

Initial comments on the draft Programme for Government

The [draft Programme for Government](#) identifies the Northern Ireland Executive's nine priorities for the rest of this Assembly term and sets out actions to achieve them in the coming year. The First Minister and deputy First Minister describe the plan as "ambitious but realistic". Throughout the document there are recurring themes of focusing on bringing about real change in people's lives, the importance of reform in public services, and also that a lack of funding will limit what the Executive can actually do. Pivotal will respond in more detail to the consultation, but at this point we offer these initial comments.

Credit to the Executive for getting to this milestone

Northern Ireland hasn't had a Programme for Government since 2016, and we shouldn't underestimate the importance and difficulty of getting to an agreed set of priorities. FM and dFM are obviously pleased and proud of what has been achieved with this agreement of joint goals. The new format feels sharper and more connected to real life than previous versions. It is clearly intended to be jointly owned, with all the Ministers' signatures presented at the start. It's a big milestone that means we now have a blueprint that should guide the Executive's decision-making through the rest of this mandate, for example with future budget allocations.

The priorities chosen will resonate with many people's day-to-day concerns

The nine priorities chosen are big headline issues for Northern Ireland that the Executive has been emphasising since its return in February. There will however be concerns about other issues that have not been included, with three leading examples being poverty, wastewater infrastructure and social care. However, not everything can be a priority and we recognise the importance of making choices. Without a doubt, the consultation will generate lots of comments about a range of potential alternative or additional priorities.

The clash between high aspirations and harsh reality is stark

The draft is realistic about what can be achieved given the current state of public services and the funding available. This is stark – but also refreshingly honest. There is a lot of description of current problems, lists of existing actions and things that have already been announced, but not many new commitments to move things forward. This is brutal in places, most notably when it states, "It will not be possible to reduce our lengthy [health] waiting lists within the funding currently available" (page 28). When different sectors examine the draft in detail for what it means for them, there will certainly be many responses saying this doesn't add up to enough. There will be widespread disappointment that the Executive is not going to deliver more.

Insufficient funding is highlighted repeatedly, but nothing about revenue raising

The document is quick to point to a shortage of funding and the need for the UK Government to provide more (see 3rd para of the Foreword and repeatedly after this). In Pivotal's view, this emphasis on getting additional funding is in danger of raising false expectations and deflecting attention from the Executive's responsibility for managing its own budget. The uplift for NI to 124% of England's per head funding has been endorsed by the independent Fiscal Council, and there is little likelihood of further concessions from the UK Government. Given public service pressures across the UK, significant new funding is expected through the Barnett formula as part of the UK Budget on 30 October, but the chances of other further special arrangements for NI are slim. The Executive would be better to recognise this reality and start making choices about spending their current funding differently and/or raising more revenue locally. While the document says "Financial sustainability will require brave decisions", it includes nothing about revenue raising (although it does mention efficiencies, more fiscal devolution and seeking additional borrowing powers).

A strong focus on transformation and reform in public services is essential

There is clear recognition of the critical need to improve public services: "The scale of the problem is enormous" (page 50). The increasing demand for and costs of public services are highlighted (see data on page 50-51). It is good to see this translate into the one of the nine priorities being "Reform and Transformation of Public Services", including "brave decisions, collaborative working, and a relentless focus on innovation and efficiency in service delivery." This is a cross-government priority, and it is fundamental to making progress on many of NI's public service challenges, as well as being key to achieving financial sustainability. The new Reform and Transformation Unit will need ambition, drive and expertise, and most importantly political support for difficult decision-making.

There is an extensive new dashboard of indicators, but no targets so far

The Wellbeing Dashboard is impressive in its scale and scope. There will be an annual report about the indicators and regular data updates. But it is a big shortcoming that there are no specific targets saying what will be improved, by how much and by when. Perhaps targets will be included in the final version. Neither are there benchmarks comparing performance in Northern Ireland to elsewhere. Moreover, there are some very odd omissions from the list of indicators, e.g. health waiting lists are not included as an indicator that will be reported on.

Anyone with views or ideas should respond to the consultation

The public consultation is an important part of this process and there is a clear commitment to listening to people's views. The consultation runs until 4 November. Here's [how to respond](#).

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