

## **Programme for Government draft outcomes framework 2021-25 – consultation response**

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. Launched in September 2019, Pivotal aims to help improve public policy by promoting a greater use of evidence and involving more people in discussing the policy issues that matter to them. Pivotal wants to encourage and enable greater policy debate in Northern Ireland about day to day issues like health, education, the economy and climate change. Pivotal is independent of government and has no political alignment. More information about Pivotal can be found on our [website](#) .

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Pivotal is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the new Programme for Government draft outcomes framework for 2021-25. Our comments below largely relate to the operation of the outcomes framework overall, rather than being about the outcomes chosen.

### ***The outcomes framework offers the opportunity to bring about much-needed change in Northern Ireland***

We welcome this draft outcomes framework. A Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government (PfG) is long overdue, and so this consultation is an important step forward. We would urge the Executive to move quickly to make the PfG operational. It is very concerning that since its return in January 2020, the Executive has had no agreed delivery programme.

We are strongly supportive of an outcomes-based approach to setting the PfG. The arguments in favour of governments taking such an approach are convincing, for example:

- Outcomes are real issues connected to people's day to day lives, and so there is a strong connection between what the government is aiming to deliver and what matters to people in the real world. We welcome the ongoing commitment to engagement of those outside government in this process.
- Outcomes are underpinned by indicators that are understandable, measurable and publicly reported, meaning there is transparency about what is being achieved. In a properly operating system, there is accountability for performance and action in response to unsatisfactory indicators.
- Outcomes are cross-cutting, removing the artificial divide that exists because governments are structured in separate departments. Importantly, this should encourage much-needed

joint working between departments, which the Executive has struggled to achieve in the past.

- Taking this cross-government approach should mean a new focus on policy making for the medium- and long-term, another issue that the Executive has struggled with in the past. Within this, the new framework should help to place a renewed emphasis on prevention and early intervention across all areas of public services.

## ***An effective outcomes based framework will require significant changes in behaviour***

The significance of moving to an outcomes-based framework should not be underestimated. Operating a genuine outcomes-based approach will require Ministers and civil servants to behave very differently, since they are working towards joint cross-cutting objectives, not just their own department's objectives. This is a huge change from what has gone before. It would be challenging for any government, but particularly so for a five-party Executive with a poor history of cross-departmental working. The Northern Ireland Executive and the NICS need to be realistic about the extent of this challenge as it moves to this new approach. Significant supporting architecture will be needed to explain the new approach, advocate for it, deal with teething problems, and drive forward progress. To make this happen, buy-in and leadership will be needed from politicians and civil servants. Useful lessons about supporting structures could be learnt from countries that have successfully moved to using an outcomes-based framework.

While the current consultation is about the proposed outcomes, the more difficult choices lie ahead in deciding how they will be delivered. To a large extent, there will be broad agreement about the desirability of the outcomes, but the tough decisions will be in deciding what this means for current spending. What will change as a result of this outcomes framework? What spending will be prioritised, and what spending will be reduced or stopped altogether as a result? A successful outcomes based framework will require the Executive to jointly make these tough decisions.

## ***Key features of a successful outcomes-based system***

1. **Leadership** - achieving the PfG outcomes needs to be the main delivery focus of all Ministers, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Leadership and commitment will be needed from ministers and civil servants to embed this new cross-government process and drive progress towards the agreed goals. There was some momentum behind this approach when it was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2016, but given the challenges in the intervening years, a renewed focus will be needed now to build understanding and commitment again. In particular, political buy-in is needed to the long-term nature of the outcomes, which look beyond the immediate (and indeed beyond this electoral mandate) to the medium- and long-term.
2. **Changed behaviour** - departments (ministers and civil servants) need to respond to the agreed outcomes by changing their priorities and spending. If the PfG outcomes do not result in significant change in decision-making by departments, then the process will only be

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a presentational exercise. Proper implementation will require difficult choices about changing or stopping some existing spending in order to prioritise achieving the agreed outcomes. Ministers need to be jointly held accountable for all the outcomes to which their department contributes. Similarly, civil servants should be responsible for delivering against all the relevant outcomes, not just their own department's objectives. Again this is a significant change in culture and practice, which needs to translate down from senior leaders to all civil service staff.

3. **Joint working** - there should be a particular focus on ensuring that the new outcomes-based approach leads to better cross-departmental working. Like governments elsewhere, in the past Northern Ireland's departments have struggled to work effectively together. This is made even more challenging by departments being led by ministers from different parties. An outcomes-based approach which leads to a breaking down of departmental siloes and working with a common purpose would be a very significant step forward.
4. **Measurement, monitoring and reporting** - there needs to be a rigorous process of measuring, monitoring and reporting on outcomes data and indicators, and taking action in response. This reporting should be transparent and accessible so everyone can see what is being achieved. If progress towards outcomes is not satisfactory, there should be action from all relevant departments to address this. There should be reporting and accountability within departments, across the NICS, to the Executive, to the Assembly and to the public.
5. **Budgets** need to be set to reflect the outcomes agreed in the Programme for Government. At present there does not seem to be any link between the Executive's budget-setting process and the PfG outcomes. Connecting these two processes in future years will be essential if the PfG is to be a proper reflection of the Executive's priorities. Multi-year budgets are needed to enable proper planning linked to the PfG outcomes. In addition, under a proper outcomes-based system, the budget setting process will need to look at reviewing the whole of a department's budget, not just considering how to allocate additional funding on top of last year's allocation.
6. **Detailed delivery planning** will be needed to set out how improved outcomes will be achieved. In the first instance, this delivery planning should examine the programmes in place to achieve the agreed PfG outcomes and identify what needed to change. Effective delivery planning will be a first step towards putting the outcomes based framework into practice, and will help identify weaknesses in current delivery chains that may stand in the way of bringing about improved outcomes.
7. **A sustained focus for the long-term** – achieving improvements in the PfG outcomes is a long-term goal that will require persistence over time. It will not be achieved quickly and will require focussed effort over years. Politicians need to be realistic about this, particularly given their tendency to focus on short-term issues. Civil servants need to develop medium- and long-term delivery plans, with supporting mechanisms in place to monitor and adjust plans in response to what is being achieved.

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8. **Focus on delivering real change** - there are at least 50 policy or strategy documents listed in the draft outcomes framework consultation document. The first challenge will be to ensure that these strategies are developed in the collaborative cross-government way that an outcomes-based framework requires. Importantly, while producing these policies and strategies should be a helpful contribution, they should not distract from planning for delivery of the agreed outcomes. There is a risk that all the activity around writing policies and strategies might become the focus, when the more challenging task is planning the delivery of improved outcomes. Success lies not in publishing policies and strategies, but in bringing about real changes in outcomes that makes a difference in people's lives.

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