

Stormont faces many tough tests- and must pass them all while also tackling Covid 03 September 2020

The Assembly is returning from summer recess at the same time as Northern Ireland's children are going back to school. The Executive needs to succeed in several key areas in the coming year, according to a new report from think tank Pivotal.

The start of 2020 looked like it could be a new dawn for Northern Ireland. The New Decade, New Approach deal saw Stormont return after a three-year collapse. MLAs from all major parties appeared united in their commitment to tackling the long-term economic and social challenges faced by all the people who live here.

The spread of Covid-19 curtailed much of those plans. The Executive's response to the pandemic can claim some success. Northern Ireland has lower death rates and infection rates than the rest of the UK. Its manual and digital case tracking systems are ahead of other regions.

However, other long-term problems have not gone away, and in many cases have been amplified by the pandemic. Next week marks the start of a new year for the Assembly. The Executive needs to address these wider policy issues with the urgency and focus that it brought to tackling Covid.

Think tank Pivotal today published *Priorities for recovery – a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess*. This paper outlines four key areas the Executive and the Assembly must address as a matter of urgency, even while the pandemic continues:

- 1. Improving how government works**
- 2. Economic recovery from Covid-19**
- 3. Priorities in health and social care**
- 4. Priorities in education**

Details of the necessary policy changes in each area are outlined below.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "In January there was a sense of optimism about government in Northern Ireland. Long-term issues were at the top of the agenda in the New Decade, New Approach deal, like skills, infrastructure, and health and social care reform.

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“Covid-19 changed all that and, overall, the Executive deserves credit for how it has handled the pandemic so far. However, Northern Ireland’s pre-existing problems have not gone away and, while they have got tougher to tackle, there is an urgent need to take them on.

“The local economy is particularly weak to the problems thrown up by Covid-19. Recovery is set to take years, longer than the rest of the UK. However, there is opportunity for change. Broad skills programmes are essential to ready Northern Ireland for the economy of the future. Infrastructure investment should be a top priority. Regional inequalities should be addressed.

“Restarting children’s education is an immediate priority. The lockdown learning gap cannot be allowed to grow further, and children’s emotional health and wellbeing needs support following months without school. However, the challenge goes beyond simply opening schools – individual children’s access to and engagement with education must be maintained on an ongoing basis, whatever further obstacles emerge due to Covid-19.

“The Executive also must ensure that the varying experiences of children during lockdown do not undermine the fairness of this year’s post-primary transfer process. So far, a lack of leadership has been shown on this issue despite the obviously challenging context.

“It is difficult to see how the 2020 transfer process can be seen to be fair given the hugely variable experiences of individual children during the pandemic. While there is no clear fix for the transfer test process that does not mean the default position should be to revert to the status quo following an insignificant delay.

“Transformation of Health and Social Care is as large a priority now as it has ever been. However, as well as beginning to reconfigure the health system the Executive must also focus on reducing waiting lists and protecting public health from Covid-19. Transformation has become more difficult, but no less essential.

“Health waiting lists are off the scale. During the first quarter of this year almost nine out of ten patients waited longer than the nine-week target for referrals. Over 136,000 people have been waiting more than a year for a first outpatient appointment. The Executive’s target is that no-one should wait more than one year.

“Properly functioning government underpins everything else. For the most part, the Executive has approached Covid-19 with a united front – albeit with some significant exceptions. That unity has to be the model in future, together with the recommendations from the RHI report.

“Those high-profile exceptions cannot be the norm. Nor can a return to the disunity and lack of collective responsibility highlighted by RHI.

“Altogether the Executive faces an immense set of challenges. It will not be easy, but it is vital for everyone in Northern Ireland that they are handled well.”

1. Improving how government works:

New Decade, New Approach tried to draw a line under political disagreements of the past, and there was an expectation that findings from the RHI Inquiry would be respected. Instead of focusing on that, however, the Executive found itself dealing with the greatest public health emergency in a lifetime. That does not mean that previous commitments should be allowed to fall away.

The Executive must continue to build a better working culture – For much of the pandemic, the government presented a united front. However, this was shaken significantly on a few occasions. Any such setbacks must be overcome. The Executive needs unity of purpose and a sense of collective responsibility.

The Executive must agree an ambitious and focused Programme for Government – *New Decade, New Approach* laid out a welcome list of goals. These should all be pursued but this cannot happen all at once. Realistic choices must be made based on finances and delivery capacity. All aims should be tied to measurable outcomes to ensure tangible improvements for people's lives.

Implementation of the RHI report should continue, and should be clearly demonstrated – The RHI report received relatively little attention due to the burgeoning pandemic. Nevertheless, the Inquiry and its findings remain a milestone in Northern Ireland's politics. Meaningful changes, based on its recommendations, must be demonstrated right across government. Systemic failures as occurred during the RHI affair cannot be repeated.

2. Economic recovery:

Northern Ireland experienced the lowest rates of Covid-19 in the UK but its short- and long-term economic recovery is expected to be slower compared to the UK and Ireland. This could be due to high employment in badly hit sectors, such as hospitality, combined with lower levels of skills, entrepreneurship and innovation.

Recent data shows the highest level of proposed redundancies since record began. Projections expect unemployment to not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2030. Furthermore, economic inactivity rates in Northern Ireland increased in the last quarter to 26.4% and remain amongst the highest in the UK.

Northern Ireland needs an ambitious skills transformation programme to prepare the workforce for the future economy, with specific support for those affected by Covid-19 redundancies – Skills development must target young people, those on furlough or at risk of redundancy, and those with low skills. The economic fallout from the pandemic is likely to hit those groups the hardest. Northern Ireland's skill base has a disproportionate emphasis on professional skills rather than vocational training. The general skill base of the population should be expanded to future-proof the economy.

The Executive should prioritise infrastructure investment to both enhance digital, education and transport provision and stimulate growth – Historically, Northern Ireland has been held back by a lack of infrastructure investment. Public transport, water and sewerage, and digital connectivity all require urgent attention. As well as the long-term benefits from better infrastructure, investment could provide immediate growth.

Economic programmes must work towards a regionally balanced economy – Northern Ireland has issues with high economic inactivity, low-wage jobs and a low-skilled workforce. These issues are greater away from the Belfast area, in regions where infrastructure is poor. Economically underperforming regions should receive help so they are not left behind in the post-pandemic recovery. Regional skills hubs could provide a platform to reduce inequalities in skills and economic activity.

3. Health and social care:

New Decade, New Approach committed to major transformation of Health and Social Care, including implementation of the Bengoa reforms. However, focus almost immediately shifted to Covid-19. This is understandable, but Northern Ireland's long-term issues still must be addressed urgently.

Overall outcomes for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland compare favourably with the rest of the UK. The Executive deserves credit for this but its good work must continue. The exception to this good record is care homes, which account for far more deaths, relatively speaking, in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK.

The Executive must prioritise the long-overdue transformation of Health and Social Care to ensure a service that is fit for the future – Several independent reviews of Northern Ireland's health service came to the same conclusions: care must be moved out of hospitals where possible; more focus must go on prevention and early intervention; support is needed for people to live independently; and acute services must be rationalised. These reforms are a matter of urgency, otherwise the system faces collapse.

The Executive must develop a plan to reduce waiting lists, especially for people already waiting for over a year - Health waiting times in Northern Ireland are so long that they hardly bare comparison with elsewhere in the UK. The latest data show over 136,000 people waiting more than a year for a first outpatient appointment. The Executive's target is that no one should wait more than a year. The nine week goal for Referral to Treatment is only met in 11% of cases. Tackling waiting times is in tension, in the short-term, with wider health reforms but the Executive must find a way to do both at the same time.

The Executive must continue to focus on robust containment of outbreaks of Covid-19, in order 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 – Protecting public health is, of course, the priority for the Executive. However, protecting health goes hand in hand with moving forward in other key areas like education and economic recovery.

4. Education:

Covid-19 and the subsequent social restrictions created an education gap for children across Northern Ireland. Some children have been impacted much more severely than others. This could be down to longer absences from school, less access to online learning, less support at home, or wider consequences of lockdown such as poor mental health or even bereavement. In general, children from low socioeconomic status households have been hit harder.

The Executive needs a comprehensive, adequately resourced education recovery plan, involving emotional and wellbeing support for children after lockdown, and it also must ensure any transfer test process is not undermined by learning gaps - Emotional

wellbeing, safety and educational recovery for children should be the cornerstone of any recovery plan. DE has allocated £11.25 million funding this year for the ‘Engage’ programme to support the social and educational needs of children post-lockdown. However, the content of this programme is down to individual schools, so its quality and effectiveness might vary widely.

Investing in a teaching support service to level-up the educational loss faced by some children in lockdown could help address learning gaps while also providing employment and experience for graduates.

The post-primary transfer process is a massive area for concern. Little leadership has been shown by the Executive on this matter. It is difficult to see how the transfer process in 2020 can be seen to be fair when children have had such varied experiences during lockdown, leading to significant gaps in learning and wellbeing.

The current plan is that the tests will be postponed for two weeks – a seemingly marginal change compared to three months without school. Even shifting the test into early 2021 would not appear to represent a significant change.

As the report states: “Nevertheless, the absence of a viable alternative should not mean that the default position is to revert to the status quo of assessment in November or indeed January 2021.”

DE should invest in contingency planning for online learning, including support for teachers – Everything should be done to keep schools open. However, this involves strict rules for pupil attendance at schools, while wider social disruptions in the coming months cannot be ruled out. Schools, teachers, parents and pupils should be prepared for a fluid mixture of classroom and remote learning, to ensure continuity of education.

Significant investment and operational re-development is required for Special Education Needs (SEN) – The SEN system, including its formal statementing process, were failing to meet demand before Covid-19. Although the pandemic presents enormous challenges, these children must be a priority. DE may have to reimagine the manner in which children with additional needs are supported and assessed in Northern Ireland.

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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. Its previous 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.
3. 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.
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.
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 .
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