

## **Some progress but no unified vision or goals – Pivotal’s assessment of the first seven months of a new era at Stormont**

*The newly-restored Executive can point to a reasonable list of actions since its return in February. However, a long list of tough decisions have yet to be made and the lack of a Programme for Government is concerning. Repairing Northern Ireland’s deteriorating public services will require much greater ambition, and more co-operation, from elected representatives.*

The Executive returned seven months ago after a two-year absence. While the institutions were down, Northern Ireland’s public services and finances – which had already been under strain – deteriorated significantly.

Optimism around the return of a functioning Executive and Assembly was tempered by broad realism about the task at hand. A new report by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, finds that while the Executive has made some good progress, it still has a huge amount to do if it wants to repair public services and make real improvements in people’s day-to-day lives.

***The first seven months of the restored Northern Ireland Executive***, published today [2 September 2024], looks at how well the Executive has functioned in a challenging period for Northern Ireland, following the two-year collapse which saw public services drift without proper political oversight and decision making, over-spent budgets, a developing ecological crisis in Lough Neagh, and sweeping global issues.

The report reviews actions taken by the Executive and each department since February, considering what has been achieved and what priorities should be now.

The report states that: “In many areas of policy, Northern Ireland needs a complete transformation to reverse recent declines and be ready for the future. There is not much evidence to show yet that the Executive grasps the level of joint vision, ambition and change needed.”

**How well has the Executive functioned?**

There is no doubt that, since the Executive's return, some progress has been made that would not have happened if the collapse had continued – including agreeing a Budget, public sector pay settlements, an early learning and childcare strategy, and extra money for social care.

A new legislative programme was agreed but there is still no sign of a Programme for Government, the headline document that outlines detailed governmental plans for the mandate.

Persistent problems like health waiting lists, decaying infrastructure and a lack of housing could never have been fixed in seven months, but “so far there is little evidence of proper plans to take these on”.

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “The return of the Executive and Assembly was a vital development for Northern Ireland. Public services and budgets were deteriorating rapidly. Proper local political leadership and accountability were essential.**

**“There has been a positive relationship between the First and deputy First Ministers, and other Ministers have taken on their responsibilities with determination and focus. But it was never going to be enough for Stormont to simply return. Northern Ireland needs stable government, but it also needs effective government.**

**“All the political parties, together with the UK and Irish Governments, need to commit to maintaining the institutions. Too often in the past, difficult political periods have led to the Executive collapsing. There cannot even be the threat of this in future. Politicians need to be clear that Stormont is here to stay and that they will work in good faith to serve the public.”**

**“All involved need to commit to providing effective government for Northern Ireland, which means fronting up to long-standing problems and making the difficult choices required. Thus far, the toughest decisions have been avoided. Prioritisation is needed. Local Ministers need to be open and honest with the public about this. One of the major factors behind the dire condition of Northern Ireland's public services today is the past failure to make longer-term strategic decisions that involved difficult choices. This pattern cannot continue.**

**“Public services require long-term restructuring to ensure they are fit for the future. At the same time, short-term fixes are also required in many areas, such as health and Special Educational Needs, because those services are**

in crisis right now. Addressing both of these aspects would be difficult at any time, but especially now given the strain on public finances.

“While passing a Budget was a welcome step, the lack of a Programme for Government (PfG) is of significant concern. The PfG is supposed to be the foundation of all government planning, and something against which the Executive’s performance can be measured. The fact that it hasn’t appeared raises questions about whether the Executive has a joint vision for what it is seeking to achieve.

“A Programme for Government should also play a key role in spending public money well. Many areas of policy are cross-departmental. Ideally, a Programme for Government would be agreed and then a budget would be passed, with money allocated to specific policies. Instead, the Executive has given money to individual departments, echoing the silo working of the past.

“In order to help people in their day-to-day lives, Ministers and civil servants should have a relentless focus on improving public services. Given that tough decisions are needed, the Executive will need a proper sense of unity and accountability. Ministers need to be clear that they are making decisions together and implementing them together.

In assessing the Executive’s performance, the paper looks at cross-cutting areas where urgent progress is required, and reviews actions taken by individual departments since February as well as identifying priorities for each.

*Key takeaways from the report include:*

### **A sustained period of effective government is essential**

Government cannot be effective without stability. All local political parties, along with the UK and Irish governments, must give a full commitment to the continued operation of the institutions. Collapse, or the threat of collapse, should not be options.

The last seven months has seen some positivity and constructive cooperation from the Executive, but this unity must extend to challenging times too.

But stability alone will not be enough. Politicians and civil servants must also show that they can provide effective government for Northern Ireland. Previous policies and ways of working have led to poor performance in many public

services, and continuing with them will only lead to further deterioration. In many areas of policy, a complete transformation in approach is needed.

### **A Programme for Government needs to be published as soon as possible**

The failure to publish a Programme for Government (PfG) is a huge shortcoming of the new Executive's first seven months. As a result, it is unclear what the Executive's priorities are, how the public can expect services to improve, or when these changes will happen.

An effective PfG should show the ambition needed to take on Northern Ireland's long list of major challenges. It should demonstrate ministers' collective ownership of policy plans. It should determine budgetary allocations, and show how strategic outcomes will be monitored and measured. All of this is essential to good government.

### **Manage a tight budget – and plan for multi-year funding in future**

All departments face tight budgets. Several seem on course for overspending. Similar challenges face other devolved governments as well as local councils across the UK.

Nevertheless, ministers need to accept responsibility for operating within the budget they themselves have agreed. Blaming a lack of funding for all difficulties and failings is not appropriate.

The upcoming fiscal sustainability plan should give proper consideration to all options for improving public finances – including options for raising revenue locally. More taxes or other payments might be unpopular, but this should be balanced against the realities of Stormont's spending power. The Executive should be honest with the public about the consequences of not raising more money locally.

Ultimately, multi-year budgets allow for better policies and planning. However, realistically preparations should be made for a one-year budget for 2025-26 – including time for proper consultation – and then a multi-year budget after that, following the UK Spending Review in spring 2025.

### **Relentless focus on improving public services**

Many services currently do not meet the needs or expectations of the public.

Health waiting lists are unacceptably long, GP access is too difficult, schools spend less on pupils than in other parts of the UK despite running over budget, Special Educational Needs is in crisis, creaking water infrastructure is a blockage on economic development and housing, the police are overstretched and local courts backlogs are the worst in the UK.

The Executive needs to focus on the task at hand. The central aim of government should be improving the lives of local people. Both long- and short-term measures are required. Ministers need to meet these challenges head on, and do so with openness, accountability and a united front.

### **Grasp long-term challenges and show collective ownership of big issues**

The Executive's first seven months have shown a tendency to focus on immediate issues that are in the public eye, rather than long-term strategic challenges.

While the current state of public services means that several short-term fixes are necessary, this cannot come at the expense of longer-term reforms.

The most obvious example is in health. The need to reconfigure Health and Social Care was identified well over a decade ago, yet progress has been slow – and this failure to act decisively is a major contributor to the dire state of the health service now, including waiting times that are off the scale.

That is just one example. Short-termism has also held back investment and progress in infrastructure, persistent poverty, the lack of good jobs in the local economy, educational under-attainment and climate change.

ENDS

### **Notes to Editors**

For more information contact Ryan Miller – 07789 552 340 – [ryan@millercomms.co.uk](mailto:ryan@millercomms.co.uk)

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland

2. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are David Gavaghan (Interim Chair); Richard Good; Sarah Creighton; Judith Gillespie; Jarlath Kearney; Sinéad McSweeney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey; Alan Whysall
4. 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 (2014-2019)
5. 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
6. For further information about Pivotal see [pivotalppf.org](http://pivotalppf.org) or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
7. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf