

Clare Rice Talk

KEY:

C: Dr Clare Rice

C: So thank you to the Education Service team for the invitation to join again today.

So today I'll be focusing on the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive over the last 12 months or so and taking a look at broader questions of how effective or otherwise they have been.

So if Judith slipped Gareth a fiver for teeing up some of her presentation then I must have thrown him at least 20 quid because there are quite a lot of common themes coming through what we've both been talking about and what I will talk about here today.

So let's get started.

Alrighty, so looking first at the Northern Ireland Assembly, of course one of the primary functions of a legislature is to make legislation. So while the last Assembly election was in 2022 we have to remember, as if any of us here probably could forget, that the institutions were collapsed between 2022 and 2024. So we effectively will have approximately half of a mandate for governance assuming everything stays operational at least until the next scheduled election.

In the time that has passed since restoration, and Gareth touched on this earlier, there have been 10 pieces of legislation completed. Six of these have been within the last 12 months, all but one of these have been executive bills and these have included matters such as hospital parking charges, one on pensions and on child support as required to maintain parity with the rest of the UK and an Agriculture Act. A further four of these act pertain to the budget.

So in terms of legislation with scope beyond either necessary or required legislation or legislation to address an update on some previous work of an earlier mandate, there has been relatively little that has passed through the legislative process so far within the Assembly that might be considered to be of direct impact or change to the lived everyday experiences of people on the ground in Northern Ireland. That said, there is a pipeline of legislation, as we heard about earlier, that indicates this picture will continue to evolve over the next 12 months.

At the moment, one bill is awaiting Royal Assent and that's relating to school uniforms. One is currently at the further consideration stage in relation to deaths, stillbirths and baby loss and 10 others are going through their respective committee stages.

Additionally, nine non-executive bills have been out for and completed their public consultation on themes including prevention of homelessness, women and girls in sport and breastfeeding and a further 15 have reported on the findings from their public consultation on themes such as the display of flags and emblems, the banning of conversion practices, suicide prevention and age discrimination to name a few.

So there are potentially another 24 bills in the pipeline but as was touched on earlier, most of these are not likely to make it across the finish line ahead of the mandate's end. Gareth has gone into more detail on the content of that legislative pipeline at present to round out the detail on this so I'm not going to repeat what he has gone into there so I'll park it there for the moment.

Even with this pipeline and the sausage machine effect or the phrase that was used, even with this it would be reasonable to expect that the current figure of 10 completed acts should at least have doubled by this time next year would be my thinking and somewhat aligns with Gareth's analysis in expecting double digits for non-executive bills passing. So there's optimism there that there is going to be continued progress on this.

When we look back at legislative productivity in previous mandates it's perhaps a little bit easier to get a sense of how the current figures compare.

So in the 2017 to 2022 mandates we had 10 non-executive bills that made it across the finish line to become law, 36 executive bills were passed giving a total of 46 acts. With the institution's then collapse between 2017 and 2020 this legislative output was achieved within a window of approximately two or so years so not too dissimilar to the amount of time that's available in the current mandate.

Even with the longer sitting days that the concerted effort that we saw at the end of that mandate to get a lot of legislation pushed through before everything wrapped up, remembering of course that there was a period of time before everything came to a complete halt due to a mechanism introduced through new decade new approach, it's reasonable to expect something similar in terms of output by the end of this mandate so we'll come back to that in due course and I imagine and see how well everything has progressed.

We have to look back to 2011 to 2016 for the last full mandate and when you consider, to make some of you feel as old as I did when I realised this, that some of your first year students in your schools wouldn't have been born when that mandate started, it really hits home just how long ago that was.

In that mandate seven non-executive bills and 60 executive bills, a total of 67 acts were passed and now of course the world is a very different place and we have different political dynamics within the chamber, nationally and internationally, within the executive and throughout the legislative process in the assembly as well and these are all factors that feed into wider questions of the effectiveness and indeed the efficiency of the assembly in terms of its legislative activities. So essentially we are where we are, I suppose whenever it comes to legislation and we'll have to see how things evolve over the coming year and a bit on this front.

Now if we turn then to look at scrutiny within the assembly, obviously a crucial part of the legislative process and of the democratic function of the assembly is scrutiny and that's both within the assembly chamber and within the committee structures.

So within the assembly we of course now have an official opposition as was mentioned earlier in the form of the SDLP. There are 10 days per year allocated for opposition business and to date the SDLP has used these days to focus on a range of issues, some of which I've listed here just to demonstrate the expansive topics that have been selected. It's ranged from violence against women and girls to justice and the rule of law, issues with the northwest and tackling child poverty to name just a few of the areas that these days have been used for.

Now I'm going to be an academic here and say I'm not willing to commit to more than the academic take on this, which is really that we need to see the opposition in place and functioning and active for a lot longer before we will be able to reach any meaningful insight as to how effective or otherwise it has been in working within the design of Northern Ireland's institutions.

The presence of an alternative perspective in a formalized capacity within power sharing structures more generally, such as those that we have here, is still somewhat uncharted territory in terms of understanding and being able to analyse how effective that presence is in legislative terms. So that's something that I will continue to visit and hopefully if you set me back at any point I'll be able to provide a bit more meaningful analysis and in-depth evidence-based thoughts on that.

But what we can say at this stage is that in many ways and particularly now that the media has gotten to grips a little bit better with the concept of an official opposition in the context of Northern Ireland, is that it is relatively commonplace now for a representative of the opposition to be included in discussions about issues of the day and for critique to be sought from this angle.

So it is possible that this will have an impact on wider public views of the work of the Executive as time goes on, but really at this stage it's something that we need to see in action a little bit more before we can reach any firmer conclusions as to the impact or the effectiveness of that.

Indeed, also within the Assembly, the specific committee rules the opposition can fill, the rights that it holds in terms of debate contributions and of course the specified opposition business days all hold importance, but their impact and effectiveness in real terms is where the true essence of future analysis lies. So that's something that really only once we get to the end of this mandate and see it operationalised in future mandates that we'll be able to get a better sense of.

Turning now to look at committees, scrutiny of course also takes place within the committees and Gareth has given already quite some detail on the more detailed aspect of the work that the committees in the Assembly are undertaking at the moment.

One of the more quantitative ways that you can analyse or think about the performance of committees has been a little bit critiqued so far today but I think it's one way of thinking about it and that's through their publications or their outputs.

Of the statutory committees 27 reports have been produced so far since the restoration of the institutions and there are an additional 10 bills as mentioned that are currently going through their committee stages. So they're certainly busy in their work there's no doubt about that.

In addition the Public Accounts Committee has produced nine reports and this committee follows a slightly different procedure and holds a specific and important role within the Assembly's scrutiny mechanisms focusing on financial scrutiny and it determines its work programme based on reports from the Northern Ireland Audit Office and works towards producing recommendations for departments to then enact. In that way its work in Northern Ireland at least is retrospective in nature, it doesn't call elected representatives to give evidence and it instead engages with departmental officials in the work that it does.

So I think it's fair to say given the time that we have had that nine reports is a pretty solid output for a committee of this remit and this stature given these challenging logistics but of course there's always room for improvement and for my sins and as a former assistant clerk to the committee and that's something that I have an interest in following as well so I'm happy to talk about that afterwards if it's of interest.

I'll also highlight here the work of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee as Gareth also mentioned. Stemming from the Windsor Framework the role of this committee is to examine and to consider new and replacement EU acts and it has scope to conduct inquiries and to produce reports in relation to replacement EU acts.

So it's an important body within the Assembly in the post-Brexit context and it has produced nine reports as well to date. It regularly takes evidence from key stakeholders and it is doing a pretty tough job in the context of those post-Brexit institutional changes on the landscape of the Assembly now. Recently it was described in a report by the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee as part of a set of arrangements that is a quote in nature so yeah if you're interested in finding out more about that I very much recommend that you have a read of that report.

The report also identified some ways in which the operational effectiveness of the committee could be enhanced including more timely receipt of information from the UK government but again this is still relatively young as a committee still quite in its infancy and I think it's to be expected that there will be refinements and some small changes in terms of its operational reality over the time ahead but it's important to say that it's doing a pretty serious and tough job in a very difficult climate.

So I haven't gone into the topic of representation here so that's of course one of the other core functions of the Assembly. I know David will be talking about political representation which is why I haven't strayed into that it's within the scope of his work.

In terms of my own research I do quite a bit on sort of more substantive representation of issues within assemblies within the Assembly and within parliaments more generally and so again that's something I'm happy to have a chat about afterwards if it's of interest but I'll leave the numerical representation stuff to David for his speech.

Now there we go so looking at the post-Brexit context then and I've already discussed the Democratic Scrutiny Committee but there are also other Brexit related features that are now present in the everyday working of the Assembly.

In terms of applicability motions there have been two of these to date one was passed and they come into play in relation to new EU acts within the scope of the Windsor Framework and the effect of the applicability motion is with cross-community consent and support to effectively give permission for the application of new acts to Northern Ireland that are within the scope of the Windsor Framework.

The overall process itself is much more procedural and nuanced than that very brief overview that I've given there but hopefully gives at least a sense of the importance and the responsibility on MLAs when it comes to these particular motions coming through so that's something that's bubbling there in the background as well in terms of the MLAs and their work.

In addition the MLAs also have a periodic vote on the continuation of articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor Framework which relate to trade related matters. MLAs had their first vote on this just before Christmas last year and as expected the vote passed but without cross-community consent.

This triggered a review of the operation of the Windsor Framework by the UK government led by Lord Murphy as Gareth referred to earlier and it means that another vote will be held four years thereafter so that should be in 2028.

Had it received cross-community support this would have extended that time frame to eight years so there is a direct consequence of how that vote goes for the activities of the Assembly and that forward work programme for Assembly members.

And had it failed to pass a separate process then would have been triggered towards ultimately the potential cessation of articles 5 to 10 applying after at least a period of two years but that's a whole other kettle of fish that you don't need board with in terms of Brexit legality so I'll leave that.

So there is another significant and important duty of the Assembly in the wake of Brexit there.

The final element that I'll highlight here as I've already gone through the Democratic Scrutiny Committee is the storm and break.

Unlike the applicability motion I've already discussed this has the potential to come into play in relation to EU acts which amend or replace acts that are already applicable in Northern Ireland under the Windsor Framework.

The clue really is in the name with this one as it was introduced to much acclaim at the time that it was a really powerful democratic mechanism that would stop any changes against the will of politicians in Northern Ireland.

Its operation is quite similar to that of the petition of concern in that you need 30 signatures from at least two parties in order for it to be triggered but its operational reality is actually much more complex than that. Essentially and I'm boiling down quite a lot here it involves a process of convincing the UK government that the replacement or amendment and I quote significantly differs to the existing law in place and that the change quote again would have a significant impact specific to everyday life of communities in Northern Ireland in a way that is and this is the key part liable to persist. There is also a role for the Democratic Scrutiny Committee in this wider picture as we saw last year as well and ultimately the UK government can follow a process that will enable the change to happen even in the absence of consent from Northern Ireland Assembly.

So there is a question mark there as to how effective it actually is in practice and how that mirrors against the political heralding of the storm and break as the next great democratic tool for the Northern Ireland Assembly whenever it was first announced so there's just a point of interest there.

Now the storm and break was triggered as I mentioned just before Christmas last year by the Democratic Unionist Party and in relation to the packaging and labelling of chemicals the Democratic Scrutiny Committee found that the two criteria that I outlined on significant change and persistent and significant everyday impact were not met and that was a conclusion

also echoed by the UK government so it didn't go any further other than to lead to the review that I mentioned but it does demonstrate that there is the potential for the break to face the same challenges as the petition of concern and being triggered potentially ineffectually and potentially for political reasons within the structures here so that'll be something also to keep an eye on as time goes on because as Gareth highlighted we haven't seen the petition of concern used yet we have seen the storm and break we know that Brexit and that question around the relationship with Europe the broader constitutional conversation conversation within which all of that is situated is something that is really core and at times toxic to the politics that we see in Northern Ireland here so actually watching what happens with that and whether or not it could potentially be seen as a lever of sorts for political interest as we as we have seen with issues with the petition of concern will be something to keep an eye on.

So all of what has been said about the content of this slide is really just to show firstly that the Assembly has been navigating a very different procedural environment post Brexit and secondly that the MLAs themselves are navigating evolving political dynamics since the 2016 referendum and this all feeds into wider questions and assessments of how effective are the institutions so it's important to take account of these Brexit specific features as part of a wider analysis on this theme even if you're sick of hearing me talk about Brexit at this stage.

Now okay so turning attention to the Northern Ireland executive then I'm going to preface this discussion or analysis of the executive's work by returning to the nine priority areas that were detailed in its programme for government a success story arguably in its own right that one was agreed at all.

So for any government this type of document acts as effectively a benchmark against which success can be gauged so the fact that this was a particularly ambitious set of aims has given some concern from the outset and I think I discussed this with you last year that the executive was perhaps setting itself up to fall short. So with that in mind I'll turn attention to just a few examples of some of the more prominent activities or stories that have surrounded the executive over the last 12 months or so.

So starting at the top left there and we've seen the introduction of a child care subsidy scheme and a subsequent extension of this however campaigners argue that this still falls short of what is required and that the costs of child care are forcing parents out of the workforce which of course has serious economic consequences for Northern Ireland. If you look at the work of organisations such as Melted Parents for example it's evident that there's still a lot more work to be done there so this is something that it's good to have seen progress in but more to come is the wider narrative around that.

Just below it then we have the front page of the 2025-26 budget and here the point that I'll highlight is that it only provides one year of clarity and financial planning ability for departments and therefore for the organisations a bit of a trickle-down effect that's set under departments or rely on departmental funding.

So the question here is really when will a multi-year budget or budgets start to come into play to allow effective planning for these organisations many of which have direct and quite pertinent consequences on the impact for everyday lives of people in Northern Ireland. It's a bit of a in the air question because there is no answer to it but that's something that certainly if an executive is working towards a point of stability and future planning that you would expect to be starting to see coming forward.

To note as well that the budget is already on rocky territory it didn't have a great start as I know we looked at last year but we have seen within the last week or so the announcement that the executive has approved 100 million pounds of an overspend for the Department of Health. So the question is firstly where is that money coming from and secondly at what expense elsewhere is this happening or indeed what the consequences might be if it's not being drawn directly from other pots for other departments so to speak.

So there's a potential storm coming down the tracks in relation to that alone on top of all the known issues that we have discussed previously around budget allocation and the fiscal situation for Northern Ireland.

Moving around the screen to the next image just at the bottom there and the question of health and social care itself is a perennial one pretty much in any system at the moment but especially so here in Northern Ireland the health care waiting lists here are widely shown through evidence to be the worst in the United Kingdom and these are routinely filled beyond capacity. Coming into the winter months we hear almost daily of hospitals being overcrowded, patients receiving medical treatment and interventions in corridors and staffing levels being sub-optimal. So the minister announced this year that the department will be leaning on the private sector to help tackle waiting lists. We now also know as I've mentioned about the funds that have been allocated to meet the pay rises to prevent strikes from health care workers over the winter months.

So work does continue to try and address the issues within health but so much remaining is remaining to be dealt with in part due to the sheer volume that this is an area that will remain somewhat of a thorn in the executive side. I think there is an argument to be made that no matter how much money is thrown at the Department of Health it won't resolve all of the problems.

There is an issue of I suppose a time lag particularly with the institutional collapses that we've seen in recent years that effectively things are on the back foot consistently so it's not just a matter of improving things from a stable point to move forward it's addressing things that are lingering from a time previously before that can happen. So there's a whole challenge there and indeed that's an argument to be made across all of the departments but particularly so within health given the sheer size of the overall budget that is allocated towards that particular department.

Going around to the bottom of the screen then where we see the prairie swan covered in the blue green algae of Lough Neagh. Obviously the issue of Lough Neagh and the now annual presence of it during the summer months of this blue green algae has essentially united the executive and the executive parties in saying that it's a problem that needs to be addressed but there's really no consensus as to how this can be done.

So it's really just to demonstrate here that it is possible for ministers to agree but without any substantive merit or meaning behind that. So this is again another ongoing issue not one that will be easily resolved but one that requires a cross-departmental approach that isn't really forthcoming to date.

In the next image we have the signage relating to the A5 road movement yes within the department for infrastructure on the long sought work on this route however this ended up in court earlier this year and it was found that the department was actually in breach of its own climate legislation with its plans on this which is a pretty serious lapse in the development of

these plans within the department and one that has essentially sent this matter back to the drawing board.

So again this emphasises the potential issues that this something as big and as major that has so much attention around it as the A5 is falling through gaps where something as pretty big as the executive's own legislation can be misinterpreted, overlooked, whatever it was that actually happened then it presents a somewhat lingering question as to what's happening elsewhere on let's say lower priority issues are there issues around there again with this cross-departmental way of working or lack thereof and indeed what does that say about the effectiveness of the executive as a body overall and its impact ultimately on the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Moving around to the next image this purple one here at the side we now have a strategy on tackling violence against women and girls and credit where it's due that this is in place it's a pretty significant step forward in not only recognising the problem and the extent of it in Northern Ireland but in forming a strategy aimed at bringing about change.

As an issue it's again something that will not change overnight even with the best of wills and so close observation and scrutiny will follow this and this has been echoed by various bodies across Northern Ireland as well not least as the strategy extends beyond the next election as well so whether or not it will actually be retained as a priority area for a future executive remains to be seen so it's good for now but will it actually reach the end of its intended life and will those aims that are outlined within it actually be achieved so there's a whole question mark around there and it's not just in relation to violence against women and girls there are several strategies that face the same question marks as well.

So another ongoing issue and one that has shone a light on tensions within the executive I think it's fair to say is in relation to the Irish language signage in the new grand central transport hub down in Belfast city centre here this is a matter now being pursued through legal routes and the communities minister has been granted permission to intervene in this on the basis of an argument that the decision should have been taken within the executive as opposed to purely within the department for infrastructure due to the cross-cutting nature of the issue at hand. A reminder on this really is just to flag that the executive was actually encouraged by a judge in relation to this to discuss and resolve the issue essentially behind doors as much as possible in order to avoid being seen as and I quote a laughingstock so you can reach your own decision on that.

And finally the image at the top of the screen and this is in reference to schools obviously and in particular integrated education so I flag this particular example as it is yet another issue that has seen the executive involved in a legal challenge and in this case the education minister in relation to his decision against permitting two schools to change to an integrated status.

It was found that the minister's decision was lawful in a challenge arguing that this had not been the case so I raise this as an example not to delve into the discussion on the legalities around that but really to highlight it as an example of pushback that we are seeing against the executive and particularly ministerial actions.

So while this slide is by no means anything more than just a snapshot and a very brief snapshot at that of what the executive has been up to over the last year so there are three things that have emerged.

The first is that every department has major issues to address for which substantial amounts of money are needed. Every minister is fighting for more and more and they simply cannot do everything that they hoped or even planned for in the current fiscal environment. There is no way that the executive will not fall short of the aims that it has outlined in its programme for government and the question here really is more one of how well each department can mitigate the effects of the expected shortcomings as opposed to necessarily focusing on what will or won't be achieved. There's a bit of a grey area there.

The second point is that the challenges of a multi-party executive are becoming increasingly difficult or increasingly clear to see and becoming stronger with time. It's arguably not anything that we haven't seen before but there was the potential for things to change as is always the case. I try to be optimistic anytime that there's a collapse of the institutions there's always some basis for coming back and trying to do things differently. That isn't the case now, it's very much a repeat of the same divisions and the same tensions playing out that we have seen before. Essentially we're at a position where as much as ever it's political will that's the glue that's holding everything together.

The final point then is that the question really at the core of considering how effective or otherwise the executive has been is what are people on the ground actually feeling and are positive changes being seen and felt by people in Northern Ireland. That in many ways and I know it was touched upon in the presentations earlier as well is the marker of success. It's not necessarily those quantitative metrics in terms of output and reports and the tick boxes and the photo opportunities and so forth. It's what people on the ground are actually saying and feeling about the politics and what's happening at that level.

That brings me to my next slide. Looking at some recent polling if we look at the Northern Ireland general election survey from the general election obviously in 2024 but published earlier this year we see that the numbers aren't great to put it mildly.

We've got 19 percent of respondents believe that the institutions won't collapse again so basically just over four-fifths believe that they will. 27 percent are satisfied with the performance of executive ministers. Again that's not even a third of people that are speaking in optimistic terms about the executive and we see as well within these results that their respondents were asked to rank priority issues and the cost of living crisis and health services were the top two that emerged.

So basically it's not constitutional questions, it's not Brexit, it's very much the bread and butter day-to-day stuff that are really directly impacting people's lives that are the priorities that people want to see action on from the executive and from within the assembly. Essentially failure to deliver on these things is going to persist or see a persistence in the low numbers of satisfaction in the work that the institutions and the elected representatives within them are doing. So just to flag that a particular piece of research.

We also had a lucid talk summer tracker poll a few months ago where people were asked how they would rank in percentage terms the performance of the assembly and the executive. We see there it's 35 percent. Again it aligns broadly with what we've seen from the Northern Ireland general election survey. The takeaway from it is it's not great.

Looking then at a second set of data. So for a few years now I've referred to the testing the temperature surveys that are conducted at Queen's University in Belfast and consistently we have seen that the most trusted actors in terms of representing Northern Ireland's interests in

relation to Brexit and the Windsor Framework more specifically have been Northern Ireland business leaders. It's not the political parties, it's not even the Northern Ireland executive, it's Northern Ireland business. So again that raises a question as to whether or not it's an issue of communication or is it just a basic matter and I said basic, doing a lot of work there of trust in the political actors and the institutions themselves and what they're doing. So there are less than positive assessments let's say of the work of the assembly and the executive.

Which brings me to a question of whether or not the institutions can actually be considered effective. Sure they're ticking the boxes in terms of doing the stuff that they're meant to be doing but that more quantitative analysis isn't the same as the qualitative impact and those questions as to how well or otherwise it is affecting people on the ground. Can we consider them to be effective institutions and I'm afraid the academic answer is as always it depends on what you mean by effective and what in turn are the features that can be considered to reflect this.

So this is a very academic ending to the presentation so please forgive me for that.

I think it's fair to say that what people in Northern Ireland consider to be effective governance and the institutions has changed in the post Good Friday Agreement era. It isn't just a matter of the institutions being present and operational but more and more about the delivery and further than that the feeling of delivery or the experience of it for people on the ground.

That is reflected not only in the opinion polls such as those I've just shared here as examples and there are others out there but in legal challenges to the executive departmental decisions and gatherings and protests on the steps of the building that we are currently in. Every campaign and effort to shape policy through activism. All of these are ways in which people are voicing concerns about the way things are being done and calling for change to greater and lesser degrees. Indications essentially currently are that the institutions simply are not delivering.

In terms of legislation more specifically on a more clinical assessment the primary function of legislature as we've said is to produce legislation and it's important in considering that to look beyond just the numerical outputs in other words how many pieces of legislation have been passed and to take account of what these pieces of legislation aim to achieve.

So this is touching quite a lot on what Gareth was talking about earlier and indeed Judith in relation to Westminster. Yes we've seen more bills get across the finish line and receive royal assent but the question here really is can we consider 10 pieces in the space of almost two years to be adequate and what about their scope as I mentioned you know can they really be considered to be 10 pieces of legislation that will have a direct and tangible impact on everyday lives in Northern Ireland.

There's certainly a strong case that the answer to both questions there is no, but I'll leave you to reach your own conclusions on that.

At the end of the last mandate we saw the flurry of activity in the chamber with several pretty significant bills getting across the finish line. That does somewhat skew the reading of how effective the institutions were before the last collapse in 2022 but I think we need to look at the positive here and that it was also a demonstration of what's actually achievable whenever all shoulders are put to the wheels so to speak. We also have to consider the balance between the quantity and quality as I've mentioned and yeah as I said I'll leave you to reach your own

views in relation to the legislative productivity in the current mandate to date not just in quantitative terms but also taking those qualitative considerations on board as well.

Thinking then about scrutiny again it's a bit of an academic response what do we mean by scrutiny? Do we mean constructive criticism? Do we mean holding ministers and other actors to account for their decisions? Do we mean the presence of different perspectives such as those put forward by an official opposition? Do we mean all of these things none of them or something completely different?

I would argue that both quantitative and qualitative metrics as I've said are needed in thinking about this but the answer itself really depends on a case-by-case basis so it's an extremely difficult point to measure.

I think it would be extremely difficult in terms of academic rigor to be able to say that it's an answer that could be reached looking at the executive or the activities of committees or debate within the chamber as a whole. It would be pointed analyses at each of those levels that would give a more meaningful picture in response to a query like that but certainly it's one that will require more time to see how things play out in bed and I don't think half a mandate is probably the best place to be starting for that.

Looking at departmental challenges then I've referenced that there are significant challenges within departments and indeed between them all heightened within the constrained fiscal environment for the needs that have been outlined that ministers and departments want to meet. We know that everything that was outlined in the programme for government won't be achievable and that's maybe a pessimistic conclusion that I'm reaching in regard to that and I'm happy to be pushed back on that but certainly on my assessment I don't think everything outlined is achievable.

So the question I want to pose here really is what do we consider to be good enough to warrant an assessment of the institutions as being effective. It's not going to be the metric of looking at you know the tick box of yes this in the programme for government was delivered it's going to be something less than that. So at what point is it good enough? At what point do we say it's fallen short? What about what happens in between?

So again a bit of an academic assessment but different takes on this question will inevitably abound around media and various circles certainly coming up towards the end of the mandate so that's something to keep in mind that there will be different perspectives and different metrics applied to how that is gauged.

In terms of existing commitments I haven't mentioned this today but I think it's important to also remember that there are long-standing commitments on the to-do list so to speak that haven't been actioned for various reasons not least the protracted and multiple collapses of the institutions.

One for example was the new decade new approach commitment to appoint an Irish language commissioner and a commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition and the creation of an office of identity and cultural expression.

Those are things that have only just been realised here in the last month or so I think it is certainly within the last few weeks so this is an NDNA commitment from the start of 2020 just to give you a sense that that's only one area within one agreement and there are so many

other lingering issues from previous agreements that have seen a restoration of power sharing in Northern Ireland as well so it goes back to the analogy that I used previously that they're running faster to basically stay still is where things are it's not it's not always necessarily having the capability to be able to move forward with the things that are the ambitious plans within the program for government but it's also an element of catching up to get to where things are supposed to be at the same time so there's a much more complex and nuanced I suppose situation to play for the institutions and the actors within it.

In effect we are talking about time as well basically we have about half a mandate so there there's very little that reasonably could be achieved assuming normal processes of government play out that doesn't mean that we shouldn't expect positive government and governance that we shouldn't set the bar reasonably high for our executive and our elected representatives in terms of representation and taking forward concerns and actioning them through legislation so I don't think we should be put off by the fact that there is a shorter mandate but we should be realistic about what can be achieved within that space of time and indeed what isn't achieved needs to be kept in the agenda for the most part going into the next mandate as well so that's just something to keep mindful of as well.

And the final point then in relation to stability I've already mentioned political will is the glue that's holding everything together present and it's not the structures or the design of the institutions that's doing that it is pretty much at this stage entirely the willingness of the political parties to remain in government that's keeping the show on the road. With another institutional collapse always sitting there on the table as an option the question here is how stable can we consider devolved governance to be here in Northern Ireland and can we really have what we might consider to be effective institutions when they are under this constant threat where is the incentive to plan ahead to have long-term goals and to be thinking about the big picture ideas that will necessitate a whole other level of cross-departmental cooperation when there's arguably and at times still a political incentive to refrain from engaging in those activities and indeed to collapse them all together. So that is an issue within the structures that we have here.

So overall and I hope I haven't overwhelmed you with a lot of questions and academic thinking points there towards the end in particular but hopefully it's something to think about in relation to the effectiveness for our political institutions going forward.

If I may I'm going to look to Professor Rick Wilford's presentation to this same event back in 2017 which I by chance came across the other day. It was entitled Devolution Tigger or Eeyore in a very Professor Wilford way and it's hard not to wonder what he would be saying today about the state not only of devolved governance and government in Northern Ireland but the broader state of devolution as a process across the UK now currently and particularly in the wake of Brexit.

Stemming from that and I think on the whole there's a lot for us to be hopeful about dare I say perhaps even optimistic but ultimately we're now looking down the barrel of an election. It's clear that the parties are in preparation mode for that and indeed arguably have been since the restoration of the institutions back in February 2024.

So the challenges and the issues that have been highlighted here will only intensify in the weeks and months ahead but everyone will want something positive to talk about on the doorsteps. So that open space potentially for focused minds before the election season gets into full swing so we can live and hope on that.

We've seen ambition demonstrated in the form of the programme for government even in the nine limited areas it identifies and perhaps to focus on that as the I guess the benchmark for success maybe isn't the best way of going about it but it's certainly something that we can talk to our politicians about when they're knocking on the doors looking for our votes and really use that as a lever to try and encourage that piecemeal but gradual change that we're seeing in terms of how politics is operating in Northern Ireland and I think once we start to see that mindset change then what the institutions are doing will follow thereafter but whether or not we'll be here in another 10 years trying to find out what's going on with that remains to be seen but I'll leave it there and thank you very much.