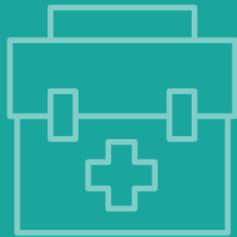


# Priorities for recovery

A briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY  
FORUM NI

# Overview

The Executive must agree an ambitious recovery plan to address Northern Ireland's long-standing economic and social problems, as it continues to manage the impact of Covid-19.

In January, the New Decade, New Approach deal brought Stormont back after a three-year hiatus. A new Executive promised to move beyond the political disagreements of recent years and set out ambitious commitments to reform in health, education, infrastructure and, importantly, in the way government works.

However, there was little time to focus on these vital policy changes before Covid-19 swept across the world. The months since have been dominated by the pandemic.

The Executive's response to Covid has shown many positives. There have been lower rates of infection and death than in other parts of the UK. Healthcare and other public services were re-configured quickly to deal with the pandemic. Overall, the Executive has worked with common purpose – something it has

struggled to do in the past – albeit with some significant exceptions.

Northern Ireland faced persistent economic, social and public service problems before Covid. These included health waiting times that are off the scale, low productivity, a predominance of low-paid and low-skill jobs, educational inequality and under-investment in infrastructure. The pandemic has only added to pre-existing challenges.

The Executive must now agree its priorities for recovery. It needs to bring the focus, ambition and unity that – for the most part – it brought to tackling Covid and direct them to all Northern Ireland's major concerns. There cannot be a return to the policies of the past or the previous ways in which government worked. Change is needed.

## 02 Improving how government works

## 07 Economic recovery from Covid-19

## 10 Priorities in health and social care

## 14 Priorities in education



### Improving how government works

The Executive must build and maintain a positive working culture. It should have a collective sense of purpose and responsibility. There must be effective working across departments and decisions should be made for the long term. The Executive should agree an ambitious and deliverable Programme for Government that begins to tackle Northern Ireland's long-standing economic and social challenges.



### Economic recovery from Covid

The Executive must respond to the immediate impact of the Covid downturn at the same time as developing an ambitious economic vision for Northern Ireland's future. This vision must address underlying weaknesses in skills, productivity and infrastructure.



### Priorities in health and social care

Transformational reform of the health and social care system is long overdue. Without structural change, the system will collapse. At the same time, an action plan to reduce ever-growing waiting lists is needed. All of this must happen while the fight against Covid continues.



### Priorities in education

Children whose learning or well-being suffered during lockdown require immediate support. Re-opening schools is vital but the central aim must be to ensure there are no more gaps in children's education. Given the likelihood of further disruption, the Executive should provide clear guidance on best practice in combining in-school and home-based learning.

# Improving how government works

The Executive's efforts during the pandemic show some signs of positive change compared with how it has worked in the past. It needs to build on this progress as it turns now to think about leading the recovery from Covid-19.

The eight months since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2020 have been extremely challenging. As with governments across the world, the Executive had to manage an unprecedented health emergency which affected all public services and, in so doing, balance the protection of public health with sustaining economic activity.

The Executive can claim a good record in many aspects of tackling Covid-19 (C-19). Death rates in Northern Ireland are the lowest in the UK. The Executive's plan for easing lockdown set out a careful and detailed strategy for Northern Ireland based on local conditions and medical and scientific advice. The manual test and trace system is now reaching approximately 95%<sup>1</sup> of contacts and the Covid-NI tracing app was the first mobile tracing app in the UK. On the other

hand, significant questions have been raised about some aspects of the Executive's approach, particularly the high proportion of deaths with C-19 in care homes and the handling of exam gradings.

Looking at how the Executive works as a government, there are several positives in how the Executive has functioned during this period. For example:

- There has been common purpose towards the goals of protecting the public and sustaining the economy and public services through these exceptional challenges. With some notable and significant exceptions, there has been unity of purpose between ministers and departments despite political differences. It remains to be seen whether the exceptions have undone the improved

relationships that seemed to have been built up during the previous months.

- There was a rapid and decisive change in how public services were delivered at the start of the pandemic, most obviously in health and social care, but also in a range of other areas where an urgent response was needed. Examples include support packages for businesses, processing increased welfare claims and measures to promote a sustainable recovery in towns and cities.
- Individual ministers have led their departments' contributions to tackling C-19 clearly and, for the most part, with the support of all the other parties represented in the Executive.

- The daily press briefings between 25.03.20 and 30.06.20 demonstrated clear leadership from the First Minister and deputy First Minister and were welcomed as important sources of information and an opportunity for scrutiny and transparency.

The Executive's efforts during the C-19 crisis show some signs of positive change compared with how it has worked in the past. As set out in Pivotal's recent paper *Good Government in Northern Ireland*, the Executive has historically struggled to work towards a common purpose, to operate across departmental boundaries, and to make difficult choices about changes to public services.

<sup>1</sup>Period 25.06.20-20.08.20

## ***New Decade, New Approach commitments delivered by the Executive since January 2020***



Published mental health action plan and appointed interim Mental Health Champion



Published new arrangements for appointment and remuneration of Special Advisors



Appointed expert panel to tackle educational underachievement



Announced opening of Medical School at Ulster University Magee campus



Agreed pay settlements for nurses and teachers



Extended welfare mitigations for the bedroom tax

## ***Examples of New Decade, New Approach commitments that are still to be delivered***



Publish new multi-year Programme for Government



Drive the delivery of essential infrastructure projects



New action plan on health waiting lists, including no one waiting over a year at 30.09.19 to still be on a waiting list by March 2021



Strategy to address the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change



Establish an external, independent review of education provision



Launch independent Fiscal Council



Figure 1

## ***Improving how government works***

The Executive needs to start making difficult decisions about public service reform. Northern Ireland has a history of increasing spending on public services, rather than fixing structural problems.

### **Key issues**

**The Executive should continue to build a positive working culture; one that prioritises unity of purpose, effective working across departments and decision-making for the long-term.**

The Executive needs to build on recent progress in how it works as it now turns to think about leading the recovery from C-19. Specific recommendations are made in later sections on health and social care, the economy and education.

The Executive demonstrated impressive energy and agility in many aspects of how it dealt with the C-19 crisis. The Executive was, on the whole, united in its common purpose of protecting the population and sustaining livelihoods.

It is crucial that ministers reflect on the positive steps forward during this relatively short period. The Executive should now be as ambitious and united about leading the recovery from C-19 including addressing Northern Ireland's long-standing economic and social problems.

The Executive needs to govern for the long-term, not just this year or this electoral period. Northern Ireland needs government that commits to sustained action to address deep-rooted problems like low skills and productivity, the predominance of low paid jobs and the social gap in educational attainment.

The Executive needs to start making difficult decisions about public service reform. Northern Ireland has a history of increasing spending on public services rather than fixing structural



problems. Health and social care is the most obvious example, where there have been numerous reports about the need for reform but a lack of real action. It is inevitable that public services will be delivered with ever limited budgets. The Executive must begin to start taking the tough decisions needed to transform services for the future.

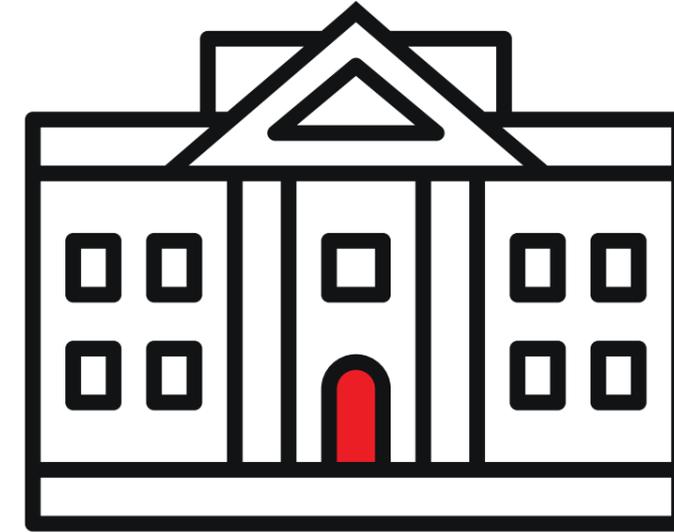
**The Executive should develop an ambitious and focussed Programme for Government setting out its agreed goals, which has at its core a commitment to tackling Northern Ireland's long-term economic and social challenges in order to deliver real improvements in people's lives.**

The Executive has showed impressive common purpose in tackling C-19 and it needs to demonstrate a similar unity in addressing the many other challenges that Northern Ireland faces. There is an urgent need for a Programme for Government (PfG). At present there is no agreed plan for the Executive's priorities. New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) committed to the publication of a PfG within two weeks of the restoration of the institutions and a multi-year PfG and budget by April 2020. Neither were published.

The PfG should be underpinned by meaningful and measurable outcomes that reflect what the public want to see in terms of improved outcomes from public expenditure. There must be ambition to put Northern Ireland on track for the long-term, not just tackling current funding problems. The Executive should

## ***Improving how government works***

There is an urgent need for a Programme for Government. At present there is no agreed plan for the Executive's priorities.



demonstrate how delivery will be monitored and reported, with effective steps taken when outcomes are not on track.

Culture change is needed across government to fully embrace an outcomes-based approach. A process that becomes about nominal completion of a spreadsheet will be meaningless: it needs to be connected to real changes in people's lives. Departments' accountability through the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Public Accounts Committee should focus on whether the agreed outcomes in the PfG have been delivered.

NDNA is very welcome in its ambition and its recognition of the challenges across public services. However, the PfG has to be realistic and difficult decisions should be taken about the relative priority of the issues set out in

NDNA. Whilst the commitments across a wide range of issues are much needed, the Executive cannot deliver everything in NDNA at once. Realistic choices need to be made based on available finances and delivery capacity.

**The Executive should demonstrate how the implementation of the recommendations in the RHI Inquiry report has led to real change in culture and practice in all aspects of government in Northern Ireland.**

The publication of the RHI Inquiry report in early March, as the C-19 crisis was imminent, contributed to limited public engagement with the findings. Public discourse in the months post-publication has been understandably preoccupied with the health and economic impact of

C-19. However, the Executive now needs to demonstrate that the implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations will lead to real changes in how Stormont operates. A process that ticks off recommendations without any real change in culture will not be sufficient.

The RHI Inquiry findings painted a picture of government with shortcomings at many levels. It recommended changes for ministers, Special Advisors, the civil service and the Assembly. The report was critical of individuals and of the systems in which they operated. Perhaps most concerning was its conclusion that *"there is no guarantee that the weaknesses shown in governance, staffing and leadership....*

*could not combine again to undermine some future initiative."*

Although delayed by C-19, there has been some progress towards implementing the RHI Inquiry recommendations in recent months. A new set of arrangements for appointment of Special Advisors was published in January, providing new rules about the appointment and remuneration of Special Advisors, and making clear that Ministers are responsible for Special Advisors. A strengthened Ministerial Code of Conduct was published in March. An annual report on Special Advisors was published in July providing details of salaries and relevant outside interests. The Executive sub-Committee on RHI

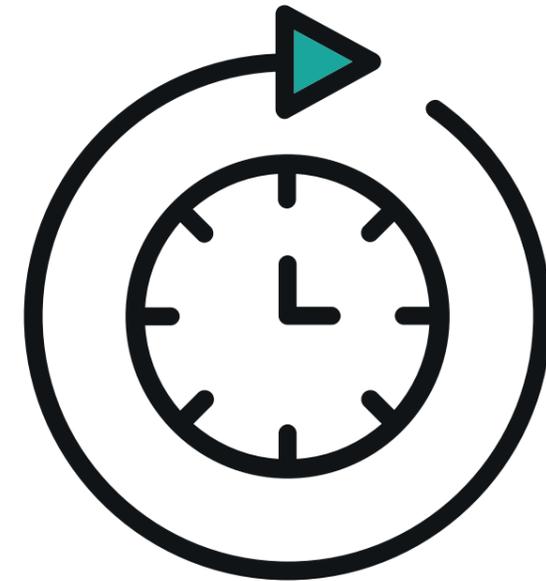
## ***Improving how government works***

The RHI Inquiry findings painted a picture of government with shortcomings at many levels. A serious change in culture and practice in all areas of government is needed.

implementation met for the first time on 30 July and agreed its Terms of Reference.

However, there is much more that remains to be done. The full and effective implementation of the recommendations will require sustained, system-wide change and it will take time to do this effectively. While the Department of Finance (DoF) leads on implementation, a full and proper response will mean commitment to change across all Executive departments. This needs to have as its ambition a serious change in culture and practice across all areas of government: ministers, civil servants and Special Advisors. Leadership and commitment from politicians and civil servants to this change in culture and practice will be essential.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) role in assessing and validating progress will be important. This should examine not just whether recommendations have been completed but, more significantly, whether culture and practice have changed right across government.



### **Priorities for recovery**

- **The Executive should continue to build a positive working culture; one that prioritises unity of purpose, effective working across departments and decision-making for the long-term.**
- **The Executive should develop an ambitious and focussed Programme for Government setting out its agreed goals, which has at its core a commitment to tackling Northern Ireland's long-term economic and social challenges in order to deliver real improvements in people's lives.**
- **The Executive should demonstrate how the implementation of the recommendations in the RHI Inquiry report has led to real change in culture and practice in all aspects of government in Northern Ireland.**

# Economic recovery from Covid-19

Northern Ireland experienced the lowest rates of C-19 cases in the UK but the short and long-term economic recovery is expected to be slower compared to the UK and Ireland. This slower recovery may be due to high employment in sectors that will be slow to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity (e.g. hospitality) combined with historically lower levels of skills, entrepreneurship and innovation.

Many job roles are at risk of redundancy as the furlough scheme is phased out. Figure 2 illustrates some of the factors that contribute to a slow economic recovery in Northern Ireland.

Recent data show the highest levels of proposed redundancies since records began. Whilst the Northern Ireland unemployment rate of 2.5% is below rates in the UK (3.9%) and Ireland (5.3%), both high and low projections highlight that unemployment levels may not recover to pre C-19 levels until 2030 at the earliest. Furthermore, economic inactivity rates in Northern Ireland increased in the last quarter to 26.4% and remain amongst the highest in the UK. Current economic forecasts suggest an unemployment crisis that has not been seen since the 1980s.

The Executive has provided effective short-term measures to support businesses, however long-term strategic plans must now take priority. The pandemic has provided the government with an opportunity to re-assess historical weaknesses within Northern Ireland's economy, along with the opportunity to encourage sectors that develop sustainable economic growth.

New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) outlines a number of commitments to economic change including a plan to drive productivity through the development of a regionally balanced economy and the delivery of essential infrastructure projects. During the past seven months since NDNA was published, Northern Ireland's economic outlook has changed drastically requiring a more active and ambitious response from the Executive.

The UK's departure from the EU has brought further uncertainty to the economy. Northern Ireland's unique position in relation to trade and customs has the potential to create both opportunities and challenges for businesses and consumers. Four months remain until the end of the transition period and there is an

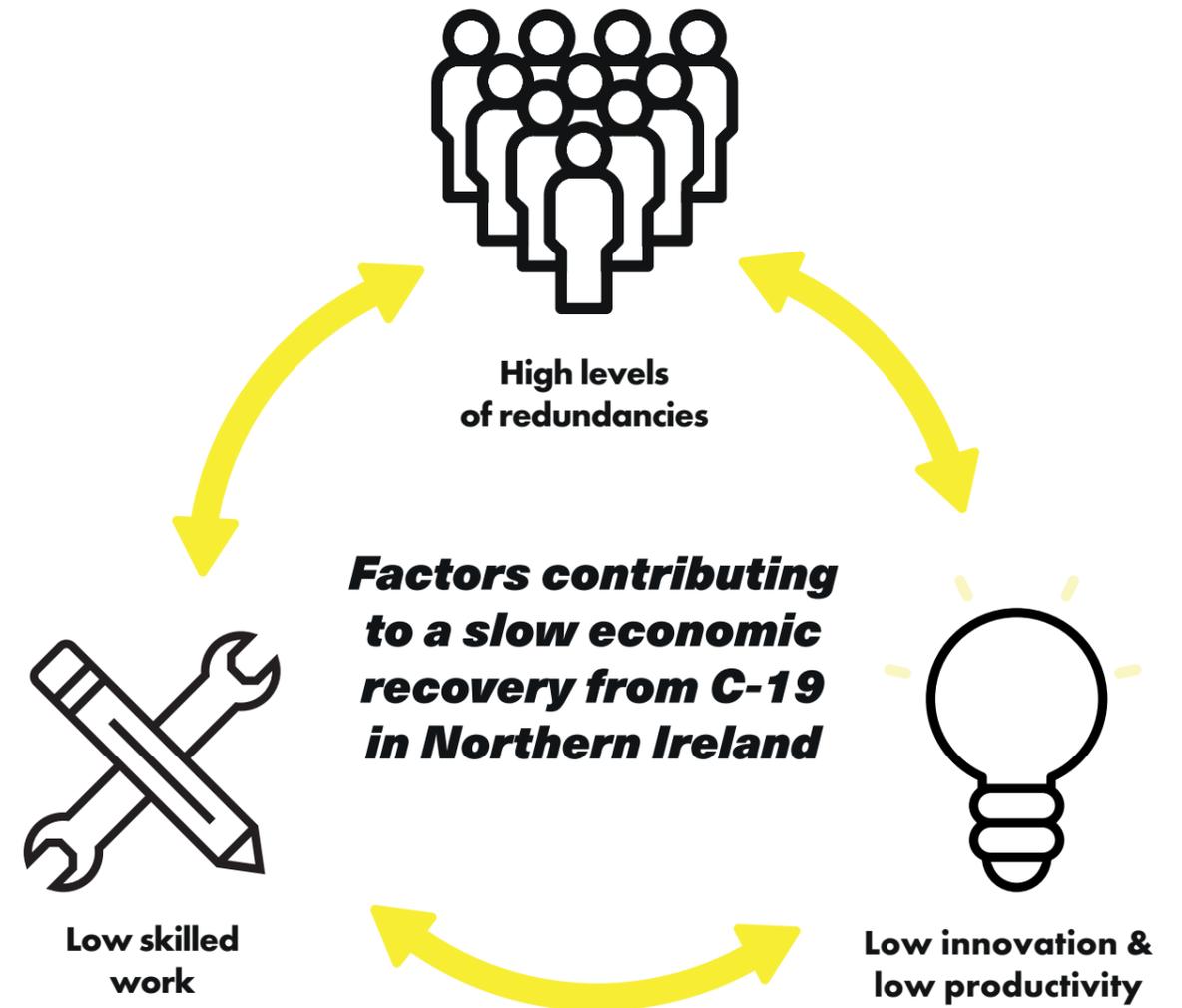


Figure 2

urgent need for the UK Government and the Executive to provide clarity on future trading arrangements for businesses and supply chains to enable preparations.

**Priorities for recovery**  
**Northern Ireland needs an ambitious skills transformation programme to prepare the workforce for the future economy, including specific support for those affected by C-19 redundancies.**

A strategic skills transformation programme must address three target groups; young people, those on furlough/at risk of redundancy, and those with low skills.

The economic challenges experienced during C-19 are likely to have disproportionate consequences for young people, those in 'low skill' roles and low-income households. Collectively, these groups are less likely to benefit from schemes such as the job retention bonus as they are more likely to be employed

## ***Economic recovery from Covid-19***

The Executive should prioritise a robust re-skilling campaign that facilitates the long-term employability of individuals, whilst at the same time preparing young people for the jobs of the future.

in sectors which may not recover to pre-pandemic activity levels in the short and medium-term. Although furlough has supported employment in these sectors during the initial crisis management phase of C-19, the lack of subsequent support leaves these groups at higher risk of redundancy.

The UK Government have initiated the Kickstart scheme to protect young people from long-term unemployment. Young people in Northern Ireland require similar strategic investment in their futures to improve access to training opportunities, apprenticeships and employment. At present there are an estimated 21,000 young people aged 16-24 years old who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). These figures are likely to increase and investment in training must be urgently considered for this group.

Incentivised enrolment in courses related to high productivity and growth sectors, such as digital technology and clean energy, could attract and retain young people in Northern Ireland.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has successfully provided a small-scale skills training programme in response to the C-19 economic crisis. This scheme provided 2,000 places on further education courses such as digital skills and leadership to those at risk of redundancy and/or on furlough. A larger, more ambitious and coordinated training programme is required to address the significant numbers of workers facing unemployment.

Northern Ireland's skill base has a disproportionate emphasis on professional

skills at the expense of broader vocational training and it is essential that the general skill base of the population is expanded to future-proof the economy. Numerous assessments of skills deficits and training areas have been completed in Northern Ireland but there has been limited action in response. The Executive should consider placing significant emphasis on a robust re-skilling campaign that can help to facilitate the long-term employability of individuals whilst concurrently preparing young people for future-focused employment.

**The Executive should prioritise infrastructure investment to stimulate economic activity and enhance connectivity in Northern Ireland through digital, education and transport projects.**

Historically, Northern Ireland has been held back by a lack of investment in crucial infrastructure. Improved infrastructure should lead to increased economic activity, greater innovation and a more sustainable environment. There is particular need for investment in public transport, water and sewerage, and digital connectivity, as highlighted by the commitments in NDNA. The recent establishment of the infrastructure advisory panel is welcome in providing leadership and expertise. Whilst some infrastructure expansion has successfully begun, for example the graduate medical school in Magee, other projects such as the York Street Interchange remain unresolved.

Our previous report highlighted the need for the acceleration of Project Stratum to provide high-quality broadband throughout Northern

## **Economic recovery from Covid-19**

The pandemic may provide the Executive with an opportunity to develop more inclusive packages of investment across Northern Ireland.

Ireland. Project Stratum aims to provide improved internet connectivity for those unable to access broadband services of at least 30 Mbps (approximately 97,000 premises). The project has been in development by DfE since 2019 and should be a priority to provide all of Northern Ireland with the digital infrastructure needed to adjust to a more online-focused society.

**Investment, skills training and infrastructure development must support the regional balance of economic activity and employment opportunities across Northern Ireland.**

Northern Ireland has a history of high levels of economic inactivity, low-paid roles and a low-skilled workforce. These issues are greater in regions outside of Belfast where

opportunities are further reduced and infrastructure (e.g. broadband and transport) may not be adequate to support economic growth. The pandemic may provide the Executive with an opportunity to develop more inclusive packages of investment across Northern Ireland. Economically underperforming regions should receive increased assistance to ensure that they are not left behind in the post C-19 recovery.

The Executive recently allocated funding for infrastructure, regeneration and tourism with a total investment of £1.2bn after the UK Government's funding commitments in May 2019. However, most of the funding (£700m) has been dedicated to the Belfast region, which could further exacerbate regional economic gaps. The remainder has been allocated for development in the Mid, South

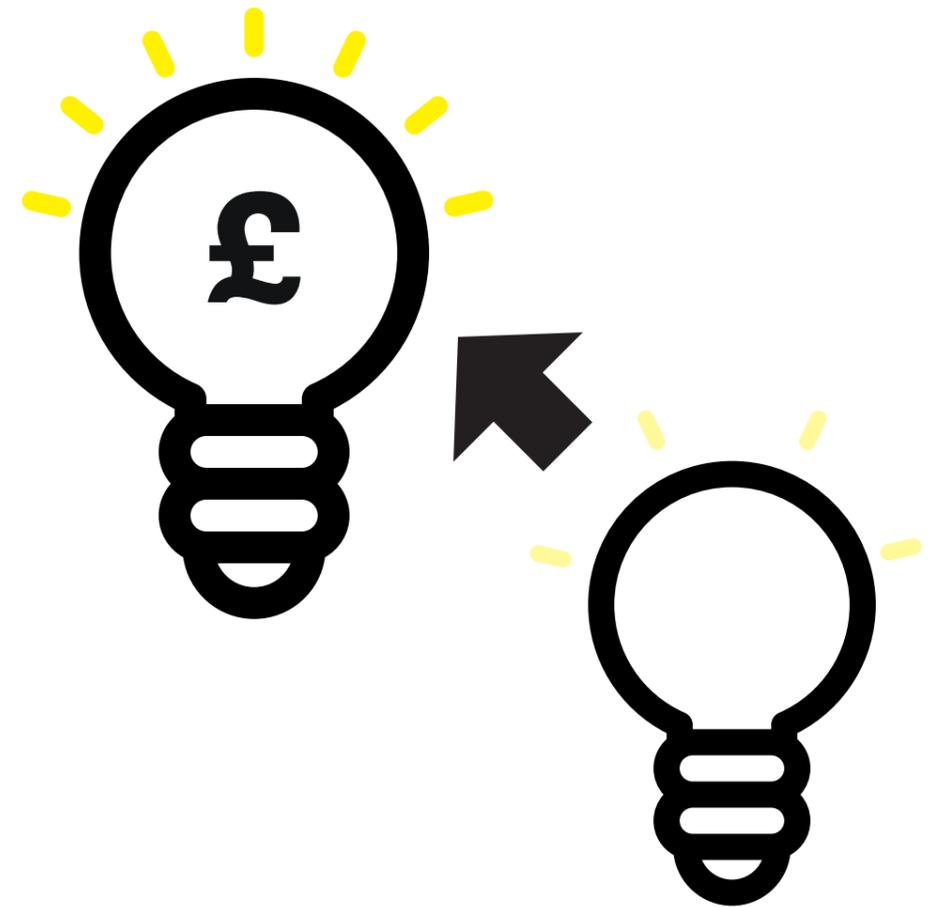
& West (£252m), Derry City and Strabane (£210m) and the Causeway Coast and Glens (£72m).

Recent skills analysis in July 2020 by the OECD highlighted the role of skills development and training in addressing regional skill deficits. Regional skills hubs may provide a platform from which to develop and enhance localised expertise to increase economic activity.

### **Priorities for recovery**

- Northern Ireland needs an ambitious skills transformation programme to prepare the workforce for the future economy, including specific support for those affected by C-19 redundancies.

- The Executive should prioritise infrastructure investment to stimulate economic activity and enhance connectivity in Northern Ireland through digital, education and transport projects.
- Investment, skills training and infrastructure development must support the regional balance of economic activity and employment opportunities across Northern Ireland.



# Priorities in health and social care

The healthcare system adjusted rapidly and effectively to deal with the expected surge in Covid-19 cases. Priority now needs to go to implementing long overdue reforms in health and social care, alongside tackling ever-growing waiting lists.

New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) made many important commitments in health and social care including; implementation of the Bengoa reforms, a new action plan on waiting times and new strategies on cancer, mental health, and alcohol and drugs. The ambition and priority given in NDNA to progressing these issues were impressive and much needed.

There was very little time between the restoration of the Executive in January and the start of full preparations for C-19. Nevertheless, several of the NDNA commitments have been taken forward including the settlement of the nurses' pay dispute, a mental health action plan and the appointment of an interim mental health champion. Three surgical hubs have also been announced to begin to tackle waiting lists for some elective care.

The healthcare system adjusted rapidly and effectively to deal with the expected surge in C-19 cases. Hospitals were re-configured, GP-led assessment centres were set up, some consultations were changed to online or phone, and non-urgent procedures and appointments were postponed.

The manual track and trace system for C-19 cases was re-launched on 27.04.20 and expanded on 20.05.20 to track all positive cases of C-19. Figures released from the DoH indicate that data show it has been successful in reaching 95%<sup>2</sup> of contacts for cases. The Covid-NI app launched on 31.07.20 as the first smartphone tracing app in the UK. The app was downloaded over 250,000 times in the first two weeks of being launched.

Outcomes for C-19 in Northern Ireland compare positively with the rest of the UK. Northern Ireland has the lowest C-19 infections per million of the population and the lowest recorded C-19 related deaths per million in the UK. However, Northern Ireland experienced a sudden rise in C-19 cases in mid August, recording 300 cases in a seven day period.

The Executive received significant criticism over the management of C-19 in care homes. A total of 431 C-19 related deaths have occurred in care homes<sup>3</sup>, representing 49.8% of overall C-19 mortality in Northern Ireland. In England and Wales, only 29.3% of C-19 related deaths occurred in care homes during the period 02.03.20 – 20.06.20. Whilst the time periods differ between the devolved nations, the C-19 related deaths in care homes

appear significantly higher in Northern Ireland. The figures may indicate that care homes were ill-prepared for C-19, with too much focus being put on protecting hospitals. Problems included a lack of adequate PPE, staff shortages and staff moving between care homes, and importantly an absence of comprehensive testing on discharge from hospital to care homes.

<sup>2</sup>Period of 25.06.20-20.08.20 <sup>3</sup>Data published on 21.08.20

## **Priorities in health and social care**

Covid-19 and pre-existing long waiting lists make the current healthcare context in Northern Ireland extremely challenging. However, the need for long-term reform remains.

### **Priorities for recovery**

**The Executive must prioritise the long overdue reform of health and social care so that Northern Ireland has a health service that is ready for the future.**

C-19 and pre-existing long waiting lists make the current healthcare context in Northern Ireland extremely challenging. As the Bengoa report said *“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.”*

One positive sign is the rapid change during the C-19 period in how healthcare was delivered.

C-19 was a major disruptor that resulted in change in healthcare delivery on an unprecedented scale. Having made these changes successfully, there may now be an opportunity to re-shape services to a model that delivers better outcomes for patients, rather than going back to how services were set up before.

Whilst C-19 has placed significant pressure on an already strained system, the need for reform in health and social care in Northern Ireland is a long-standing issue. The over-85 population is expected to nearly double by 2030 leading to higher prevalence of people living with chronic conditions. There is widespread support for the need for change but a lack of progress in delivering that change.



Previous independent reviews of health and social care in Northern Ireland have come to common conclusions about what needs to happen; shift care out of hospitals, more focus on prevention and early intervention, support for people to live independently, and rationalisation of acute services.

NDNA contained a commitment to deliver the reforms of health and social care set out in Bengoa and other recent reports. It said that hospital provision would be reconfigured to deliver better patient outcomes, more stable services and sustainable staffing. Improvements were promised by the end of 2020 in stroke, breast assessment, urgent and emergency care, and day elective care.

While these commitments are welcome, they need to be followed up by action. For too long difficult choices have been avoided about how services will be reconfigured.

**Percentage of patients for whom the initial waiting time target is met**

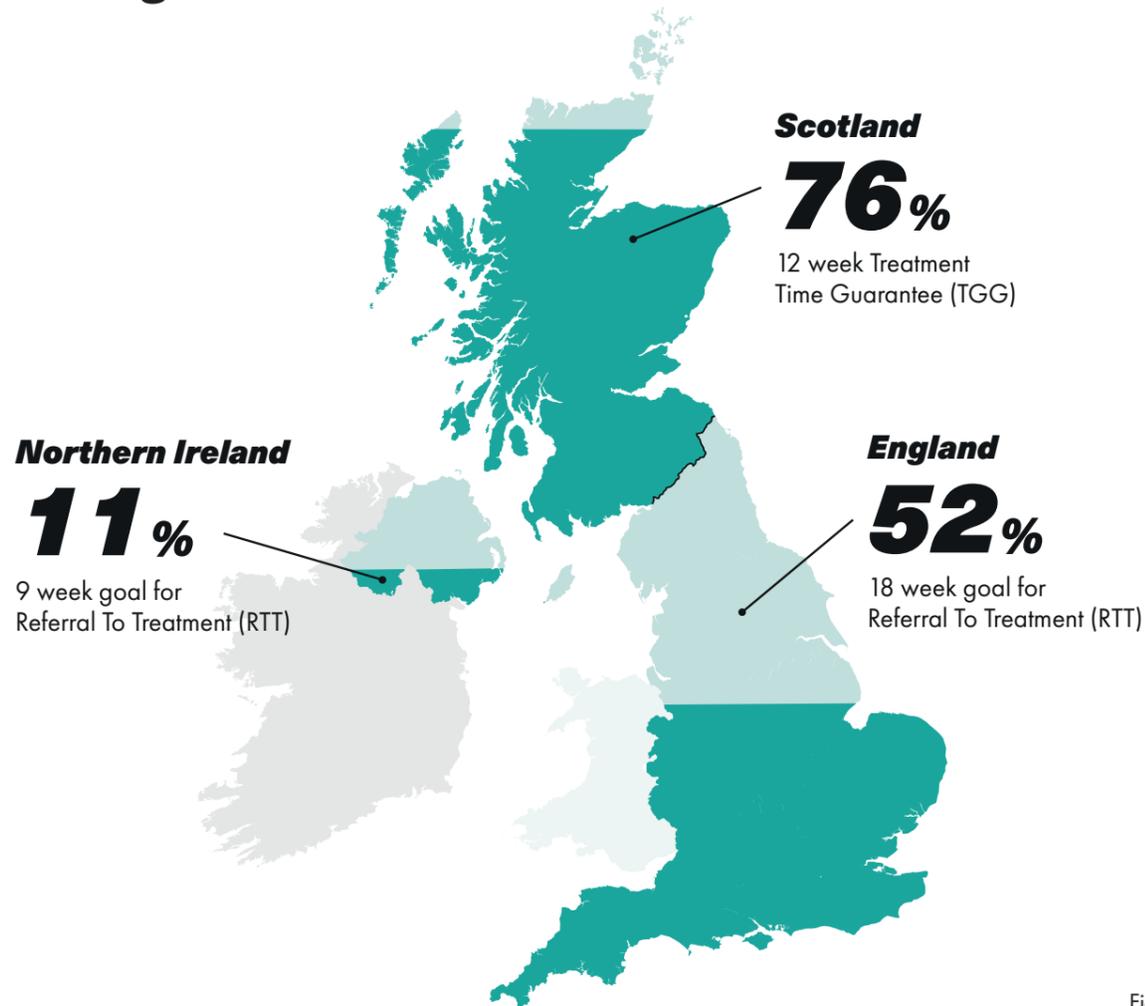


Figure 3

**The Executive must develop an urgent action plan to reduce waiting lists, particularly for those who have been waiting more than one year.**

Health waiting times in Northern Ireland are so long that they hardly bear comparison with elsewhere in the UK. Figure 3 provides an overview of the percentage of patients who have their first outpatient appointment within

the individual government guidelines. Figure 4 demonstrates waiting times as of June 2020.

The Executive's target is that no patient should wait more than one year. There are approximately 311,090 people on a waiting list in Northern Ireland for outpatient treatment, of which 44% (136,366) have been waiting more than 52 weeks. In comparison, there are approximately 3,859,962 people on

**Number of patients waiting longer than 52 weeks for a first outpatient appointment**

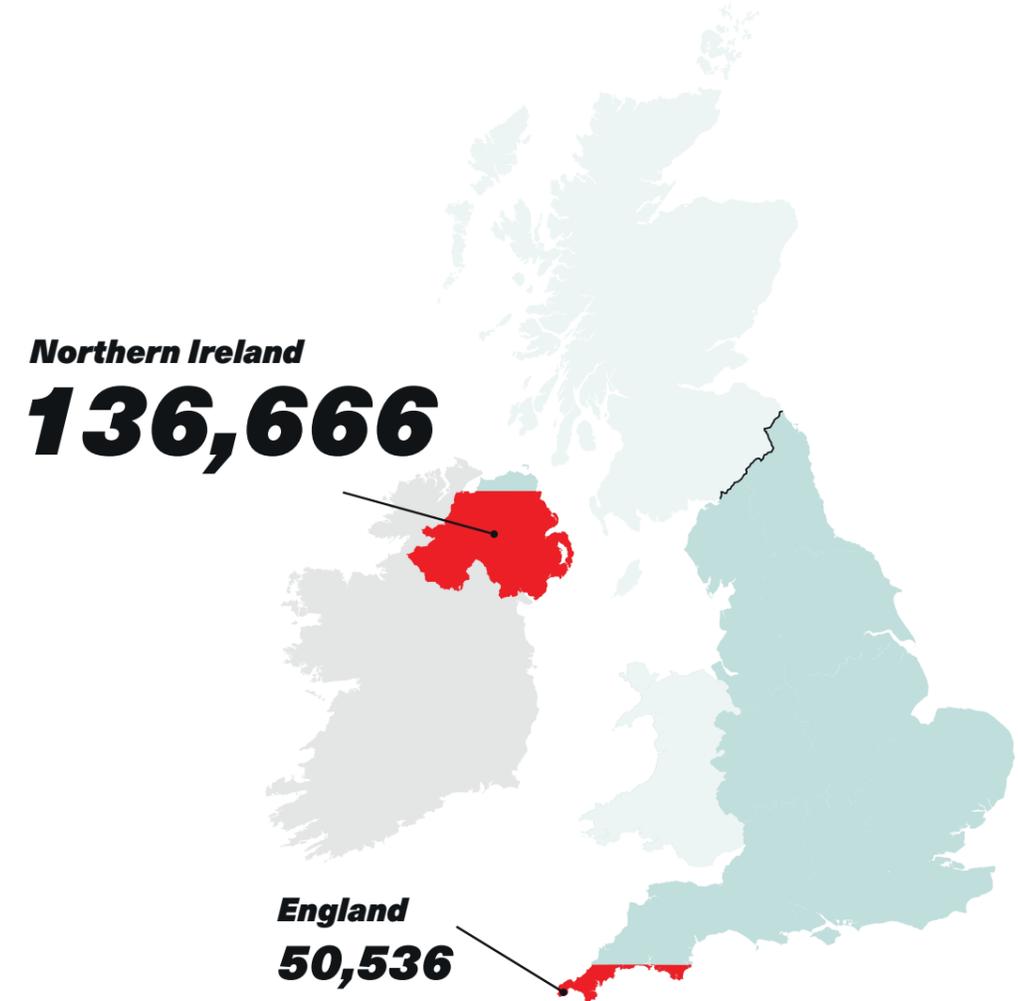


Figure 4

a waiting list for outpatient treatment in England, of which 1.3% (50,536) have been waiting more than 52 weeks.

The pandemic has strained already limited resources in Northern Ireland and this will likely exacerbate the waiting times. Success in preparing for, and dealing with, C-19 was achieved in part by pausing other health consultations and procedures on a large scale,

which will have consequences for waiting lists. Future life outcomes may be reduced due to later diagnosis and treatment.

NDNA promised a new action plan on waiting times. It included a specific commitment that no one waiting over a year at 30 September 2019 for outpatient and inpatient assessment or treatment will still be on a waiting list by March 2021. The Executive must now

## ***Priorities in health and social care***

Robust measures must be put in place to reduce and contain outbreaks of Covid-19 during the high-risk winter season, through enhanced testing and tracing procedures.

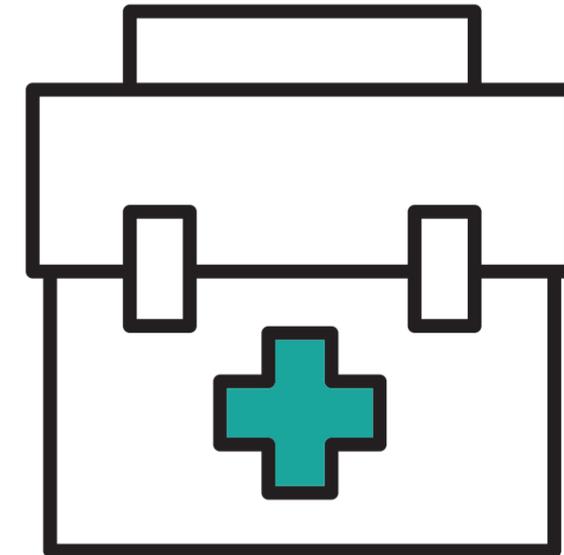
demonstrate ambition and drive in addressing this issue. An action plan is urgently needed, followed up by rapid and effective delivery of improvements.

**The Executive must continue to focus on robust containment of outbreaks of Covid-19 to reduce the pressure on hospitals during the winter months, enable a safe return to school for children and young people, and facilitate a recovery in economic activity.**

Throughout this crisis, the Executive has had the difficult job of balancing the protection of public health with the need to support a safe return to economic and social activity. As case numbers begin to move up again, and in the absence of a vaccine, the best hope for the coming months is that C-19

outbreaks will be quickly and robustly identified and contained. Comprehensive measures must be put in place to reduce and contain outbreaks of C-19 during the high-risk winter season through enhanced testing and tracing measures.

The measures needed remain similar to those set out in Pivotal's earlier paper *Covid-19 in Northern Ireland – moving out of lockdown*. Testing capacity and eligibility should continue to be developed, including considering further testing of non-symptomatic people in vulnerable groups or who are at high-risk of infection. Comprehensive and robust tracking and tracing systems (both manual and app) remain vital along with continued preventative measures like hand-washing, social distancing and face coverings in enclosed spaces.



In preparing for future outbreaks or a second wave, particular efforts should be made to protect care home residents and staff. Lessons need to be learnt from the spring particularly about discharge from hospital to care homes, staff moving between different settings and availability of PPE. Specific measures related to containing C-19 to support the safe return to education are outlined in Section 4.

An investment in comprehensive testing and tracing measures will reduce C-19 transmission, protect the vulnerable, increase public confidence and greatly enhance economic activity.

### **Priorities for recovery**

- **The Executive must prioritise the long overdue reform of health and social care so that Northern Ireland has a health service that is ready for the future.**
- **The Executive must develop an urgent action plan to reduce waiting lists, particularly for those who have been waiting more than one year.**
- **The Executive must continue to focus on robust containment of outbreaks of Covid-19 to reduce the pressure on hospitals during the winter months, enable a safe return to school for children and young people, and facilitate a recovery in economic activity.**

# Priorities in education

Children and young people have experienced an exceptionally challenging period due to Covid-19. A failure to adequately resource educational recovery could lead to a large cohort of children failing to reach their potential.

New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) established a number of priorities for the restored Executive including resolving the teachers' industrial dispute, developing policies to address educational underachievement and delivering a new Special Educational Needs (SEN) framework. However, the pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures have significantly disrupted educational planning and delivery. The sudden shift to home-based learning that occurred during lockdown was challenging for parents, teachers and children.

Many children will have struggled during the long period of school closure, whether with learning and/or well-being. UK and global evidence indicates that the lockdown period may have created attainment gaps with

children in low socio-economic status (SES) households more at-risk of educational disadvantage.

C-19 has created significant disruption for GCSE, BTEC and A-Level candidates and university applicants. Along with governments across the UK, the Northern Ireland Executive reversed a decision to use statistical adjustment measures and re-released grades which were based on teacher assessment. As a result, many student grades increased which led to more applicants being eligible for their first choice university programme. However, the maximum student number (MaSN) control mechanism in Northern Ireland meant that HEIs had little flexibility to respond to changes in demand.

## Priorities for recovery

**A comprehensive and adequately resourced education recovery plan is required to provide the additional emotional well-being and educational support needed to facilitate best outcomes for children following the lockdown period.**

Children and young people have experienced an exceptionally challenging period and in some cases loss and trauma due to C-19. The emotional well-being, safety and educational recovery for children should be the cornerstone of any recovery plan. The Department of Education (DE) has allocated £11.25 million funding this year for the 'Engage' programme to support the social and educational needs of children post-lockdown. The content, design

and structure of the programme will be developed by each individual school rather than a universal, evidence-based model. Therefore, the quality and effectiveness of the programme may vary widely. The level of funding per pupil will be allocated based on numbers entitled to Free School Meals. The funding allocated is not proportionate to the level of need estimated by research in countries who have experienced learning-loss similar to the estimated lockdown learning gap. Furthermore, there is a history of under-investment in education in Northern Ireland relative to other high-income European countries on a per pupil basis.

A failure to adequately resource educational recovery could lead to a large cohort of children failing to reach their potential. Across Northern Ireland, 14 cohorts of students

## **Priorities in education**

It is difficult to see how the plans for the post-primary transfer process can be seen to be fair when children have had such varied experiences during lockdown.

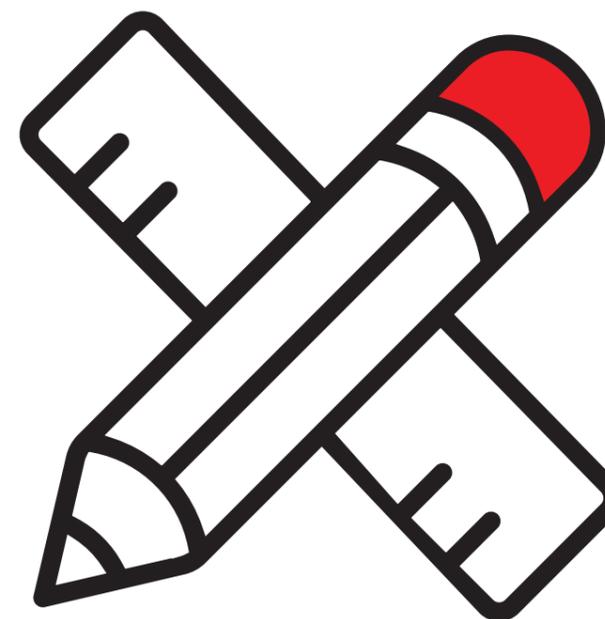
have so far been affected by the lockdown. Therefore from the mid-2030s, and for the 50 years following that, approximately a quarter of the entire workforce could have lower skills and a lower growth rate if the learning gaps caused by lockdown prove significant. This scenario has the potential to create long-lasting negative social and economic consequences.

Our previous report recommended, amongst other things, a teaching support service to level-up the educational loss that some children will have experienced during lockdown. Investment in this plan would provide much needed employment and occupational experience for graduates in Northern Ireland, whilst investing in future outcomes for children. This additional workforce would complement

ongoing core curriculum delivery and provide the additional tuition and emotional support that many children will require.

The Executive needs to be sure that the varying experiences of children during lockdown do not undermine the fairness of this year's post-primary transfer process.

The Executive has not shown clear leadership about the upcoming transfer process despite the challenging context. It is difficult to see how the transfer process in 2020/21 can be fair when children have had such varied experiences during lockdown, with evidence showing widening attainment gaps as a result. Following a judicial review, the tests have been postponed until January, but this still seems like a small change compared to three months without school.



Regardless of the legitimacy of the transfer tests as valid assessment models, the ethics of testing children who are returning to education during a global pandemic must be carefully considered. In addition, there are practical questions about whether children will be able to attend tests given the possibility of illness, self-isolation or further lockdowns. Various alternatives may be proposed, for example, teacher assessment, geographic criteria, or parent/sibling criteria. However, there are currently no obvious approaches that present fairness for all.

Nevertheless, the absence of a viable alternative should not mean that the default position is to revert to the status quo of testing in November or indeed January 2021.

**The Department of Education (DE) must develop an inclusive educational delivery model that accounts for children learning in school, at home or a combination of both scenarios.**

DE's commitment to return to full-time education for all pupils from 31st August is welcomed. School leaders and staff have put in large amounts of preparation to enable classes to re-start with the necessary safety measures in place.

## ***Priorities in education***

It is likely that learning will be further disrupted over the coming months. The Department of Education should provide schools with support and guidance to help them plan for learning at home and in school.

Despite these efforts, it is likely that learning will be further disrupted over the coming months. It is vital that DE provides support and guidance to help schools plan for learning to happen at home as well as in school. The possibility of rising C-19 cases, combined with seasonal flu and cold viruses, may mean large numbers of children missing school at any time. DE must prepare for a model of teaching that accounts for high levels of self-isolating, illness and potential local or national closures. The recent funding allocation to support online learning is welcome news. This funding could support the development of guidance on best practice for digital teaching, feedback and assessment (i.e. pedagogy) to provide a standardised approach to remote teaching to enhance educational engagement and learner satisfaction.

A standardised digital pedagogy should outline a baseline of requirements related to teaching approach, feedback and marking. A teaching approach that combines classroom and online learning could provide a solution for teachers and students to provide continuity, a connection to the classroom and minimise lockdown learning gaps. This 'Hylfex' approach to teaching enables multiple modes of engagement; a physically present classroom and online learning.

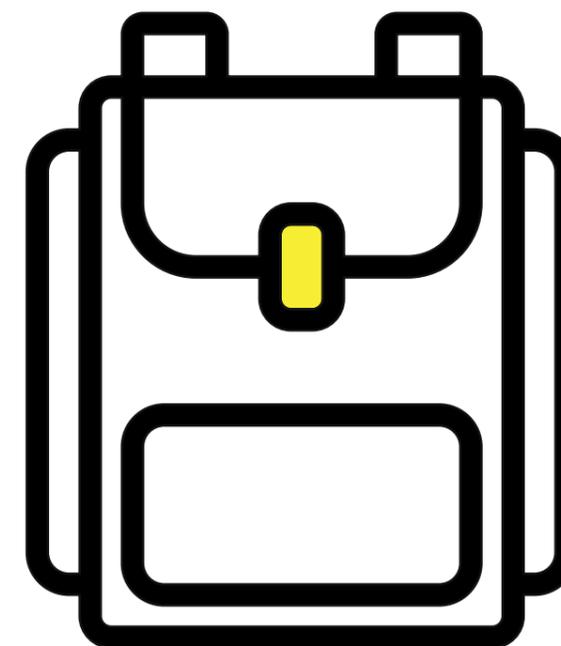
The return to school also raises practical challenges in relation to access to C-19 testing, supplies of PPE and guidance to support staff and children with immunosuppressant difficulties. DE must work with DoH to significantly increase testing capacity and facilitate a rapid return of results to enhance school safety and reduce

unnecessary quarantine and school closure periods. The Executive may wish to be innovative in their approach to testing and undertake random testing within children's allocated bubbles and, in the event of a positive result, test the entire classroom. This approach would reduce demand on testing whilst increasing confidence in school safety measures.

### **Significant investment and operational re-development is required for the Special Education Needs (SEN) statementing process in Northern Ireland.**

Many children with SEN benefit from a 'statement' of education needs which enables them to receive bespoke educational support which may include additional resources; for example a classroom assistant. However, the

process of obtaining an educational statement is often lengthy, creating disruption to children's educational progress. DE was under significant pressure in Northern Ireland prior to C-19 and had failed to meet agreed timeframes to assess and support children with SEN. The 'best endeavours duty' introduced in April to August 2020 may create further delay and distress for those with SEN.



## Priorities in education

The Covid-19 crisis may offer the Department of Education an opportunity to re-imagine the manner in which children with additional needs are assessed and supported within Northern Ireland.

Figure 5 demonstrates the significant delays that many children awaiting an educational statement may face. This excessive delay is likely to have a negative impact on the child's social, educational and emotional well-being.

The C-19 crisis may offer DE an opportunity to re-imagine the manner in which children with additional needs are assessed and supported within Northern Ireland. The commitment to deliver a new SEN framework in NDNA must be prioritised alongside immediate action to re-establish the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and increase resources to cope with the backlog of assessments.

### Priorities for recovery

- A comprehensive and adequately resourced education recovery plan is required to provide the additional emotional well-being and educational support needed to facilitate best outcomes for children following the lockdown period.
- The Department of Education must develop an inclusive educational delivery model that accounts for children learning in school, at home or a combination of both scenarios.
- Significant investment and operational re-development is required for the Special Education Needs (SEN) statementing process in Northern Ireland.

## Special Education Needs (SEN) - time periods for an educational statement in Northern Ireland (2018/2019)

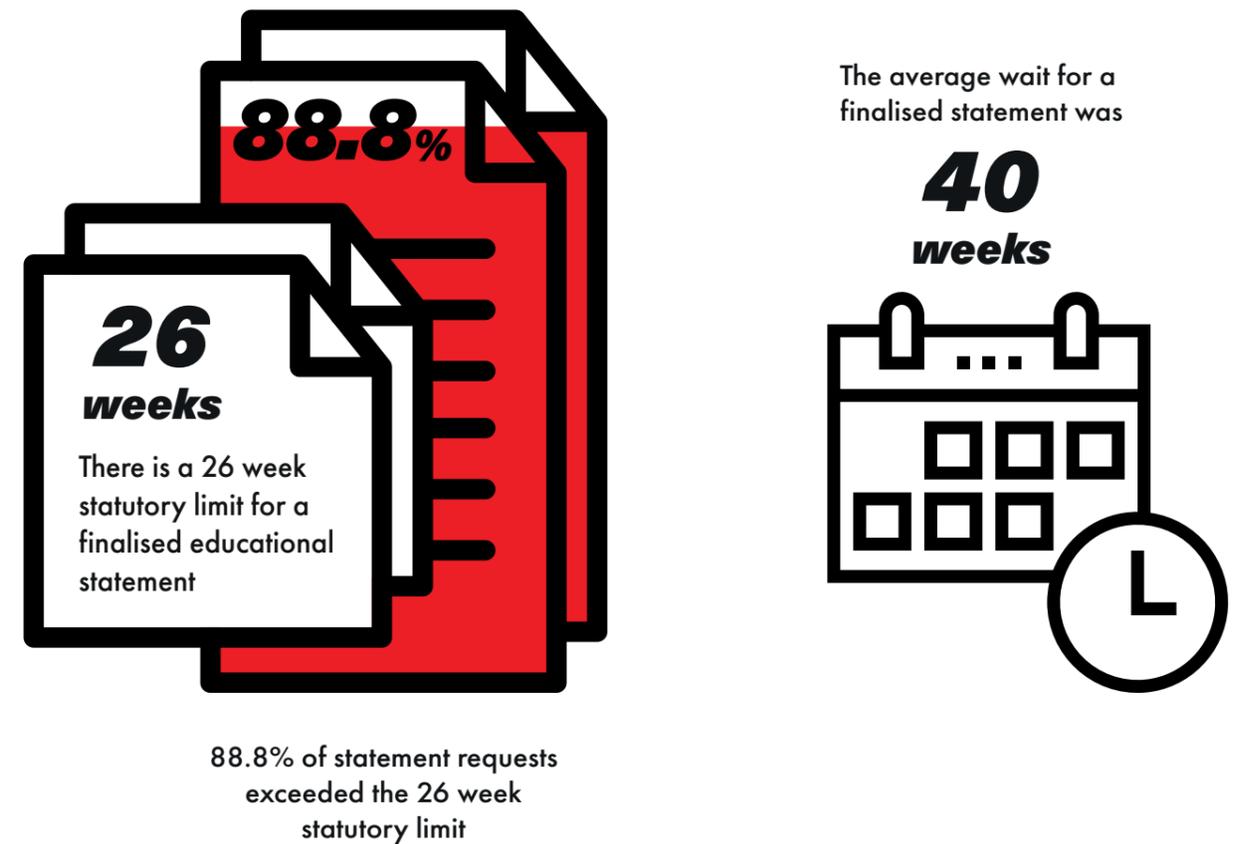


Figure 5: SEN Waiting times in Northern Ireland

# Twelve priorities for recovery

## How government works



The Executive should continue to build a positive working culture; one that prioritises unity of purpose, effective working across departments and decision-making for the long-term.



The Executive should develop an ambitious and focussed Programme for Government setting out its agreed goals, which has at its core a commitment to tackling Northern Ireland's long-term economic and social challenges in order to deliver real improvements in people's lives.



The Executive should demonstrate how the implementation of the recommendations in the RHI Inquiry report has led to real change in culture and practice in all aspects of government in Northern Ireland.

## Economic recovery



Northern Ireland needs an ambitious skills transformation programme to prepare the workforce for the future economy, including specific support for those affected by Covid-19 redundancies.



The Executive should prioritise infrastructure investment to stimulate economic activity and enhance connectivity in Northern Ireland through digital, education and transport projects.



Investment, skills training and infrastructure development must support the regional balance of economic activity and employment opportunities across Northern Ireland.

## Priorities in health and social care



The Executive must prioritise the long overdue reform of health and social care so that Northern Ireland has a health service that is ready for the future.



The Executive must develop an urgent action plan to reduce waiting lists, particularly for those who have been waiting more than one year.



The Executive must continue to focus on robust containment of outbreaks of Covid-19 to reduce the pressure on hospitals during the winter months, enable a safe return to school for children and young people, and facilitate a recovery in economic activity.

## Priorities in education



A comprehensive and adequately resourced education recovery plan is required to provide the additional emotional well-being and educational support needed to facilitate best outcomes for children following the lockdown period.



The Department of Education must develop an inclusive educational delivery model that accounts for children learning in school, at home or a combination of both scenarios.



Significant investment and operational re-development is required for the Special Education Needs (SEN) statementing process in Northern Ireland.

03<sup>rd</sup> September 2020

[www.pivotalppf.org](http://www.pivotalppf.org)



@PivotalPPF

PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY  
FORUM NI