

2022 was the year in which energy prices soared, and as we came into the new year, there were fears of energy shortages or even the lights going out due to blackouts. As we move further into 2023, energy prices are still very much on our minds, but people will be hoping the lights will go back on at Stormont to help deal with challenges that households, businesses, the public sector and society as a whole face this year.



Bulb and shape of home on wooden background

Recharging Stormont is important but there is no shortage of challenges for the politicians to deal with, if and when they come back into power. One of the most immediate is the cost of doing government crisis and the half billion-pound shortfall in the funding needed to run Northern Ireland's public services in the next financial year. This is before existing pressures, notably in health and education, are taken into account. As David Sterling, the former Head of the NI Civil Service, said recently, these could add up to around £1 billion in

pressures. This is creating range anxiety in many areas of the public sector about how far budgets can go to deliver the public services needed.

One of the other big items in the in-tray of incoming Executive Ministers is dealing with the cost-of-living crisis and climate emergency by moving forward on energy efficiency and other sustainability measures. 'Green growth' is also seen as an important strand of growing the Northern Ireland economy. Retrofitting residential housing (notably social housing) with energy efficiency measures, enabling renewable energy development, and improving electric vehicle charging infrastructure are all things that need Executive attention, along with changing public mindsets and behaviours on sustainability.

If you take thermal insulation of social housing, installing this will lead to better social, environmental, health and economic outcomes. Encouraging more people to move to electric vehicles would also play an important role in better environmental and health outcomes. And with sales of new petrol and diesel cars to be banned by 2030, action is needed. A recent survey by NISRA showed that 62 percent of households in NI are unlikely to or would not consider an electric vehicle as their next car purchase. This is down from 75% in 2019/20, but it is still very high. Purchase price is the biggest factor, but range anxiety is also an issue, which is linked to the lack of electric charging infrastructure.

Some of the benefits of electric vehicles are the low overall running costs, they are environmentally friendly, and they are exempt from vehicle excise duty; although the latter is going to be removed from 2025. But their range and the challenges associated with charging them limit their appeal. It's only from experiencing an electric car that these fears are eased. Many an electric car driver going on their first long journey will have experienced the 'Apollo 13 moment' when all non-essential power usage was turned off to conserve batteries for re-entry to the earth's atmosphere (or simply returning home). It's only by being exposed to these circumstances that you learn to adapt your behaviour to the

technology.

This theme of changing behaviours is one that needs to be vigorously adopted by policymakers and government in Northern Ireland. The big thing is budgets; budget holders across the public sector are going to have to have their own Apollo 13 moment and work out what unnecessary spending they can reduce or turnoff to ensure that budgets go as far as they need to. The so-called 'salami slicing' of budgets no longer 'cuts it', if it ever did. The Police Service of NI has found that it is going to have to shrink to its smallest workforce in its history. The PSNI like other organisations are having to separate out their statutory requirements that they can't avoid, the things that they can do in a different way, and the things that they have to stop doing. Northern Ireland already has around £700m per year of bespoke reliefs / benefits that our counterparts in the rest of the UK can't avail of. So going 'cap in hand' to the Treasury will likely only lead to the Secretary of State pointing to these reliefs and benefits as the first port of call for raising more revenue. Changing behaviours and attitudes in areas such as health and education is also vital to make them sustainable. In the same way we are phasing out the internal combustion engine and embracing new, environmentally friendly technologies, we have to phase out unnecessary bureaucracy, duplication and legacy issues, and embrace new ways of doing things in the public sector.

Other issues facing the Executive include the need to recharge morale in the public sector. It has taken a battering in recent years as a result of the pandemic, working from home disconnection, and rampant inflation which is not being matched by pay increases. There is also the need to address NI's infrastructure deficit generally. The issue is not just with electric vehicle charging. There is also a lack of adequate wastewater infrastructure which is hampering development and progress. If you think about the vital arteries of the local economy such as broadband, energy, wastewater and transport, you could say that we have done some of these excellently and some dreadfully. We embraced the new in broadband but took the existing in wastewater for granted. We need to invest in it in the same way.

That's very much something that should be on a new Executive's priority list.

Recharging Stormont is really important for all of the reasons above. But it's not just a recharge of Stormont that is needed. Given the scale of the challenges, a reboot of the public sector is required. The electric car isn't just a tweaked version of the petrol vehicle. It's rethought and re-engineered, meaning the end of the internal combustion engine. Ultimately, it's outcomes that matter - getting from A to B. Much like the seminal moment that is coming for the petrol and diesel cars in the UK, Northern Ireland's public sector is going to have to have its own 2030 moment of radical change.

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