

Pivotal Tracker - policy priorities for Northern Ireland September 2021



Introduction

After overshadowing all government business last year, Covid has continued to dominate the Northern Ireland Executive's agenda. While there have been some important achievements, the Executive has again struggled with instability and strained relationships. No Programme for Government has been agreed and there is little evidence of ministers working together on longer term strategy. As next year's Assembly election approaches, renewed focus is needed on government that operates together to address Northern Ireland's long-term economic and social challenges.

The pandemic has created multiple challenges for the Executive. The health system has faced unprecedented pressure, children have been impacted by time away from school, and some businesses have seen huge falls in activity. The organisation of the Covid vaccination programme was a notable success, although the current high case numbers are extremely concerning.

The Executive faces considerable pressures across all public services. This is most obvious in health, where almost 185,000 people have been waiting more than one year for a first outpatient appointment. Extra funding to tackle Covid impacts has helped alleviate budget pressures in the short-term, but the need for fundamental investment and reform is increasingly clear. The Executive now needs to look beyond Covid to start to plan for the next three, five and ten years.

The approach of next year's Assembly election will focus attention on the dividing lines between the parties. Unfortunately this may mean even less likelihood of progress on longer term strategy or operating collectively. The Executive should resolve to use what remains of this mandate to deliver progress on Northern Ireland's headline policy challenges, like health service reform, schools budgets, infrastructure investment and climate change.

This short tracker report reviews the Executive's performance in 2021 so far and suggests priorities for the future. It has a

particular focus on Northern Ireland's long-term policy challenges in health, education, economy, infrastructure, climate change and environment. In the absence of a Programme for Government, the report considers whether the commitments in [New Decade, New Approach](#) (NDNA) have been achieved.

Pivotal plans to publish regular updates of this tracker report to review the Executive's performance and to give a revised assessment of policy priorities. A data annex is included to provide the latest information on some headline indicators.

In our Vision 2040 project, Pivotal is exploring public opinion about ideas and aspirations for the future in Northern Ireland. We would welcome participation in our research survey ([click here](#)) about policy priorities.

This document will consider:

- **How the Executive has functioned as a government in 2021 so far**
- **What the Executive has achieved this year, including a comparison to what was promised in New Decade, New Approach**
- **What should be the Executive's priorities for the next year**

How has the Executive functioned as a government?

The Executive has made progress in some important areas, but the absence of an agreed Programme for Government is a huge failing.

The Executive's focus in 2021 so far has been on continuing to manage the impact of Covid on the health service, the economy and wider public services. Successes include the swift and effective vaccination rollout and schemes giving financial support to businesses. In contrast to late 2020, a plan was developed for relaxing Covid restrictions without major disagreements between ministers. However, wider pressures on the health service have become even more apparent, with non-Covid procedures postponed and waiting lists continuing to grow. Across all areas of public services, particularly health, the priority now must be investment and reform to provide good quality services, while still managing the ongoing impacts of Covid.

Looking more broadly, the Executive has made progress in some important areas. A mental health strategy has been published. Consultations on innovation and skills strategies have been launched. An expert panel has reported on how to address educational under-achievement. A climate change bill led by the DAERA Minister is going through the Assembly, and before this a Private Member's Bill on climate change was introduced. An independent Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission headed by leading experts have been set up to provide advice on budgetary issues. A pension scheme for people who were badly injured during the Troubles opened for applications.

As ever, the Executive has faced many threats to its stability. Relationships between the five parties in the Executive have been fraught. The fact that the Executive has survived since January 2020 without collapse is notable in itself. Fundamental disagreements about Brexit have overshadowed this whole period, as have disputes about legacy and cultural issues. Changes in party leadership and ministerial roles have created further uncertainty. [As Pivotal has highlighted before](#), the prevailing instability and lack of

common purpose in the Executive often means a failure to make good decisions on day-to-day matters, and frequently means that longer-term policy challenges do not get addressed at all.

The absence of an agreed Programme for Government (PfG) setting out the Executive's joint delivery agenda is a huge failing. Policy commitments in NDNA are frequently cited, but there is no clarity about if, how and when these will be delivered. A 'Building Forward' plan was published in August setting out priorities for the next 24 months, but without any ministerial or media attention. Whilst this plan plus progress made by civil servants on the PfG outcomes framework are welcome, they cannot make up for the lack of political agreement between Executive ministers about what will be delivered and when. It is now too late for this mandate, but rapid agreement of a new Programme for Government must be a top priority for the new Executive next May.

Brexit remains a very divisive issue with time and energy being focussed on political disagreements about the Northern Ireland Protocol. The Executive does not appear to have invested in finding a common position which could give Northern Ireland a strong and unified voice in negotiations. Meanwhile much time has passed and chances have been missed to get the best outcome for businesses and consumers here. Unfortunately it seems likely that the upcoming election will mean further months without a focus on agreeing solutions that could make the best of the challenges and the most of the opportunities the Protocol presents.

NDNA had a welcome emphasis on addressing Northern Ireland's longer-term policy challenges, but since the deal was signed they have received limited attention. There has been some progress by individual departments during

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this period, for example consultation on a skills strategy, a new Infrastructure Commission and the development of a DAERA climate change bill. However, much more is required. As a new Assembly mandate approaches, the Executive must prioritise Northern Ireland's long-standing social and economic challenges, like low skills and productivity, poverty and inequality, and poor community relations.

There is a clear need for multi-year budgets and a more robust budget-setting process, to enable proper planning for investment and reform across all public services, particularly health. The [additional £3.9 billion](#) provided for tackling Covid has temporarily masked huge funding challenges across all departments. The independent advice provided by the new Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission will be very important in identifying current and future financial opportunities and challenges.

Little political or public attention has been given to the implementation of the recommendations of the RHI Inquiry. An update report from an Executive sub-Committee on RHI Inquiry implementation was meant to be published before Christmas 2020 but has still not appeared. The first NIAO report assessing and validating progress on implementation is due later this year. A renewed focus on ensuring real change comes about is needed by those inside and outside the Executive and Assembly.

With budgets stretched and demand for services increasing, the case for transformation in how public services are delivered is overwhelming. A new public sector reform strategy should be a priority for the Executive. There is a particular need for a plan for civil service reform, with a [recent NIAO report](#) highlighting an ageing staff, absence of long-term workforce planning, and a lack of appropriate skills in some posts.

Priorities

- **Prepare for the early agreement of a Programme for Government after next May's election, including multi-year budgets**
- **Prioritise working together on Northern Ireland's long-term challenges, like low skills, low pay, climate change and infrastructure investment**
- **Find an agreed negotiating position on the Northern Ireland Protocol that secures the best outcomes for Northern Ireland's businesses and consumers**

Health

What's been achieved?



Rapid rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme



Elective Care Framework published to reduce the backlog of patients waiting for assessment and treatment



Ten year mental health strategy published

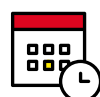
The Covid-19 vaccination programme was rolled out swiftly and successfully. However, the lower take-up of the vaccines amongst younger age groups and the current high number of cases are serious concerns.

Covid has underlined pre-existing fragilities in the health system, with huge waiting lists, over-stretched GP and hospital services, and staff shortages. Following unprecedented demand during the summer, full preparation must now be made to ensure staff resources are used most effectively over the coming winter. Elective services must continue despite Covid pressures, a point repeatedly emphasised by the [Royal College of Surgeons](#) and other professional bodies.

Latest data show 184,873 people in Northern Ireland have waited more than one year for a first outpatient appointment, up from 136,633 a year ago. In England, 5.6% of patients have waited more than one year, while in Northern Ireland it is 53.0%. The Health Minister has recognised this is unacceptable, and in June he announced a new [Elective Care Framework](#) to reduce waiting lists through a twin-track approach of investment and reform.

The Executive must grasp the three-fold challenge facing the health service. First, Covid needs to be managed, particularly through the coming winter. Second, waiting lists must be reduced to an acceptable level. The Health Minister has said this will require an additional £700m, but the Executive

NDNA commitments still to be delivered



Reduction in waiting times with a target of no one waiting more than one year



Deliver reform in health and social care as set out in Bengoa and other independent reports



Reconfigure hospital provision to deliver better patient outcomes

is yet to agree this funding. Third, long-term transformation is needed to ensure the system can cope with rising demand. The necessity of reform has been highlighted by a number of [independent reports](#) and the lack of significant change to date is one reason services are now so stretched. Political leadership from the Executive as a whole is needed to lead health transformation, including supporting changes to how and where services are delivered.

Priorities

- **Agree a funded plan for the long-term transformation of the health and social care system so it is able to deliver good quality services now and in the future**
- **Support the funding, actions and targets needed to radically reduce health waiting times**
- **Deliver effective health services over the coming winter months**

Education

What's been achieved?



Expert review of educational under-achievement published



Funding for Engage programme and summer activities to support educational recovery



New Special Educational Needs framework published

The Executive should continue to support children's recovery following two years of disrupted schooling, with particular focus on those most seriously affected, as identified in [research by the Children's Commissioner](#). Additional monies provided through the Engage programme and for summer activities are welcome. However, [research by the Education Policy Institute \(EPI\)](#) found the funding provided across the UK, particularly in Northern Ireland, to be far below what was needed to make up for lost time at school.

In June an expert panel produced a comprehensive [report about educational under-achievement and social background](#). Recommendations included a focus on early years, emotional health and wellbeing, and a whole community approach to education. This is the latest of several reports on this topic, and it is essential that this time around the Executive provides the sustained funding and leadership needed to bring about a step-change in outcomes.

In February the Public Accounts Committee published a [highly critical report](#) about Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, highlighting the number of children who have been failed by the system. In 2019-20, [85% of assessments](#) were not completed within the statutory 26 week target. Children who have not been properly assessed and supported for their SEN are likely to under-achieve in school, putting them at risk of poorer outcomes in the future.

NDNA commitments still to be delivered



External independent review of education provision



Ensure every school has a sustainable core budget



Childcare strategy including greater resourcing for high quality education and care for 3-4 year olds

The NDNA commitment that every school would have a sustainable core budget has not yet been met. A [recent EPI study](#) found that reductions in school spending per pupil over the last ten years have been higher in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK, with spending per pupil here now 20% below Scotland, and 5% below England and Wales. A proper assessment of school funding requirements should be a core element of the upcoming independent review of education provision.

Priorities

- **Ensure that pupils are supported to recover from disrupted schooling during Covid, with a targeted approach on the most vulnerable**
- **Deliver radical improvements in assessment and provision for children with Special Educational Needs**
- **Ensure every school has a sustainable core budget**

Climate change & environment

What's been achieved?



Two climate change bills being discussed by the Assembly



Commitment to publish Green Growth Strategy and Climate Action Plan



Consultation on energy strategy and decarbonisation scenarios

NDNA commitments still to be delivered



Climate change strategy, legislation and targets



Energy strategy with ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero carbon economy



Independent environment agency

As November's COP26 summit approaches, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has **warned of climate catastrophe**, saying "there is no time for delay and no room for excuses". The UK's independent Climate Change Committee (CCC) said that **action in the UK** to address climate change was failing to keep pace with the threat. In Northern Ireland, CCC said **climate change risks higher temperatures** leading to increased flooding, wildfires and summer droughts.

Greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland have fallen by just 18% since 1990, compared to a 44% reduction in the UK as a whole. Northern Ireland still has no climate change strategy, legislation or targets, although there is now cross-party agreement that these are urgently needed. Two climate change bills are going through the Assembly, one introduced by the Green Party leader and the other by the DAERA Minister. There has been consultation on an energy strategy and decarbonisation scenarios, with a final strategy due later in 2021. This increased prioritisation of climate change is overdue and welcome. The Executive and Assembly must ensure that competing views about targets for different sectors do not distract from reaching swift agreement on the action required.

Northern Ireland needs an independent environmental protection agency which is clearly separate from the Executive and its departments. This was a commitment in NDNA but has yet to move forward.

Climate change is a huge pressing issue with serious consequences globally and locally. Governments elsewhere are doing much more to recognise the extent of the crisis. As we approach the next mandate, all the parties here should embrace the challenges and aim to make Northern Ireland a world leader in environmental policy.

Priorities

- **Legislate for a long-term emissions reduction target with a deliverable plan showing how it will be achieved**
- **Publish an ambitious energy strategy setting out how Northern Ireland will reach a net zero carbon energy system**
- **Set up an independent environmental protection agency to safeguard the natural environment**

Economy & infrastructure

What's been achieved?



Innovation and skills strategies launched with aim of driving long-term transformation of the economy



High street voucher scheme announced together with other Covid business support schemes



Strategic rail review to look at promoting all-island economic opportunities, connectivity and growth



Infrastructure Commission to provide a long-term approach to infrastructure planning and delivery

Recent '[10X economy](#)' strategies published by the Department for Economy set out ambitious plans to address Northern Ireland's low levels of skills and productivity, through a focus on innovation, growth sectors and addressing skills imbalances. There is a danger that these ambitions do not translate into significant change in the real world. The Executive as a whole needs to focus on delivering improvements on these key economic indicators, jointly working across all departments. There should be a particular emphasis on making sure that everyone benefits from economic growth, not just particular sectors or sections of the population. The Executive should have a special focus on addressing low skills, economic inactivity and low pay.

NDNA contained a commitment to "develop a regionally balanced economy as a top priority". So far there has been a lack of obvious action by the Executive to take this forward. All economic strategies should include a clear explanation of how they will benefit people right across Northern Ireland.

There has been a little progress towards the NDNA commitment to "turbo-charge infrastructure investment". The expert advice provided by the new Infrastructure

NDNA commitments still to be delivered



Ensure benefits from innovation and skills strategies reach all groups, for example by developing an anti-poverty strategy and childcare strategy



Develop a regionally balanced economy as a top priority



Prioritise investment in essential infrastructure projects through a multi-year Programme for Government



Urgently invest in waste water infrastructure

Commission about large-scale transformative projects should be a positive step towards more strategic, long-term investment. The strategic rail review is also welcome. The Executive as a whole needs to give priority to long-standing infrastructure deficits that are holding back economic activity and growth, like [waste water capacity](#). A key element of this will be multi-year budgets which allow proper planning of investment.

Priorities

- **Use newly published strategies to drive a transformation in skills and innovation, ensuring these benefit all sections of the population**
- **Agree actions that demonstrate a clear commitment to a regionally balanced economy**
- **Put in place multi-year funding for long-term infrastructure investment**

Priorities for the Executive

The Executive faces multiple challenges from both Covid and wider pressures across public services. This report has identified some key priorities where the Executive should commit to making progress during the remainder of this mandate.

Real improvements will however rely on government that functions better together and looks beyond the short-term.

After the May elections, the new Executive should quickly agree a multi-year Programme for Government which focusses on long-standing social and economic issues like health service reform, low skills and productivity, educational inequality and climate change.



How government works

Prepare for the early agreement of a Programme for Government after next May's election, including multi-year budgets.

Prioritise working together on Northern Ireland's long-term challenges, like low skills, low pay, climate change and infrastructure investment.

Find an agreed negotiating position on the Northern Ireland Protocol.



Climate change & environment

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Health

Agree a funded plan for the long-term transformation of health and social care system.

Support the funding, actions and targets needed to radically reduce health waiting times.

Deliver effective health services over the coming winter months.



Economy & infrastructure

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Education

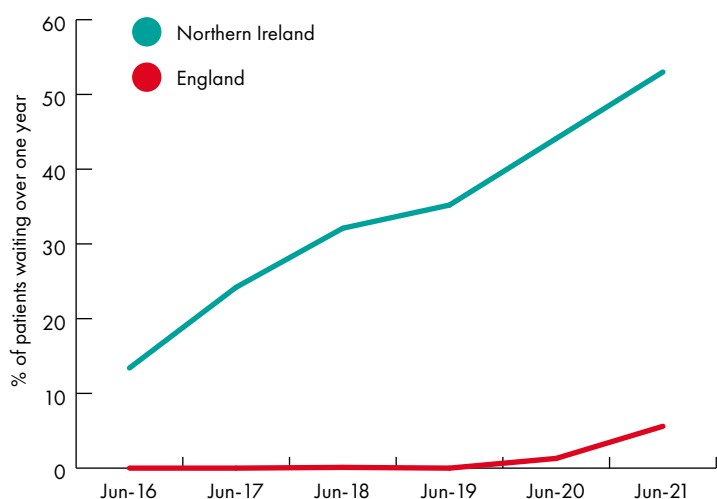
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Deliver radical improvements for children with Special Educational Needs.

Ensure every school has a sustainable core budget.

September 2021 Data tracker

This short annex provides the latest data for a number of key economic and social indicators, highlighting some of the main policy challenges in Northern Ireland.

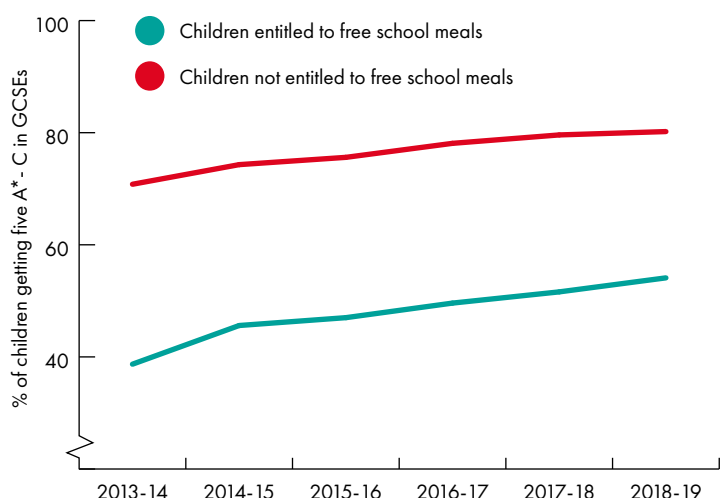


Health

Percentage of patients waiting more than one year for planned care

Almost 185,000 people in Northern Ireland have been waiting more than one year for a first outpatient appointment.

Source: England - Referral To Treatment (RTT) waiting times, incomplete RTT pathways - NHS England, Northern Ireland waiting time statistics - patients waiting more than one year for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment, DoH

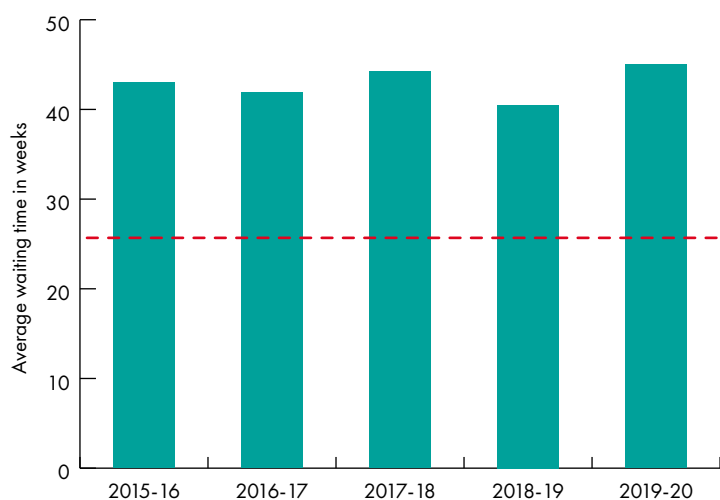


Education

Percentage of children getting five A* - C GCSEs including English & Maths by Free School Meal Entitlement

Latest data shows a gap of 26.1 percentage points in GCSE attainment between children entitled to Free School Meals and those not entitled.

Source: Examination performance at post primary schools in Northern Ireland, Department of Education



Special educational needs

Average waiting time in weeks for a statutory assessment

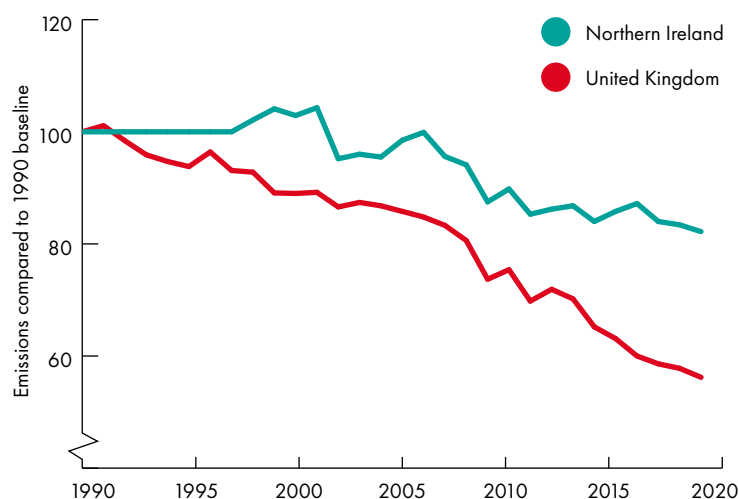
26 weeks

85% of statement requests are not finalised within the 26 week limit

Source: NIAO based on Education Authority figures - NIAO Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (2020)

September 2021

Data tracker

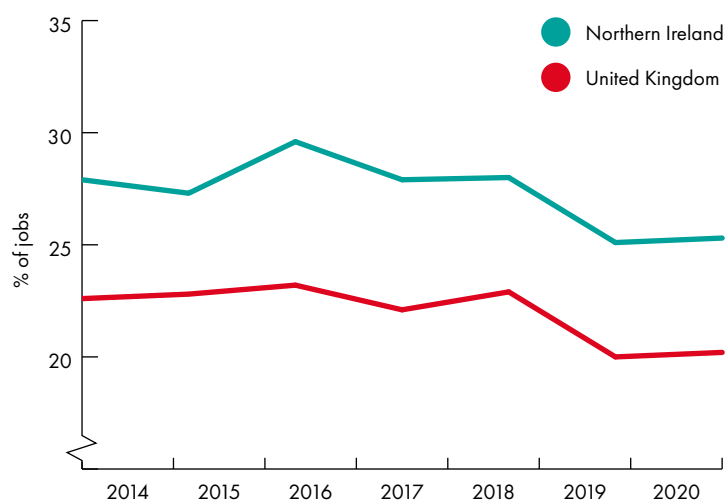


Climate change

Greenhouse gas emissions 1990=100

Greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland have decreased by just 18% since 1990, compared to a 44% reduction in the UK as a whole

Source: Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990-2019, DAERA and UK greenhouse gas emissions national statistics 1990 to 2019, UK Government

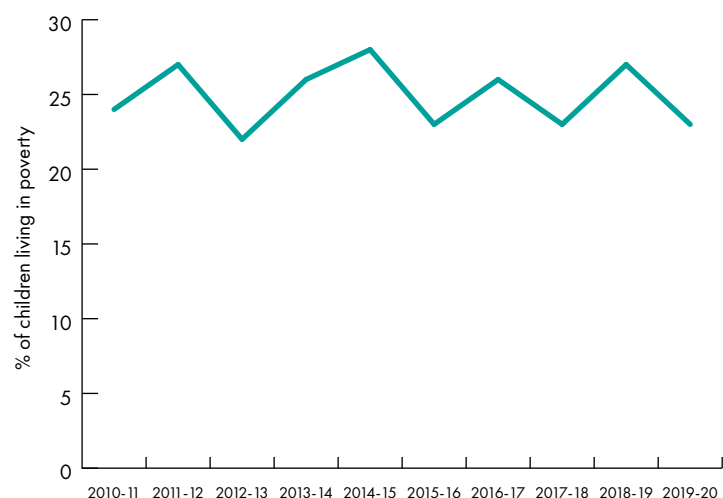


Economy

Percentage of employee jobs with hourly earnings below living wage

Although the percentage of low paid jobs is falling, in 2020 one quarter of employee jobs in Northern Ireland earned below the living wage

Source: NISRA Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) 2020



Poverty & disadvantage

Percentage of children living in poverty

Almost a quarter of children in Northern Ireland are growing up in poverty

Source: Relative income poverty defined as proportion of population living in a household with less than 60% of median UK household income, after housing costs. See NI Poverty Bulletin 2019-20 - Department for Communities

6th September 2021

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