

2020 was a tough first year for the new Executive – but long-standing challenges must be addressed in 2021

It is one year since *New Decade, New Approach* and the return of Stormont, and it turned out to be an extremely challenging 12 months. According to a new report from Pivotal, some progress was made during 2020 but long-standing economic and social challenges remain. If they are to be addressed, the Executive needs to find ways to work together for the people of Northern Ireland.

When the main political parties returned to the Executive table last January, no-one foresaw that the next 12 months would be dominated by a global pandemic.

The *New Decade, New Approach* (NDNA) deal brought Stormont to its feet with a renewed sense of hope following three years of what the Head of the Civil Service described as “stagnation and decay”.

According to a new paper from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, some progress has been made in crucial policy areas like health and education but many issues in NDNA remain outstanding. The pandemic was a major factor in this but, nonetheless, Northern Ireland has growing challenges that require reform. Covid-19 has not made those any less pressing.

New Decade, New Approach – one year on, published today [THURSDAY, JAN 7], found that the Executive's ability to work together wavered throughout 2020. The year started well for the new government before its sense of unity began to fracture – leading to a breakdown of relationships in the latter half of the year.

Failure to provide leadership and a united front in the middle of an unprecedented public health crisis represented a grave failure of governance. At times, senior politicians' behaviour caused frustration and undermined public health messaging - whether through an inability to follow rules they helped craft or the failure to work collaboratively towards joint decisions.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “Northern Ireland needs a government focused on tackling our persistent, long-term problems in health, education and the economy.

To do that, the Executive needs to work with a genuine sense of partnership and common purpose. This has been lacking – a culture change is necessary.

“After the three-year collapse of Stormont, New Decade, New Approach set out a welcome agenda for investment and reform in public services. Given the level of ambition in NDNA, it was crucial for the Executive to prove it could work together for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

“In the early months of the pandemic, this appeared to be the case. The daily press conferences from the First Minister and deputy First Minister provided a regular stream of information, crucial during such difficult times, as well as a sense of collective responsibility and accountability.

“However, from June onwards cracks began to show. The daily conferences were abandoned after the deputy First Minister’s attendance at a prominent republican funeral. Covid rates rose and, in November, a renewed set of measures to reduce infection rates was blocked by the use of a cross- community mechanism. This was the old misuse of power, falling down along old factional lines, all in the middle of the biggest global health crisis in a century.

“The new year offers a fresh chance for the Executive to function better. Covid-19 is far from over – but the development of vaccines means the end is in sight.

“All the parties now need to agree a path to navigate Northern Ireland through the rest of pandemic while also showing more progress on other areas of policy where there are significant problems.

“New Decade, New Approach showed welcome ambition. However, it was signed off without any agreement about the funding to deliver its commitments, and without the Northern Ireland Executive agreeing any policy agenda or prioritisation. A Programme for Government was supposed to follow quickly but never arrived.

“Transformation of health and social care, improving skills in the workforce, and making Northern Ireland a leader in climate reform are all priorities – all of which should be underpinned, as quickly as possible, by a Programme for Government.”

Pivotal says that, to achieve a functioning government in 2021:

- The Executive must make coalition government work for the people of Northern Ireland, recognising the need for collective working, long-term planning and compromise

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- While managing the ongoing impacts of Covid, priority must be given to long-term economic and social challenges like health service reform, low skills and climate change
- The Executive must urgently agree a multi-year Programme for Government setting out its joint work programme

Sector-by-sector

The Executive's performance was also mixed in specific policy sectors – however, some progress was made despite the pandemic.

The Pivotal paper found that little work was done on the transformation needed to make health and social care fit for the future, as the focus was understandably on re-tooling the service to fight Covid. This reshaping largely went well – and the ability of the health system to change quickly itself bodes well for permanent structural transformation.

Education was up-ended as schools closed for several months. Efforts were made to make up for this, while some progress was made on long-term change, with the launch of a review into the link between underachievement and low socioeconomic background, and an independent review into the entire education system.

Pivotal's report identified many key commitments of NDNA where there has been progress – and many in which there has been none. These include:

Health

The nurses' pay dispute was settled quickly, the health system was quickly reconfigured to focus on Covid, a mental health strategy consultation was published and an Interim Mental Health Champion appointed.

However, Northern Ireland's waiting times are off the charts and no plan to fix this was brought forward, while the wider transformation envisioned in the Bengoa report has not progressed.

Priorities for 2021:

- Significant progress in the transformation of health and social care into a system fit for the future
- Minimise the effects of Covid and roll out vaccines, while moving forward other health concerns
- An action plan for waiting lists

Education

The teachers' pay dispute was settled, major reviews into the links between underachievement and socioeconomic background and into the education system as a whole are moving forward, and schools received extra money to help with Covid.

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However, fundamental pressure on schools' budgets has not been addressed, a new Special Education Needs framework has not appeared, and the system still lacks a modern approach to careers, skills and training.

Priorities for 2021:

- Educational recovery plan to address lost learning due to Covid
- Significant investment and reform in Special Educational Needs
- Skills and training reform for young people, with a view to creating an economy fit for the future

Climate change and environment

Discussion documents were published on a Clean Air Strategy and the wider approach to climate change, and the Forests for our Future programme committed to planting 18m trees in ten years.

However, there is still no climate change strategy – and no legislation nor emissions targets – there is no energy strategy and the promised Independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has not appeared.

Priorities for 2021:

- A climate change strategy that makes Northern Ireland a world leader in environmental protection
- A realistic path to net zero must be developed
- Independent EPA should be established

Economy and infrastructure

Businesses received some financial help due to Covid impacts, support was provided to apprenticeships and some free training places were made available for people who lost their jobs because of Covid, planning permission for the North/South Electricity Interconnector was approved, a feasibility study for high-speed rail was launched, and the Independent Infrastructure Commission Panel report was published.

There was little strategic investment in long-term skills development, little movement on developing a regionally-balanced economy, a plan for wider infrastructure investment is lacking, and nothing has been done to reduce pressures on the wastewater system.

Priorities for 2021:

- A long-term economic strategy focused on improving the local skills base, now and in the future
- The Executive must agree joint priorities for infrastructure investment, to support economic and social development
- Work should begin to balance the regional economy

Notes for 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 – *Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19* can be found [here](#)
3. Pivotal's earlier report *Priorities for recovery – a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess* can be found [here](#) .
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
8. 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)
9. 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
10. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
11. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf