

PIVOTAL

**Pivotal response to the draft
Programme for Government
consultation 2024-2027**

4 November 2024

Pivotal welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Programme for Government. As an independent think tank, Pivotal seeks to contribute to improved policy making in Northern Ireland, and we have a particular interest in the functioning of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. Pivotal has no political alignment and operates outside of government. For more information about Pivotal, please see www.pivotalppf.org.

An important milestone

Pivotal commends the Northern Ireland Executive for getting to the stage of publishing a [draft Programme for Government](#) (dPfG). We recognise the difficulties of achieving such a consensus within a multi-party coalition and are pleased to see progress made on shared priorities and a vision for the future. In our most recent report, [The first seven months of the restored Northern Ireland Executive](#), the importance of publishing a Programme for Government (PfG) was highlighted as an urgent priority. This is a significant step towards more stable and accountable governance in Northern Ireland and will help track the functioning and effectiveness of government here. It is encouraging to see the joint ownership of the dPfG from Executive Ministers, together with the commitment to making a real difference in people's day-to-day lives. Moreover, the public conversation that the consultation has developed is a welcome and positive step towards greater engagement in public policy discussion, particularly after several years without the Executive in place.

We welcome the language of co-operation, of a 'shared mission' and a 'common cause', highlighting a sense of unity and an understanding of the seriousness of the task facing the Executive. This is evident even in the title of the dPfG, **Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most**, underlining the shared ownership of the priorities. The commitment to this 'agenda of change' is a welcome step forward from the instability and lack of clear purpose of previous Executives.

Furthermore, we strongly welcome the commitment to reform and transformation of public services, a theme and priority which runs throughout the document. Pivotal has continually emphasised the importance of long-term reform in our public services, rather than the short-term decision-making which has often dominated the Executive's actions. It is vital that this commitment to transformation is adopted and pursued by this and future Executives.

Important and worthwhile priorities, but some notable omissions

The Executive has chosen nine 'immediate priorities' for this year and for the remainder of the mandate, which are in line with the issues the Executive has focused on since its

return in February. Pivotal noted the importance of such priorities which resonate with people's everyday lives in a previous publication, [8 features of an effective Programme for Government](#). However, there has been criticism from certain sectors about the omission of some other issues, including [poverty](#), [wastewater](#) infrastructure, [social care](#), and the [Irish language](#). There are many issues which require urgent attention, especially after years of collapsed institutions, a devastating pandemic, and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and so the desire to have a larger number of priorities is understandable. However, we would caution against a long list of priorities, to maintain a sharp focus on acute areas that need attention. That being said, we would encourage the Executive to consider adding poverty and wastewater infrastructure to the priorities, which are both long-standing issues where the situation is increasingly urgent.

Funding – a key enabler that should be informed by the priorities

A key aspect of having achievable priorities is that, along with a clear plan with targets and measurable outcomes, there should be appropriate funding attached to each area. It is important that future funding should follow the priorities in the final PfG. There has been little evidence of this in the past, so we welcome the commitment that 'the budget process will prioritise commitments made in the Programme for Government'. The recent [Interim Fiscal Framework](#) (including the new fiscal floor), [Budget Sustainability Plan](#) and funding allocations in [Budget 2024](#) go some way to getting Northern Ireland's finances on a more stable footing. Nonetheless, the budget remains stretched and it is imperative to get the very best from it. Undoubtedly tough choices will have to be made. The dPfG makes this clear, stating 'we cannot afford to do everything that needs to be done'. The difficult financial situation will require targeting funding to priority areas, and using the PfG to guide these decisions will be vital.

The current financial situation has already led to an admission of failure on one of the nine priorities even within the dPfG itself, in openly stating that 'it will not be possible to reduce our lengthy waiting times within the funding currently available'. A lack of funding to do what is needed is a frequently recurring theme throughout the document, but is most obvious in this case. While we appreciate the honesty, it represents a concerning gap between ambition and reality. The priorities set out in the PfG should be achievable, and this raises an immediate question about whether they are realistic, if the Executive believes at least one of them cannot be met. Such an admission could have a significant impact on public confidence in the PfG and the Executive.

We welcome recent commitments to maximising efficiencies and reform, but recommend that a full range of options for balancing Northern Ireland's budget should be given due consideration. In Pivotal's view, there are other financial options which should be considered to further generate income, including but not limited to water

charges, domestic and non-domestic rates, and increased higher education fees. We would encourage the Executive to seriously consider the possibilities for greater local revenue raising to provide increased funding for public services and greater control of NI's own finances, meaning less reliance on the Block Grant.

Plenty of ambition, but how will the Executive be held to account?

A PfG should include what will be achieved and how it will be measured. There is a notable lack of indicators and targets for the nine priorities, which will make it difficult for MLAs, civic society, and the general public to be able to monitor progress. A series of indicators for the nine priorities should be established and made publicly available, to be reported on regularly to ensure scrutiny and accountability. Given the compressed mandate remaining, this is all the more significant. We note that since the publication of the dPfG, the [deputy First Minister has stated that the Executive will 'consider carefully' the inclusion of targets](#), which is welcome. Where targets are used, it is important that they are focused and achievable goals that do not unintentionally drain attention or resources from other important areas. The Institute for Government has done interesting [research into target-setting](#), with insightful comments on the benefits and risks.

Many of the actions listed in the dPfG are previously announced strategies, funds, or action plans which are already underway or have been developed in previous mandates. It is unclear to us how a step-change improvement in the nine priorities can be expected when the actions to achieve them are largely the same as in the past. We are concerned that some of these are framed as new investments or initiatives, when in fact they are already announced. For example, the [£25m investment](#) in a Childcare Subsidy Scheme was announced in May 2024 to provide all children with a 22.5 hour per week place for the pre-school year, and to give an increased amount to families using the tax-free childcare scheme. Furthermore, the scheme is [only confirmed until March 2025](#), by which time the final PfG is likely to only be a few months old.

A welcome commitment to reform

As previously stated, we are heartened to see the inclusion of reform and transformation in the dPfG. As the document notes, 'the scale of the problem is enormous'. Northern Ireland faces huge challenges in improving our crumbling public services and re-building people's trust that services will provide properly for them. After years of stop-start government, the stable platform of a restored and united Executive must be accompanied by the difficult decisions needed to change our public services for the better. This is a 'long-term commitment' which will require adequate funding to match the ambition and scale of the challenge ahead. The Executive's 'focus on innovation and efficiency in service delivery' and the pledge to 'maximise any potential funding sources'

should contribute to improved financial stability. This long-term thinking is a significant change in itself, and so we encourage the Executive to keep true to their word on taking the tough choices that lie ahead.

The need for transformation in public services in England was a focus of the 2024 Budget on 30 October, accompanied by significant new funding for both day-to-day and capital spending. Northern Ireland will receive Barnett consequentials of this funding, and it is essential that the Executive uses this new injection of revenue effectively to deliver the same scale of improvements to public services for people who live here.

The new Reform and Transformation Unit should be given the resourcing and status needed to lead and drive progress across all departments. The Public Sector Transformation Board, and the Transformation Fund, need to be used to bring about a step-change in how specific services are delivered. We welcome the focus on digital transformation and innovation and research. It is also good to see the strong emphasis on working in partnership with those outside government in Northern Ireland and beyond. We strongly recommend the use of external expertise from people and organisations who have a track record in successful public service transformation.

As with many parts of the dPFG, the section on Reform and Transformation of Public Services is strong on defining the problems, but with limited detail about what will actually be done in practice. More information is needed about plans for reform and transformation to ensure appropriate [scrutiny and accountability, and to enable those outside government to get involved in supporting this work](#).

A lengthy document lacking a clear, coherent thread

Much has been made about the length of the dPFG. At over 80 pages, it is much longer than [PfGs in Scotland and Wales](#), with the former containing only four priorities and the latter running to only 15 pages. Alongside its nine priorities are the three Missions (People, Planet, Prosperity) and the cross-cutting Mission of Peace. Under these are ten strategic domains, informed by around 50 indicators. Together, these make up the Wellbeing Framework, a longer-term vision for Northern Ireland that goes beyond just this mandate. [Many other Western nations have something similar](#) to this, and so we welcome this long-term strategic focus for Northern Ireland. That being said, the dPFG should focus on the nine priorities, and the inclusion of the Missions, domains, and indicators leaves their status and purpose unclear. The final PfG should provide clarity and definition of the vision, reasoning, and goals of the Missions and Wellbeing Framework, and how, if at all, they interact with the nine priorities.

On account of this, the 'hierarchy' of the dPFG is unclear. The document does not explain whether it is the nine priorities or the Missions that have pre-eminence, and which will be

used to determine Ministers' decisions. This is important not only for good governance and accountability, but also for allocating the budget. In the section of the dPFG which introduces the nine priorities, it states that they 'will help us deliver our missions', the implication being that the Missions are more important than the priorities, with the focus going on them rather than the nine priorities. This is made more significant by the fact that the Missions section seems full of ideas which didn't make it into the priorities, and could therefore act as a competing focus. Furthermore, there is another section entitled 'Building New Foundations' which includes various aspects of public infrastructure but does not have any timeframes, funding, or targets. It is unclear whether this is part of the short-term objectives for the mandate or the longer-term Missions, or if it is something completely separate that lacks detail. These inconsistencies in the dPFG make it difficult to follow. Overall, it lacks a common thread which makes clear the Executive's intention.

While we welcome the fresh approach of the dPFG, we suggest that it could be made clearer by separation into two distinct entities: a Programme for Government which focuses on the priorities for the mandate, and a Framework for Government which acts as a strategic vision document setting out the longer-term view through the Missions and which will inform future Legislative Programmes and PfGs. Under such an approach, the Missions and Wellbeing Framework would be granted clarity, increased significance, and improved definition. The Missions would have more of an over-arching purpose which would be used by the Executive to determine future PfGs. This would not only help to embed this thinking into the processes of governance here, but also to define the priorities and the Missions present in this dPFG more clearly.

Wellbeing Dashboard – impressive but how will it be used?

To monitor progress on the Missions, the Wellbeing Dashboard provides an informative and easy to navigate collation of around 50 indicators which inform each of the ten domains. The breakdown of data across local council districts, constituencies, and demographic groups such as age, sex, and religion is insightful and thought-provoking. We welcome the fact that decision-making about the Wellbeing data will be made by analysts and experts rather than politicians, to provide impartial and rigorous data that presents an informed picture of life in Northern Ireland. That being said, some seemingly significant areas to both wellbeing and the nine priorities, such as health waiting times, violence against women and girls, and childcare, have no indicators. We welcome the fact that the Dashboard will be dynamic, and that indicators will be added, tailored, or removed if necessary. On the 'Happier Children' domain, we are curious about why there are only two indicators included at present, when a wide range of possible data about children and young people could be used. We would strongly support the inclusion of the 'pre-school readiness' indicator which is under consideration for this domain.

While the presentation of the data is useful for an understanding upon a quick glance, there are some issues. The ‘traffic light’ system provides an easy to grasp understanding of changes, but also comes with a risk that it could lead to attention being given only to red and amber indicators, with the green ones becoming neglected. It is important that decision-makers examine and treat all indicators appropriately, to ensure that those areas which are doing well continue to do so, while the others catch up. Furthermore, the traffic light system is based on an improving/worsening/no change scale, rather than, for example, good or poor. While the monitoring of improvements is welcome, and indeed necessary in some cases, the information could become misleading, for example an area could be performing very poorly but be improving, and that context would not be clear from the reporting. The Technical Report offers comparative examples for some of the data, which, if added to the Dashboard, would provide additional important information about the condition of some of these. The Technical Report also details what is considered an ‘improvement’ or a ‘worsening’ but does not explain *why* this is the case. Without this information, the data sometimes appears inconsistent and confused. For example, it is unclear why there is an 8 percentage point gap between improving and worsening for the indicator of people living in absolute poverty, but a 0.1 decrease in life satisfaction is considered a worsening trend. While we appreciate that these are statistical decisions, clarity on the reasoning would improve transparency.

We await further detail on how the Wellbeing Framework and Dashboard will be used. While it is positive that the data is publicly available, it is unclear how it will be used by politicians. To ensure it is effective, we would welcome its use to inform future PfGs, and also in mapping funding to the domains to help inform budgetary decisions. We would also suggest the publication of an annual report, collating the Dashboard data into one place for the Executive to present to the Assembly and the public. This would provide a yearly updated assessment on wellbeing in Northern Ireland, and provide clear data for analysis and accountability.

Delivery, delivery, delivery

While this response has so far focused on the contents of the dPfG, what is more important is how it is used now and in the future. It is vital, therefore, that the PfG in its final form not only guides the Executive for the remainder of its mandate, but also has a significant effect on decision-making, ultimately with the aim of improving outcomes for people in Northern Ireland.

We welcome the work being progressed in the [Executive Office](#) and the [Civil Service](#) on a Delivery Unit, and also the publication of a yearly Delivery Report, but would appreciate more information about what form these will take, including their remit and resourcing. While the PfG may be full of worthwhile aspiration and the best of intentions, it is simply

a document unless it is coupled with a relentless focus on delivery and achieving improved outcomes. Delivery Units have taken many forms across the world, and require due consideration of the individual contexts and careful planning of its structure (see the work of [Oxford Policy Management](#) and the [IfG](#)). Having a Delivery Plan will be a central plank of this, and should also guide the Executive Ministers as they seek to implement the actions laid out in the PfG.

The 2024 Budget on 30 October contained multiple commitments to delivering improved public service outcomes in England, particularly in health, education and housing, together with significant additions of new funding. Unfortunately we know that public service outcomes in Northern Ireland already fall far behind England in many areas. Northern Ireland has received a big step-up in funding via Barnett as a result of the Budget, but of course does not have to spend this on the same things or in the same way as in England. Pivotal would advise that such injections of new funding do not happen often, and it is imperative that the Executive uses the new funding provided in the Budget to deliver a marked improvement in public service outcomes for people in Northern Ireland.

Summary

- Publishing the dPfG is a welcome and significant step by the Executive.
- The nine priorities chosen are important and appropriate, but poverty and wastewater infrastructure should also be considered.
- Future allocations of funding should follow the priorities set out in the PfG.
- The PfG should include targets which are clear, focused and achievable, so that progress can be measured.
- Reform and transformation of public services are essential. More detail is needed about plans in this area.
- A clearer explanation of the roles of the nine priorities and the Missions is needed, as well as the connection between them.
- The Wellbeing Dashboard is impressive, and it needs to be used effectively to monitor progress and improve decision-making.
- The UK Budget provided significant new funding in England for public services and investment. Pivotal urges the Executive to be similarly ambitious, ensuring that its additional funding is used to transform public services.
- The most important thing for the Executive and civil service now is to ensure the PfG is used to help deliver real change for people in their day-to-day lives.