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Northern Ireland needs a functioning Executive to take on its long list of policy problems

Arguments about the Protocol may mean that no new Executive is formed after the May Assembly election. This would leave Northern Ireland without a properly functioning government, in the face of immense challenges across health, education and the cost of living. Whatever the results on polling day, it is imperative that an Executive is formed and that local politicians work together to address these issues.

Forming a new Executive after May's elections is crucially important if Northern Ireland is to tackle the serious policy challenges it faces, according to a new report.

Arguments over the Northern Ireland Protocol pose a serious risk to the stability of the institutions. However, crises in health, in education and with the cost of living can only realistically be addressed at Stormont, according to a new paper published today [Monday, March 28] by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland.

Post-election policy priorities for Northern Ireland identifies massive issues in a range of policy areas. Reform of the health service has been slow while, at the same time, waiting lists are skyrocketing. Over 355,000 people are waiting for a first consultant appointment - and over half of those have been waiting for longer than a year.

Schools' budgets are strained, with Northern Ireland lagging behind other parts of the UK on classroom spending. Funding per pupil here now is 20% below the level in Scotland, and 5% below England and Wales. Meanwhile, outcomes in education remain very dependent on children's socio-economic background.

Home energy prices in Northern Ireland are 46% higher than a year ago. The UK Consumer Price Index rose 6.2% in the 12 months to January 2022 and is expected to rise further – while the local economy still suffers from low wages, low levels of investment, and a low skills base.

If no new Executive is formed then previous ministers will return to their old posts but with vastly reduced 'caretaker' powers, leaving them unable to make new decisions that are significant or cross-cutting.

This will leave Northern Ireland rudderless as it tries to navigate growing pressures that have significant impacts on individuals, families and businesses.

Westminster could step in - but has shown previously it will only intervene in devolved matters when the UK Government thinks it is absolutely necessary. This is unlikely to change.

Northern Ireland needs an Executive to come together with a sense of unity and common purpose in order to address these problems.

A Programme for Government (PfG) needs to be created that sets the agenda for the next mandate, and lays out measures that will improve people's lives. Multi-year budgets need to become the norm, so that long-term planning becomes easier.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "Since the Executive returned in January 2020, following a three-year collapse, we have seen good and bad from Stormont. Most people were glad to see local politicians back in charge, making decisions about local issues here.

"The pandemic was a massive and unforeseen challenge. At times, it brought the main parties together and gave the Executive common purpose, but there were also many political crises which led to instability. Crucially, no Programme for Government was ever agreed and the establishment of a multi-year budget was delayed before ultimately not happening.

"However, some good work was done. A Mental Health Strategy was published and a Mental Health Champion appointed. A Climate Change Bill passed. An independent review of education has begun. The flurry of legislation being completed in the past few weeks shows what can be achieved by a functioning Assembly and Executive.

"Northern Ireland faces a long list of challenges, most of which need to be addressed through a combination of short-term action and long-term strategic changes that deal with underlying problems. This cannot be done without an Executive.

"Disagreements over the Protocol are real and matter to many people, but they should not threaten progress on all the other work that needs to be done by government. Shrinking school budgets, health waiting lists that are years long, and the rising costs of living mean households will be under immense pressure.

“These problems are immediate. Waiting lists are too long, right now. The cost of living is rising, right now. Schools budgets are strained, right now. The absence of local leadership and decision-making is a bleak prospect when Northern Ireland badly needs to address such a long list of policy challenges.

“It is imperative that an Executive is established quickly after the election, a Programme for Government setting out joint priorities needs to be created, and a three-year budget that allows for long-term planning must be put in place.

“Failure to do those things will inevitably make life harder for individuals and families here in Northern Ireland – with the most vulnerable people disproportionately affected.”

Pivotal’s three key recommendations for after the election are:

- Establish Executive quickly so that effective government is in place to address immediate and longer term policy challenges
- Agree a Programme for Government setting out joint priorities
- Agree a three year Budget focussed on investment and reform

Pivotal’s report identified many short- and long-term issues that will have a significant impact on local people, across various policy areas.

HEALTH

Latest data show almost 355,000 people in Northern Ireland are waiting for a first consultant-led appointment and nearly 187,000 (52.6%) of them have been waiting for more than one year – despite the government target that no-one should wait more than a year.

As well as providing an immediate salve to shorten waiting times, Stormont also needs to address the underlying causes of long waits. Health and Social Care provision needs long-overdue transformation, in line with Bengoa and other reviews over the past decade.

Health inequalities, based on individual’s socioeconomic circumstances, also need to be addressed. Healthy life expectancy is 13.5 years lower for males and 15.4 years lower for females in the most-deprived areas when compared with the least-deprived areas.

EDUCATION

New Decade, New Approach promised a sustainable core budget for every school but serious financial pressures continue to be reported. Reductions in school spending per pupil over the last decade have been sharper in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK – with spending per pupil here now 20% lower than in Scotland, and 5% lower than England and Wales.

Most Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements are not finalised within the 26 weeks limit, a situation that has persisted for several years. Educational underachievement continues to be an issue for children from lower-income backgrounds.

A review was completed last year into educational underachievement, a new framework is in place for SEN, and a comprehensive review of the entire education system is ongoing – however, implementing recommendations and properly establishing new models of work is very difficult without a functioning Executive.

ECONOMY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Northern Ireland's economy has struggled for decades with a persistent cycle of low-skill levels, low-paying jobs, low productivity, and low levels of investment and innovation. However, these long-term challenges are now joined by the immediate pressure of a huge spike in the cost of living.

Home energy prices in Northern Ireland are 46% higher than a year ago. The UK Consumer Price Index rose 6.2% in the 12 months to February 2022 and is expected to rise further. While these price increases affect everyone, they are most acutely and painfully experienced by those on the lowest incomes.

Strengthening of welfare mitigations, as well as financial support for a broader number of households, may be needed over the next year. At the same time, government needs to find a way to fundamentally improve the local economy, particularly through increasing skills so that more people can benefit from higher paid jobs.

Unfortunately, this will be difficult until infrastructure improves. The transport system is struggling – while the water and sewage system is at capacity in many areas, halting construction programmes in some cases.

Three-year budgets and a functioning government are essential to creating a strategy that moves forward on all these interlinked challenges.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT

A climate change bill complete with targets was passed recently, including a commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. This is welcome news – however,

the difficult work starts now. Implementation will require balancing several different priorities.

This work is urgent. Greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by only 18% here since 1990, compared to a 44% fall in the UK as whole. Northern Ireland also has a poor record on wider environmental protection, ranking as one of the worst places in the world for biodiversity loss. Independent regulation of the environment would help to ensure greater transparency and accountability.

ENDS

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's previous report – *Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work* can be found [here](#)
3. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
4. 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
5. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance
6. 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)
7. 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
8. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
9. Follow Pivotal on Twitter [@pivotalppf](https://twitter.com/pivotalppf)