



**The State of the State 2024: Northern Ireland**

By the people who use it and the people who run it

# Contents

Introduction	2
Executive summary	3
Insight from public sector leaders	6
The public's view of the public sector	18
Conclusion: lessons for the public sector from within	33
Contacts	35

## Methodology

*The State of the State* blends two forms of research to provide a view of the state from the people who depend on it and the people who run it.

To understand public attitudes, Deloitte and Reform commissioned Ipsos UK, who conducted an online survey of 5,815 UK adults aged 16-75 between 27 October and 1 November 2023. Quotas were set to reflect the known profile of the UK adult offline population and a boost sample was achieved in each of the UK nations. In total 821 responses were achieved in Scotland, 713 in Wales and 420 in Northern Ireland. For the UK figures, results have been weighted back to the correct proportion for each nation. Where responses do not sum to 100 this is due to computer rounding or questions which require multiple answers to be chosen.

To bring a strategic perspective, our qualitative research comprises interviews with more than 100 leaders in government and public services throughout the UK including permanent secretaries and other senior civil servants, police chief constables, council chief executives, NHS leaders and elected representatives. The interviews took place between September and December 2023 and included a cohort of leaders in Northern Ireland.

**The views of interviewees quoted in this report are their own and not the views of Deloitte or Reform.**

# Introduction

Since its first edition in 2012, *The State of the State* has commented on a decade of disruption for the UK's governments and public services. From austerity to COVID to the cost-of-living crisis, the public sector has battled through some relentlessly tough years with resilience and purpose. But Northern Ireland has faced additional challenges and complexities – not least as the epicentre of EU exit debates and with the intermittent absence of an Executive.

That past decade has left a difficult legacy. This edition of *State of the State* finds Northern Ireland's public sector grappling with the cumulative impact of successive crises as well as the reductions in spending power, increases in demand and the workforce challenges that came with them. At the same time, the intermittent absence of the Executive continues to impact the public sector by limiting policy and decision-making abilities and hindering transformation, all against the backdrop of an unsustainable budget position.

This Northern Ireland report follows the UK-wide review that can be read alongside it for a broader perspective.



**Marie Doyle**  
Partner  
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**Charlotte Pickles**  
Director  
Reform



# Executive summary

*The State of the State* brings together a survey of the UK public alongside interviews with government leaders. This blend of research provides a view of the public sector from the people who use it and the people who run it.

Our exclusive survey, conducted by Ipsos UK, polled 5,815 UK adults about their attitudes to government and public services. Quotas were set to reflect the known profile of the UK adult offline population and a boost sample was achieved in each of the UK nations. In total 420 responses were achieved in Northern Ireland. We also interviewed more than 30 public sector leaders in Northern Ireland.

Key findings:



## **Trust in Northern Ireland's government is the UK's lowest.**

Our survey found that Northern Ireland's government is the least trusted of the UK's administrations, inevitably due, at least in part, to the ongoing absence of an Executive. However, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK to see an increase in trust in policing over the last year, and concerns around crime are far lower than in England.



## **Public sector leaders want Ministers back – not least to make some tough decisions.**

Almost all the leaders we interviewed want to see a return of devolved, decisive government displaying determined, unified leadership. In the absence of Ministers, officials remain in a challenging position with their decision and policy making limits uncertain.



## **Targeted reforms will be a priority for a returning Executive.**

The absence of government in recent years has resulted in a lack of reform that has exacerbated issues in some areas of the public sector. Interviewees told us that a returning Executive would need to prioritise a small number of transformation and reform initiatives, ensuring they are affordable and deliverable at pace. Health and social care, education, justice, childcare, the planning system and housing were frequently cited as priorities.



## **Government's aspirations and resources don't match under existing delivery models.**

Public sector leaders told us that, as in common with the rest of the UK, the public sector is going to need to make difficult choices in the years ahead. Several interviewees noted that Northern Ireland's challenges are particularly acute in the public sector, while many parts of the private sector are doing relatively well and unemployment is at near historical lows.



## **Public worries about health and social care are high and getting higher.**

According to our survey, Northern Ireland's public is more worried about NHS waiting lists and the state of social care than other nations of the UK, and those concerns have grown in the past year.



## **People want public services they can access and complain to someone when things go wrong.**

According to our survey on priorities for public service improvement, Northern Ireland's public wants services to be accessible when it needs them and it wants them to be responsive to complaints – it is less interested in choice, personalisation or how services are organised.





**Public sector leaders believe they are only scratching the surface in terms of the potential for digital and cutting-edge technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).**

They cited challenges such as recruiting skilled staff, resistance to change and a lack of focused digital leadership. However, there was felt to be real opportunity to accelerate progress in this area and generate significant benefits.



**Northern Ireland's public are the UK's least confident in net zero commitments.**

Our survey found that people in Northern Ireland are the UK's least convinced that we will meet our net zero commitments. Indeed, people see net zero as an energy problem and few expect to make profound changes in the interests of sustainability.



**Crisis mode has held back net zero – but there is potential for Northern Ireland to become best-in-class.**

Public sector leaders told us that progress on net zero had been held back by their focus on urgent, crisis issues. However, many believe that Northern Ireland could become best-in-class given the right investment.



## Conclusions: lessons for the public sector from within

There are also five specific conclusions drawn from the interviews with public sector leaders. These are:

- 1. Northern Ireland needs effective political governance to thrive.**  
A returning Executive will need to be ambitious, courageous, pragmatic and collegiate and demonstrate a willingness to take difficult decisions. This would allow new policies to be developed and implemented and legislation to be passed. Ministers will also need to ensure Northern Ireland's the institutions are both stable and resilient.
- 2. An agreed Programme for Government must be focussed on a small number of strategic priorities.**  
It should be costed, deliverable and there should be a relentless focus on that delivery by the Executive, by Ministers, by the NICS and by other organisations where appropriate.
- 3. Northern Ireland needs a larger, longer term financial settlement from the UK Government.**  
It needs to provide a sustainable, multi-year budget that will facilitate the stabilisation and improvement of public services, accelerate a focussed programme of transformation and reform in key sectors and resolve the outstanding pay claims which should address the industrial unrest issues.
- 4. There is a need to for the Executive to galvanise efforts to accelerate digital transformation.**  
Our interviews surfaced some impressive areas of good practice in digital transformation, often led by skilled and motivated individuals. A sustained long-term effort to galvanise ambition, improve digital access and exploit the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) could leverage Northern Ireland's relatively small scale and deliver exceptional benefits to its public sector.
- 5. Northern Ireland has an opportunity to build an ambitious, economy-wide approach to net zero and sustainability.**  
Northern Ireland's scale, economy and unique position in the UK's trading environment give it a compelling opportunity to serve as an international reference point for sustainability. Achieving that would require a bold, resourced, Executive-led plan that engages the public, businesses and the public sector in a multi-decade programme.

*The State of the State 2024* concludes that public sector leaders want government to 'reset' the system and put years of crises and tactical responses behind them. Ultimately, officials across government and public services want the sector to adapt to its challenges by prioritising more deliberately, while becoming more long-term and more delivery orientated.

A 'CTRL+ALT+DEL' reset would enable the sector to think in terms of:

- CTRL** Better **control** of outcomes by emphasising the importance of delivery.
- ALT** Boosting productivity by exploring **alternative** ways of working.
- DEL** Prioritising what government does to **delete** lower-impact activities.

An aerial, black and white photograph of a group of people walking on a bright red carpet. The people are scattered across the frame, some walking in pairs, some alone, and some carrying bags. The carpet is a vibrant, solid red, and the people are in various poses and directions, creating a sense of movement and activity.

# Insight from public sector leaders

# Insight from public sector leaders

To provide a commentary on Northern Ireland's public sector, we interviewed leaders including senior civil servants, politicians and officials from across government and public services.

In this section of *The State of the State*, we explore the main themes that emerged from those conversations.



## *In the words of public sector leaders: the political context*

The absence of an Executive since February 2022 and Ministers since October 2022 has taken an inevitable toll on Northern Ireland's administration. Ultimately it has created a governance gap in which decisions that require direction from an elected Minister or the Executive have not been taken.

While there is some legislative precedent and framework guidance for civil servants to step in, their decision-making vires remain limited and uncertain and they lack democratic accountability; with no institutions or politicians in place, there is inevitably less transparency, scrutiny and accountability than there otherwise would have been.

Staff are under real pressure and having to take very difficult decisions with real world consequences. This takes a toll on individuals.

**Senior Civil Servant**

Perhaps inevitably, some interviewees suggested that the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has become more risk averse because of the pressure that decision makers are under. In some cases, that's because of concern over possible legal challenges, in others because of variations in risk appetites between senior civil servants, and also because of the audit trail officials believe they might need to justify decisions.

There has been a loss of momentum without Ministers.

**Senior Civil Servant**

Of course, the absence of the devolved legislature means that no legislation can be passed locally. In response, the UK Government has recognised that in the absence of an Executive and Assembly, there will be some decisions it should take, for example when it introduced legislation in Parliament setting out Departmental budgets. However, such interventions, legislative or otherwise, are rare as the Northern Ireland Office has largely taken a 'hands off' approach according to the leaders we interviewed.

No local legislature is a really serious problem for Northern Ireland.

**Politician**

The lack of direction from the Northern Ireland Office is a problem.

**Senior Civil Servant**

The absence of an Executive and Ministers also means that Northern Ireland does not have the same voice it had in many fora such as the North-South and East-West bodies. There is also concern from some in the private and voluntary sectors that they are unable to lobby and influence policy effectively.

Communication with government has deteriorated in the absence of Ministers and MLAs.

**Voluntary Sector Chief Executive**



Issues around the functionality, stability and resilience of the devolved institutions in recent years was a common discussion point across interviewees. Many worried that the absence of democratic government in Northern Ireland seemed to be becoming an accepted norm. Yet when people were asked if they wanted the devolved institutions back, there was an overwhelming consensus that they wanted to see local politicians back in government. Some raised concerns that no formal contingency planning for an even more prolonged absence appeared to be underway. Others added that a multi-year financial package needed to be a pre-requisite for the restoration of an Executive.

Having local Ministers in place is better. Full stop!

**Voluntary Sector Chief Executive**



Interviewees widely acknowledged that the working and sustainability of Northern Ireland's political institutions needs further consideration, but most politicians felt that this should be done when the institutions are back up and running. Some ideas have already been put forward by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in its [report](#) published in December 2023 entitled '*The effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*', which proposes a raft of measures aimed at restoring and improving the stability and resilience of Stormont.

Some of its recommendations have received a mixed response – including concerns about the inherent problems of a major governance review due to the complexity and inter-locking aspects of the Good Friday Agreement.

My fear is that once you start tampering with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, once you pull a thread, you could unravel the whole thing.

**Politician**



Many leaders we interviewed – including those from across the political spectrum – were clear that a returning Executive will need to provide strong leadership, clarity of vision and collective responsibility. It will also be faced with some difficult and contentious decisions that it will need to make in order to succeed. Getting agreement on a focussed Programme for Government that prioritises a relatively small number of issues that is costed, deliverable and that has measurable targets was also considered extremely important.

If the Executive returns it is likely to be very fragile.

**Politician**



As our *State of the State* survey illustrates, public trust in Northern Ireland's devolved administration remains lower than other UK nations. Interviewees largely felt that the Executive will have to function in an effective and sustained manner, providing leadership and delivering on its agreed Programme for Government priorities, if it is going to rebuild trust and confidence.

Whilst there has been much political stagnation, as we know from experience, the political situation can change very quickly.

**Politician**



I am concerned that there doesn't seem to be any contingency planning taking place.

**Politician**



Our interviews found that the outlook in local government was generally more positive.

Councils are not experiencing the same level of difficulties as central government because their political governance is in place and the majority of their funding comes from rates.

While there are funding cuts in some areas, they are trying to make up losses from alternative sources such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Shared Island Fund and Peace Plus.

We have to remain positive. People don't want to invest in gloom.

**Council Chief Executive**



## *In the words of public sector leaders: finance and budgets were the dominant themes*

Finance and budgets were the dominant themes in our conversations with public sector leaders. Due to the lack of a functioning Executive, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland set a budget for 2022-23 in November 2022 and a budget for 2023-24 in April 2023. However, the Secretary of State inherited an overspend of £297m from the period when caretaker Ministers were in charge. This in effect became a loan that would have to be repaid from the Block Grant in 2023-24 based upon Treasury rules. The 2023-24 budget of £14.4 billion represents a fall of 0.9 per cent in cash terms and a fall of 3.3 per cent in real terms compared to 2022-23.

All of this means the budget cuts in many NICS departments, arms-length bodies and other agencies have been challenging, and in common with 2022-23, there is currently a projected overspend of £400-450m in 2023-24. There are also unmet pay pressures of over £500m. In many cases Permanent Secretaries and Chief Executives do not have the vires – the powers – to stop or reduce the services necessary to live within their allocated budgets. The cumulative impact of budget reductions in real terms coupled with the impact of high inflation has placed public sector officials in a very difficult position. The powers themselves are limited and not entirely clear in their scope, and it was evident from our discussions that leaders have different risk appetites when it comes to decision making. Some are quite risk averse whilst others were more willing to test the boundaries of the powers they have.

Overall, this has led to an inconsistent approach to decision making when it comes to cost saving interventions.

I have never seen such a grim financial position.

Senior Civil Servant

NICS departments vary in their responses to budget cuts, but typical actions include cuts to ALB funding, not filling vacancies or making redundancies, reducing or cutting services, pausing or deferring projects, cutting grant assistance, extending payment timescales and looking at alternative sources of funding.

We kept paring back and paring back which created great stress on the system.

Senior Civil Servant

Many leaders argued that even if Ministers were in post, some of the cost cutting options are so unpalatable, because of concerns about public safety and the adverse impact on the most vulnerable in our society, that Ministers would be unlikely to see them through.

There are major issues bubbling under the surface as the system slowly deteriorates and immense damage is being done. I'm amazed at the level of public acceptance.

Senior Civil Servant

The concept of a 'Fiscal Floor' came up in several discussions to help address what were seen as ongoing, systemic funding issues in Northern Ireland. This is an arrangement used in Wales where there is a needs-based factor applied to the Barnett Formula to determine changes to Welsh Government block grant funding. For Wales this is set at 115 per cent. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has suggested an equivalent figure for Northern Ireland would be 124 per cent. For historic reasons, Northern Ireland has had higher government spending per head than other regions in the UK. However, that premium is falling and looks set to continue to fall in the future based on current trends. That is happening for a combination of technical reasons and the end of temporary additional funding arising from various political deals. Spending per head has fallen from 40 per cent above England in 2018-19 and is currently around 23 per cent.

The funding situation inevitably differs across different parts of Northern Ireland's public sector. Within the NICS, some departments may be able to live within their current year budget whilst others, due to the high level of statutory services they provide or staff costs, are simply unable to do so. The same pressure does not exist in local government as their budgets have not been cut as extensively as central government's; they have politicians in place with the authority to make decisions on service delivery, and they have the ability to raise revenue directly through the setting of a District Rate at Council level.

Beyond the public sector, the voluntary sector is primarily firefighting and is concerned about the financial sustainability of many of their organisations due to departmental budget cuts and the demise of the European Social Fund. Voluntary sector leaders also told us they believe the sector needs to be properly valued and recognised as an essential part of civic life and public services.

Multi-year budgets are a must.  
How can you properly plan for just  
a year. Crazy!

Politician



One potential solution to the financial issues currently being experienced would be to implement additional revenue raising measures. On 20 September 2023, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wrote to Permanent Secretaries of NICS departments directing that they launch public consultations on measures to support budget sustainability by raising additional revenue. These include increasing university tuition fees, the introduction of prescription, domiciliary care and water charges, and some of these consultations have now been published.

Under current legislation, it is only the Northern Ireland Executive that can implement these revenue raising measures, but the Secretary of State has not ruled out introducing legislative changes in Westminster to allow him to do this. However, it is not clear that even if many of the revenue raising options out for consultation were ultimately adopted, that this would of themselves return the public finances in Northern Ireland to a sustainable footing.

Undoubtedly super-parity issues will also need to be considered. In our interviews there was very limited local political support for revenue raising measures, based on a strong desire not to exacerbate current cost of living pressures for people in Northern Ireland.

We have no resilience whatsoever  
to any new shocks.

Senior Civil Servant



There was a general consensus in our interviews that financial stability in the short term, and longer-term funding going forward, are crucial for service stabilisation, service transformation, and pay catch up.

In addition, interviewees referenced the need to address the negative impact from 2022-23 and 2023-24 overspends as this simply creates additional pressures in the next financial year. A further impact of overspends has been that Northern Ireland has not benefitted from any in-year Barnett consequentials nor monitoring rounds which has exacerbated the situation even further. In a number of discussions, interviewees were clear that we cannot have a sustainable political situation without having some hope of a sustainable financial situation.

There was hope that the return of the Executive in the near future will be accompanied by a financial package to bring public sector finances onto a more sustainable basis. However, many interviewees were concerned that a package might only provide short-term fixes, rather than long-term stability.

## In the words of public sector leaders: transformation and reform

In our interviews, the majority of public sector leaders were clear that the need for public sector reform – and more fundamental, systemic transformation – has grown in recent years.

Some identified health and social care, childcare, skills, education, housing, planning and the justice system as in need of urgent attention. Many added that there have been successive reform strategies over the years – but now was the time for action.

We need to stop talking about plans and get on and implement them.

ALB Chief Executive



We badly need support for working families through better and more affordable childcare.

Politician



It was felt that any reformed Executive should consider which of these issues, and those identified by the public and others, are its highest priorities when collectively agreeing a focused, prioritised, costed and deliverable Programme for Government.

Many interviewees stressed that to deliver a successful transformation and reform programme, and Programme for Government, is going to require strong, determined, ethical, collective leadership with a clarity of vision and a relentless focus on delivery.

The reform fairy can't magically appear and fix things.

Politician



There has been much analysis and commentary about what needs to happen in the health and social care, education (where an Independent Review of Education was published in December 2023), housing, water and sewage, economy and justice sectors; but interviewees believed that there are also other areas that merit consideration. For example:

### • Planning.

Interviewees believed that when the planning system works effectively, it can have an important role in encouraging investment and supporting the Northern Ireland economy, creating places that people want to work, live and invest in. A recent report by the NIAO concluded that the planning system doesn't deliver for the economy, communities or the environment. Three quarters of 'Regionally Significant' and 'Major' planning applications processed between 2017-18 and 2019-20 were not completed within the statutory target of 30 weeks – 50 per cent had taken more than 12 months and 19 per cent more than three years. Concern was also expressed by interviewees over the capacity and performance of the Planning Appeals Commission.

The Planning system is broken. It needs reform. It is hindering economic growth.

Politician



We need a more agile planning system that helps the economy.

Private Sector representative

• **Infrastructure Planning and Delivery Capacity.**

Some interviewees referenced the NIAO Major Capital Projects report that stated the existing cumbersome governance and delivery structures within the Northern Ireland public sector are not conducive to maximising the achievement of value for money. The NIAO found that current structures and arrangements have not provided effective leadership, governance and accountability in public procurement. Interviewees agreed with many of the conclusions within this report in that years of single year budgets and political instability have significantly impacted the ability to plan long term and skills gaps are growing across the public sector in key areas such as business case preparation, procurement and project management and the lack of pipeline certainty and training is affecting areas such as engineering and construction in the private sector.

We can't deliver major projects on time and to budget.

Politician

• **Declassification.**

The vast majority of public services are under the control of Central Government in Northern Ireland which creates restrictions on borrowing due to budgetary and classification rules and additional pressures on the Block Grant as borrowing is currently on the government's balance sheet. This differs from other parts of the UK and is a particular issue for major infrastructure providers such as NI Water, NI Housing Executive and Belfast Harbour.

Getting borrowing 'off balance sheet' would be a game changer for capital investment plans.

ALB Chief Executive

• **NICS.**

Some politicians and others felt that transformation and reform of the NICS should be considered as it could benefit the service and the delivery of public services. The issues highlighted included less siloed working, increasing the risk appetite of civil servants, improving recruitment practices and staff retention, the range of skills, performance management, sector-specific knowledge and skills, collaboration with the private and voluntary sectors, project management and delivery ability.

The NICS needs to demonstrate that it can deliver at speed.

Private Sector Representative

• **Local Authorities.**

Interviewees also thought local councils could benefit from reform. They generally felt that less competition and more collaboration and standardisation could bring benefits in terms of economies of scale and efficiencies. This was a theme that was also raised in the voluntary sector.

Many interviewees felt that the highest priority transformation and reform initiatives should be included in the Programme for Government and real progress on implementation needs to be made.

We need agreement on five or six policy priorities and must demonstrate the mechanics of how we will deliver.

Politician

We need a grown-up discussion and political agreement on top priorities.

Politician

## In the words of public sector leaders: digital

All of our interviewees agreed that investment in digital presents a significant opportunity to drive more efficient and effective public services. Some recognised that a lot of knowledge and new capacity was gained during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a huge increase in the volume and sophistication of remote working for staff.

There are a number of major digital programmes underway, including the implementation of a new region wide Electronic Health Care Record system in health and social care, and the proposed rollout of new infrastructure and systems across the schools' sector.

It was clear from many of the discussions that public sector leaders feel they are only scratching the surface in terms of the potential for digital and cutting-edge technologies, such as AI. A number of reasons were cited including:

- **Recruiting skilled staff:** there is a strong market for people with digital skills in Northern Ireland and a strong private sector with key strengths in cyber, analytics and digital. Public sector organisations are finding it difficult to compete with the private sector in terms of attracting and retaining talent to drive the digital agenda forward;
- **Resistance to change:** people cited resistance from some senior staff to experiment with new technologies in particular because of a lack of policies in the area and a lack of risk appetite; and

- **Leadership:** many organisations do not have a digital leader as part of their senior management team to help drive the digital agenda and make the case for investment.

The potential for much better digital services has barely been tapped.

Senior Civil Servant

There are clearly some areas of the public sector that are leading on the digital agenda. They are proactively looking for ways to make best use of existing systems and also looking for ways to exploit new technologies that drive improved service delivery. In many cases however, organisations were reliant on the expertise and drive of a small number of skilled and motivated staff.

In some sectors, technologies such as AI are already being used and will become part of normal service delivery. For example, the use of AI in medical imaging has the potential to transform diagnostic processes.

The need for a longer-term digital strategy across the public sector was cited by a number of interviewees, especially given the challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled staff. There would be benefits in having a sustained long-term effort to improve digital access and services and exploit the potential of AI.

AI has real potential to help organisations if properly managed across sectors such as information technology, health and finance.

AI is really exciting but also really scary.

Senior Civil Servant

Overall, interviewees were keen on a sustained, deliberate and explicit effort to improve digital access and services and explore the potential of AI. Some argued the public sector needs to be more agile and pilot some digital and AI technologies at a smaller scale first.

We need to light fires throughout government rather than a top-down formal structured approach. Let the ambition spread like wildfire! We can create an ecosystem that can prove the concept and increase everyone's confidence.

Senior Civil Servant

## *In the words of public sector leaders: workplace and workforce*

Across Northern Ireland's public sector, organisations continue to build on progress and adapt their hybrid working practices. In our interviews, we heard about moves to get office-based staff back into the workplace – generally for three days per week. Some told us that younger people in general were keener to come back into the office and others shared their concerns about the potential creation of a two-tier workforce. Several said they were consolidating office estate given that it is less used.

Most leaders were of the view that their staff were more effective when working together, face to face, for at least some of the time. Many were encountering some resistance to getting staff back into the office as many have adjusted their lifestyles to include working from home and are reluctant to revert.

They also aired concerns about the rise in mental health issues in staff absence statistics and many put this increase down to staff working from home and feeling isolated. Improving the workplace environment surfaced as an important issue for leaders in encouraging people back into the office, helping drive organisational effectiveness and recruiting and retaining staff.

Hybrid working has resulted in a loss of corporate esprit.  
New people are not getting a true sense of our culture and values.

**Senior Civil Servant**

Staff satisfaction was another recurring theme in our discussions. Whilst leaders were very proud of how their teams had responded to extremely difficult financial circumstances over the past year, they were concerned about burnout and staff motivation generally. The main issues highlighted in staff surveys were dissatisfaction with pay, leadership (but not line management), change management and career development assistance.

Pay was also a recurring factor with interviewees who were frustrated that they had been unable to progress pay awards, particularly at a time when the annual rate of inflation has been over 10 per cent. This has contributed to a period of industrial unrest which has put significant additional pressure on service delivery and remains one of the key priorities for public sector leaders to address.

Staff are angry, frustrated and believe they are not valued.

**ALB Chief Executive**

Within the NICS, budget pressures have been dominant. This led to a temporary pause in recruitment to allow for a prioritisation of existing vacancies to be carried out. In common with other parts of the public sector, the NICS has found it difficult to recruit professional staff – like accountants, scientists and architects – but easier to recruit staff into general service grades.

Interviewees told us the difficulty with hiring professional staff was largely the difference between public and private sector salaries.



## *In the words of public sector leaders: net zero*

In June 2022, the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) received Royal Assent. The Act created a target for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with bridging targets, including at least a 48 per cent reduction in net emissions by 2030. This legislation, albeit coming into force later than in other parts of the UK, will be a real driver for the net zero agenda.

Some of our interviewees were optimistic about the future and the likely achievement of targets but they were outnumbered by those with a less optimistic view.

There are some, that given the scale of NI, who believe that we could and should become leaders and best in class in this area. They point to the encouraging picture regarding the amount of energy we obtain from local renewable sources.

We should definitely be striving to be leaders in this field.

**ALB Chief Executive**

For the 12-month period, July 2022 to June 2023, 45.5 per cent of total electricity consumption in Northern Ireland was generated from local renewable sources. Of all renewable electricity generated within Northern Ireland over this period, 83.5 per cent was generated from wind.

Getting nearly 50 per cent of our energy from renewable sources has been a real success story.

**Senior Civil Servant**

The increasing importance of organisations being able to evidence their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) credentials, which can give them a competitive advantage, is a positive driver in this area. Many organisations are also motivated by the desire to reduce energy costs and there are reports of firms taking energy efficiency measures.

The move to electric vehicles and other emission friendly vehicles continues and the public transport fleet is getting increasing numbers of zero-emission and hydrogen fuelled buses. We are also seeing those organisations who are big energy users reviewing their energy and renewables strategies.

I believe that net zero is becoming slightly more mainstream, rather than just a bolt on, and there are some examples of very good practice.

**Senior Civil Servant**

Encouragingly young people seem to be receptive to the net zero concept and further education in this area could be very beneficial.

**Politician**

Some interviewees would like to see consideration given to the establishment of a climate change and energy department in Northern Ireland to increase this issue's profile, to create a centre of expertise, to focus people's minds and to better co-ordinate policies and actions across government and other sectors.

However, we also spoke to those who believe that there has only been limited progress and that we are not currently on the road to achieve the extremely challenging targets and be net zero by 2050. They cite the fact that there is currently no Executive and Ministers to drive this agenda and introduce the new policies and radical action that will be required to create the necessary momentum. They believe that the enablers are not in place.

There is real scepticism about whether the heroic net zero targets the Assembly set are achievable.

**ALB Chief Executive**



We also heard the view that this issue has not been sufficiently mainstreamed and that it is under resourced from a financial, staffing and skills' perspective. There is also a concern that some of the consequences of the necessary action are not fully understood, and that there are so many other issues competing for resources and attention.

As some interviewees pointed out, these views were reinforced by the Climate Change Committee which [reported](#) that planning for climate change in Northern Ireland remains at an early stage. It reported that across key areas of adaptation most of the critical policy and planning milestones identified as important for delivering adaptation are not in place.

Indeed, despite the critical importance of adapting to climate change, there is only limited evidence of delivery, and data gaps in key areas are large. The absence of relevant data is a key barrier to assessing all aspects relevant to delivery and implementation of adaptation policy.

Larger companies usually drive climate change harder than smaller ones, as smaller companies are often more focused on survival not climate change.

**ALB Chief Executive**



Interviewees noted that whilst behavioural change to help people lead more sustainable lives is important, the scale of resourcing required to fund and achieve net zero should not be underestimated. For example, there would be substantial costs to retrofit the existing housing stock or to electrify the rail network.

It was also stated that infrastructure investment is not being viewed sufficiently through a net zero lens and, if it was, there would be implications for the content of the draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Strategy would also require consideration of carbon offset measures for any projects that are not net zero.

So, undoubtedly the goal of achieving net zero by 2050 is a very challenging one – and the consistent message from interviewees was that Northern Ireland needs to take action now.

We need to take net zero seriously and act now.

**Local Authority Chief Executive**



# The public's view of the public sector

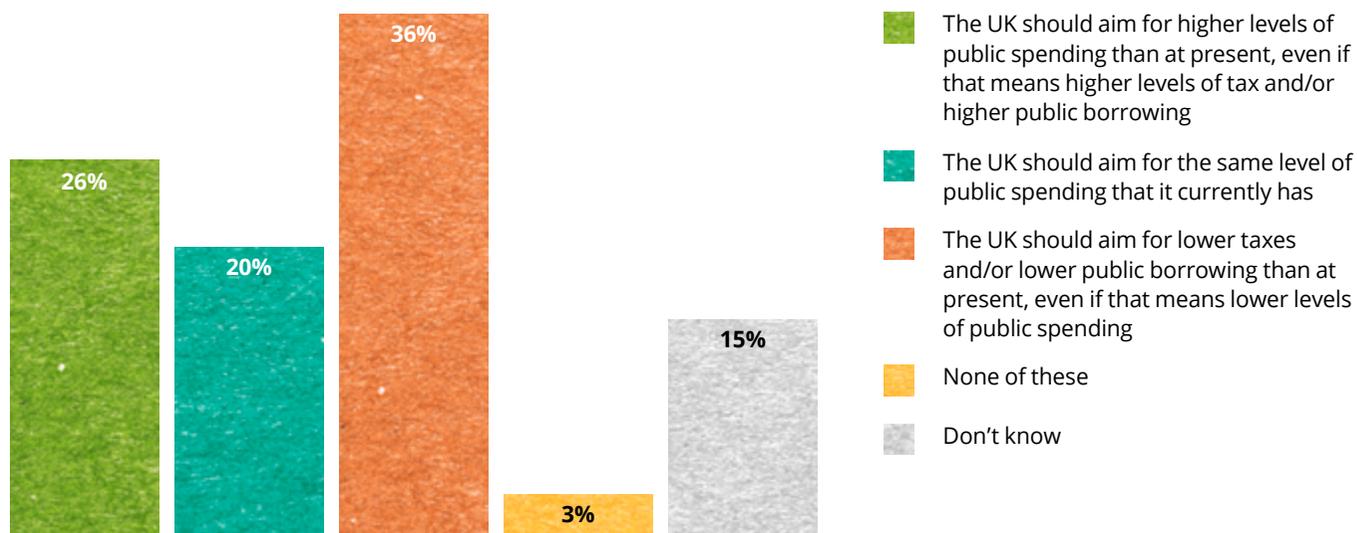


# Northern Ireland has a preference towards lower taxes, even if that means lower public spending

Our survey found the Northern Ireland public more inclined towards lower taxes than elsewhere in the UK.

As the chart shows, over one in three of the Northern Ireland public say the UK should aim for lower taxes, even if that means lower public spending. In contrast, Scotland stands out as the only nation that would prefer higher public spending, with only 27 per cent favouring lower taxes. This points to a substantial divergence of opinion within the UK.

**Q: Which of the following, if any, do you think should be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and the levels of taxation and public borrowing in the future?**

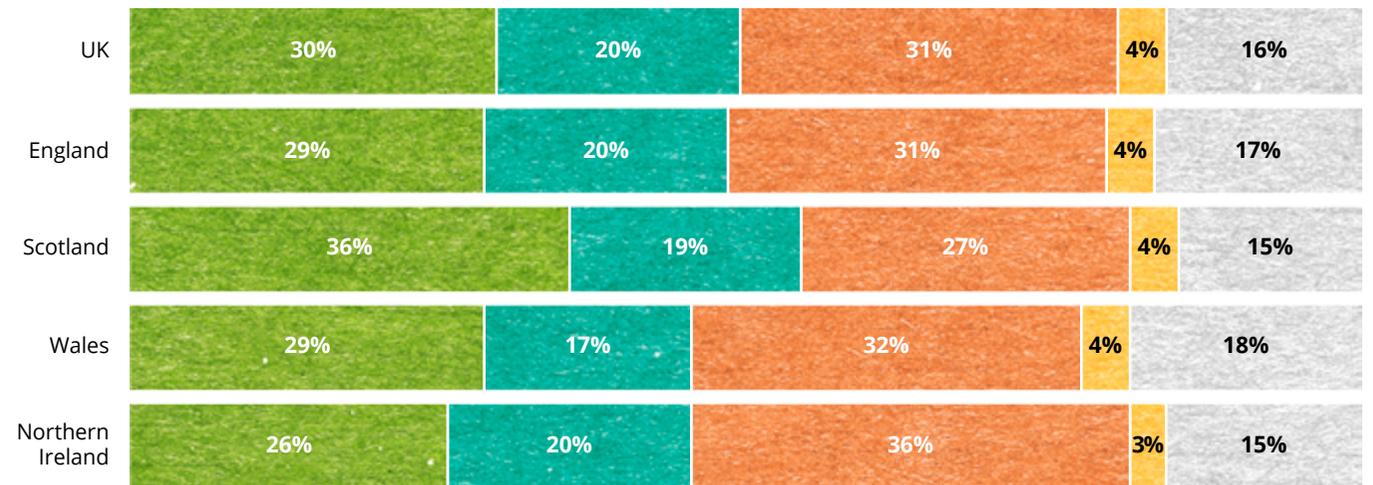


Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75



Across the UK there is no consensus on the right balance of tax and spending, as the public is split between 30 per cent who want higher public spending, 31 per cent who want lower taxes and 20 per cent who want to retain current levels.

**Q: Which of the following, if any, do you think should be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and the levels of taxation and public borrowing in the future?**



- The UK should aim for higher levels of public spending than at present, even if that means higher levels of tax and/or higher public borrowing
- The UK should aim for the same level of public spending that it currently has
- The UK should aim for lower taxes and/or lower public borrowing than at present, even if that means lower levels of public spending
- None of these
- Don't know

Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

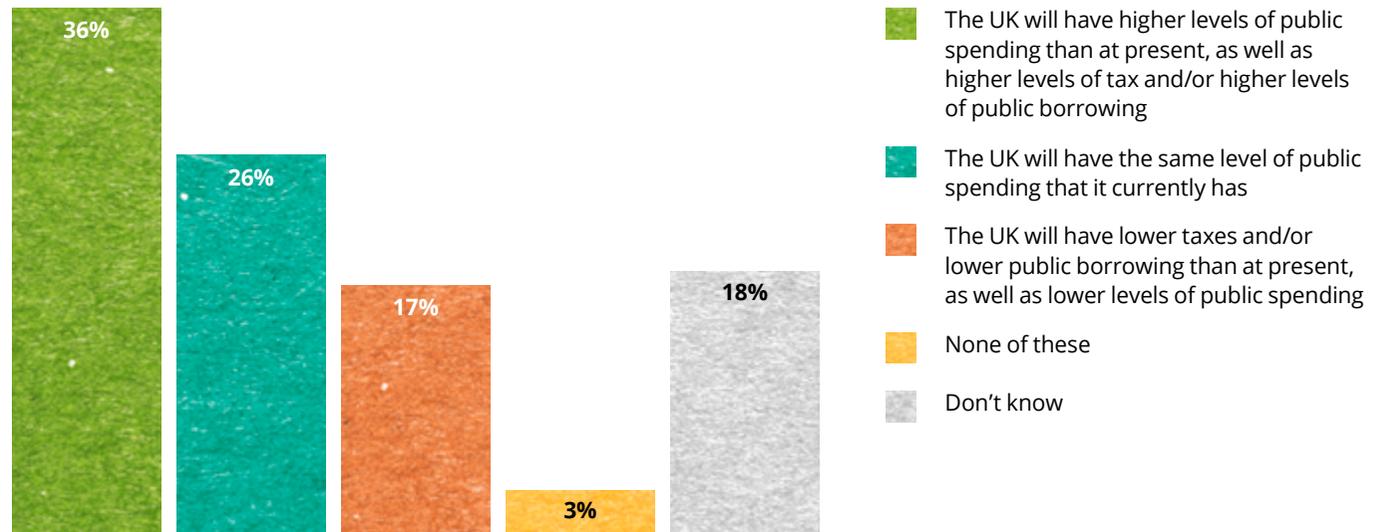
# Whatever their preferences, the Northern Ireland public expects spending to increase

Whatever the Northern Ireland public *wants* to happen in the years ahead, it does not *expect* government spending and taxes to follow suit.

As the chart shows, 36 per cent believe public spending will increase, compared to only 17 per cent of those who believe taxes will fall. A further 26 per cent of the Northern Ireland public think the balance of tax and spend will remain at the same level.

This is broadly similar to the UK average where some 59 per cent believe that public spending is set to remain at the same level or go up, while just 17 per cent believe that tax and spending is going to go down.

**Q: And which of the following, if any, do you think will be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and tax and/or public borrowing in the future?**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

# The Northern Ireland public's priorities remain the cost of living and NHS waiting lists

Our survey asked the public to name their priorities for improvement in the UK.

For the second year running, the cost of living crisis is the Northern Ireland public's top concern, mentioned by 83 per cent, five percentage points higher than the UK average.

The next biggest issue for the public in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the UK is NHS waiting lists. Over eight in ten of the Northern Ireland public say this should be a government priority. This is higher than elsewhere in the UK, with 73 per cent of the UK public saying this is a priority, 72 per cent in England, 74 per cent in Scotland and 75 per cent in Wales.

The public in Northern Ireland also placed social care as third on their list of priorities with 72 per cent mentioning it, seven percentage points higher than the UK average.

There are several other notable shifts since last year's *State of the State*. The percentage of the Northern Ireland public who want to see improvements in the country's infrastructure has risen from 28 per cent in the past year to 36 per cent.

Concerns around COVID, inequality between different regions and crime and policing have all decreased over the past year. The percentage of the Northern Ireland public who say that protection against further pandemics should be a government priority has fallen from 30 per cent to 20 per cent.

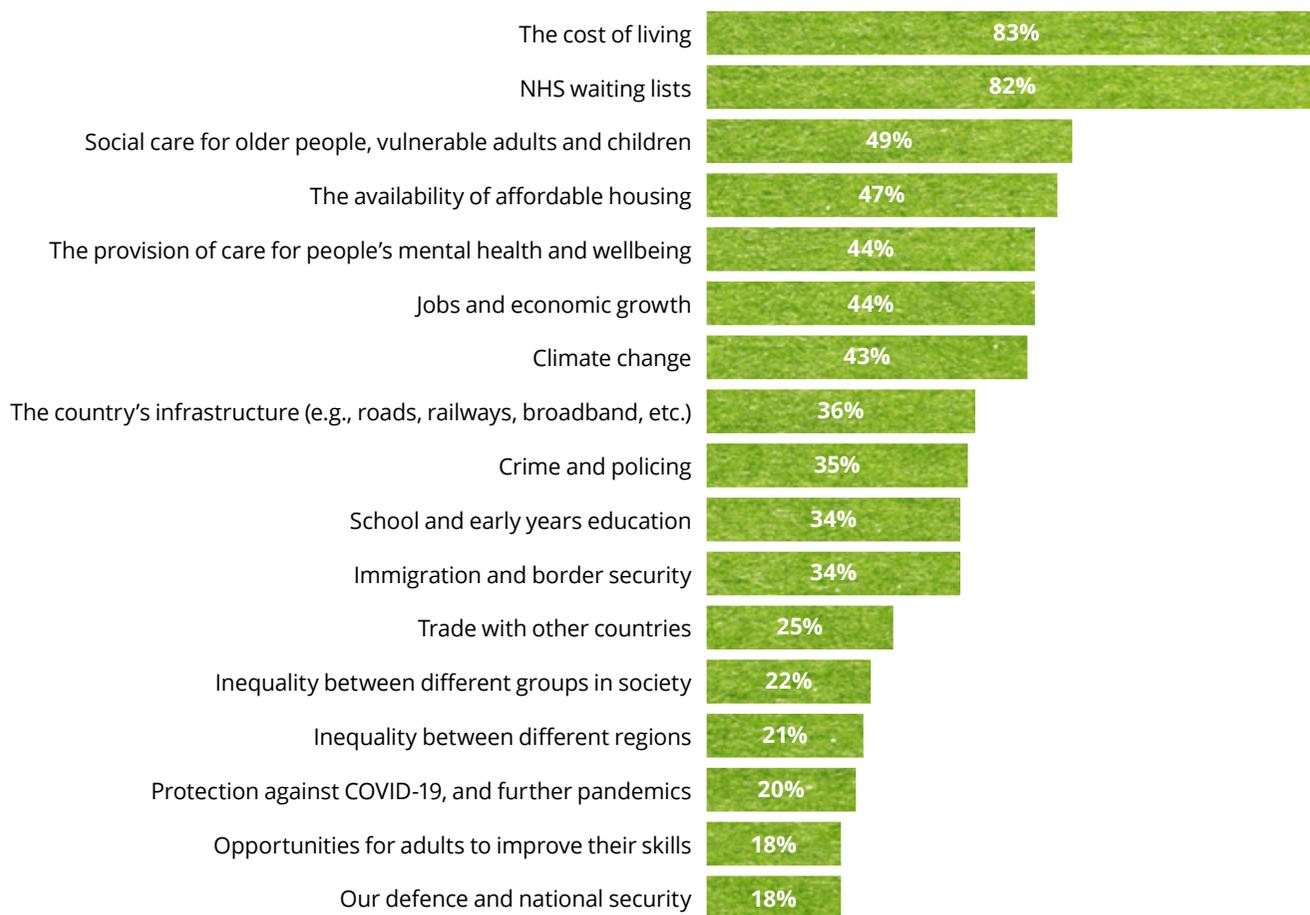
Inequality between different regions has also decreased, from 28 per cent to 21 per cent in the past year, and the percentage of the public who are concerned about crime and policing has fallen from 40 per cent to 35 per cent.



Our survey also shows a growing divergence between the nations on what they would prioritise, with Northern Ireland and Scotland largely similar in what they would prioritise compared to England and Wales.

Our Northern Ireland respondents are less likely than those in England to say that crime and policing is a priority, with 35 per cent mentioning it compared to 48 per cent in England. Furthermore, 34 per cent of the Northern Ireland public say that immigration is a priority, compared to 45 per cent in England.

**Q: Which of the following issues, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement in the UK over the next few years or so?**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

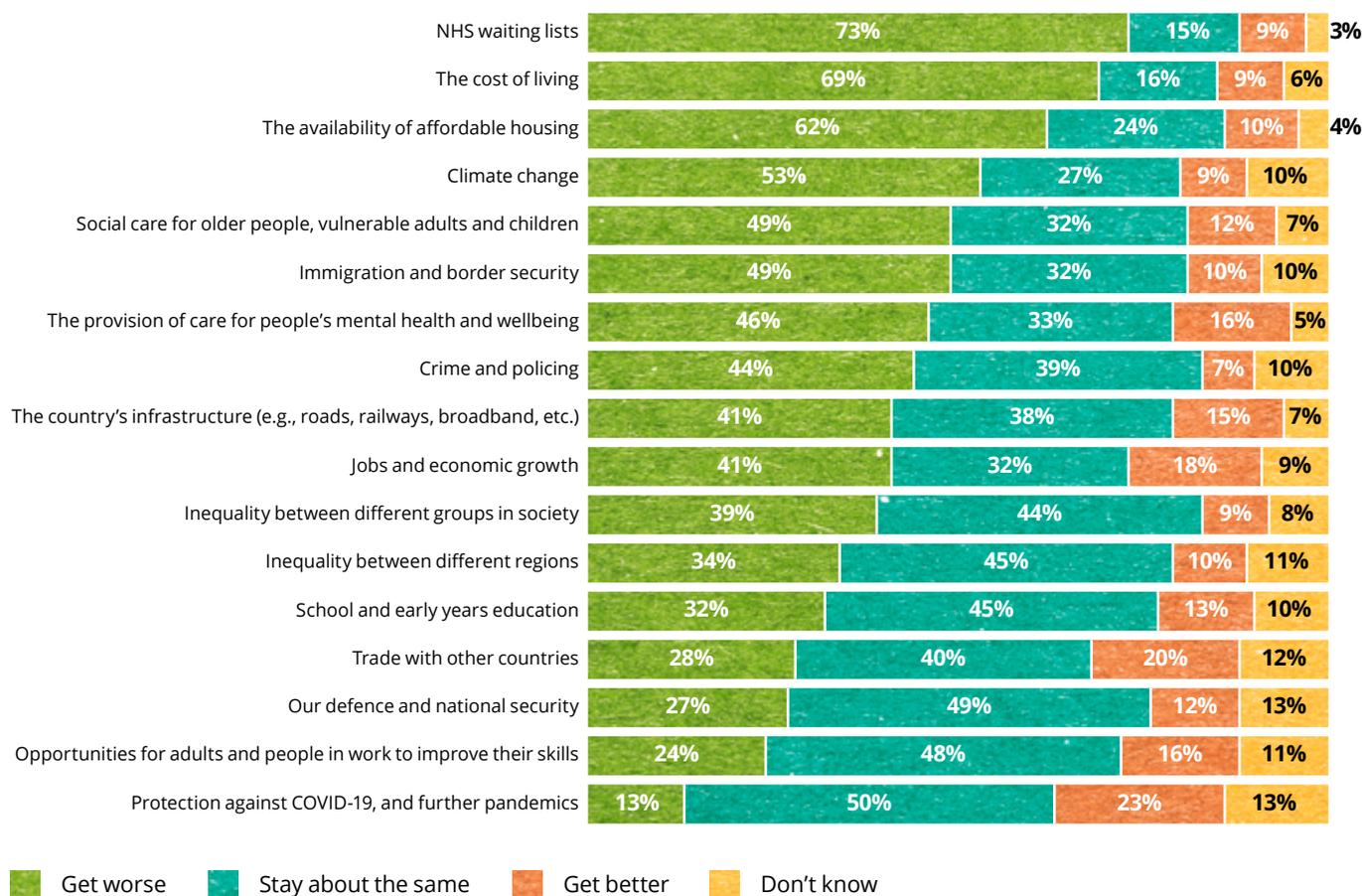
# Public's concern still high around the cost of living crisis – but starting to abate

Against this difficult backdrop, our survey asked the public what they expected to get better, worse or stay the same in the years ahead, and the chart below summarises their responses.

Perhaps inevitably after years of disruption in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the UK, the public in general are in a pessimistic mood. Some 73 per cent of the Northern Ireland public expect NHS waiting lists to get worse in the years ahead, 69 per cent think the cost of living will worsen, and 62 per cent expect the availability of affordable housing to get worse. In comparison, 59 per cent of the UK public expect NHS waiting lists to get worse in the years ahead, 55 per cent think the cost of living will worsen and 53 per cent expect the availability of affordable housing to get worse.

However, there are glimmers of optimism – or at least reductions in pessimism. The percentage of the public who believe the cost of living crisis will get worse has dropped from 81 per cent last year to 69 per cent in our latest survey. It also finds modest reductions in pessimism this year for the future for climate change and inequality between different regions as well as active optimism in the outlook for trade and our protection against pandemics.

**Q: Thinking about the next few years or so, do you think that each of the following will get better, get worse or stay about the same in the UK?**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

# Trust is drifting down – especially when it comes to delivery

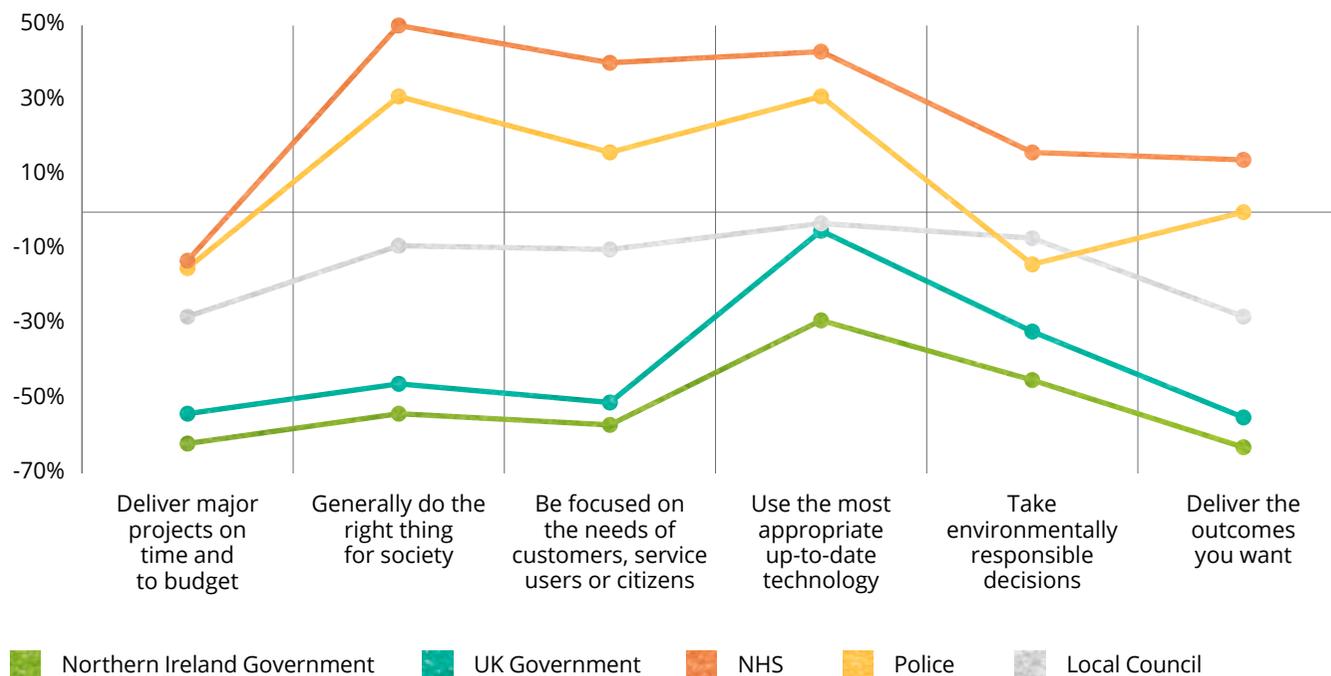
Our *State of the State* survey finds overall trust in government and public services continuing to decline.

As the chart shows, the Northern Ireland Government continues to be the least trusted administration in the UK. This is likely because of the absence of the Executive. In the last year, trust in the Northern Ireland Government to use up-to-date technology has fallen by nine percentage points and to take environmentally responsible decisions has decreased by six percentage points.

The Northern Ireland public trusts local services more than the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Governments, as the chart illustrates. Overall, the NHS and Police enjoy higher levels of trust than local and central governments, particularly around doing the right thing for society. Northern Ireland is the only nation to have increased levels of trust in some areas of policing. Compared to 2022, the Northern Ireland public is now more likely to trust the Police to do the right thing for society (up seven percentage points) and be focused on the needs of customers, service users or citizens (up five percentage points).

On the other hand, trust in local councils to do the right thing for society has fallen by eight percentage points in the past year. The Northern Ireland public, as elsewhere across the UK, also continues to believe that the public sector does not excel at delivering major projects.

Q: To what extent, if at all, do you trust to...?



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

# People want services they can access and hold to account

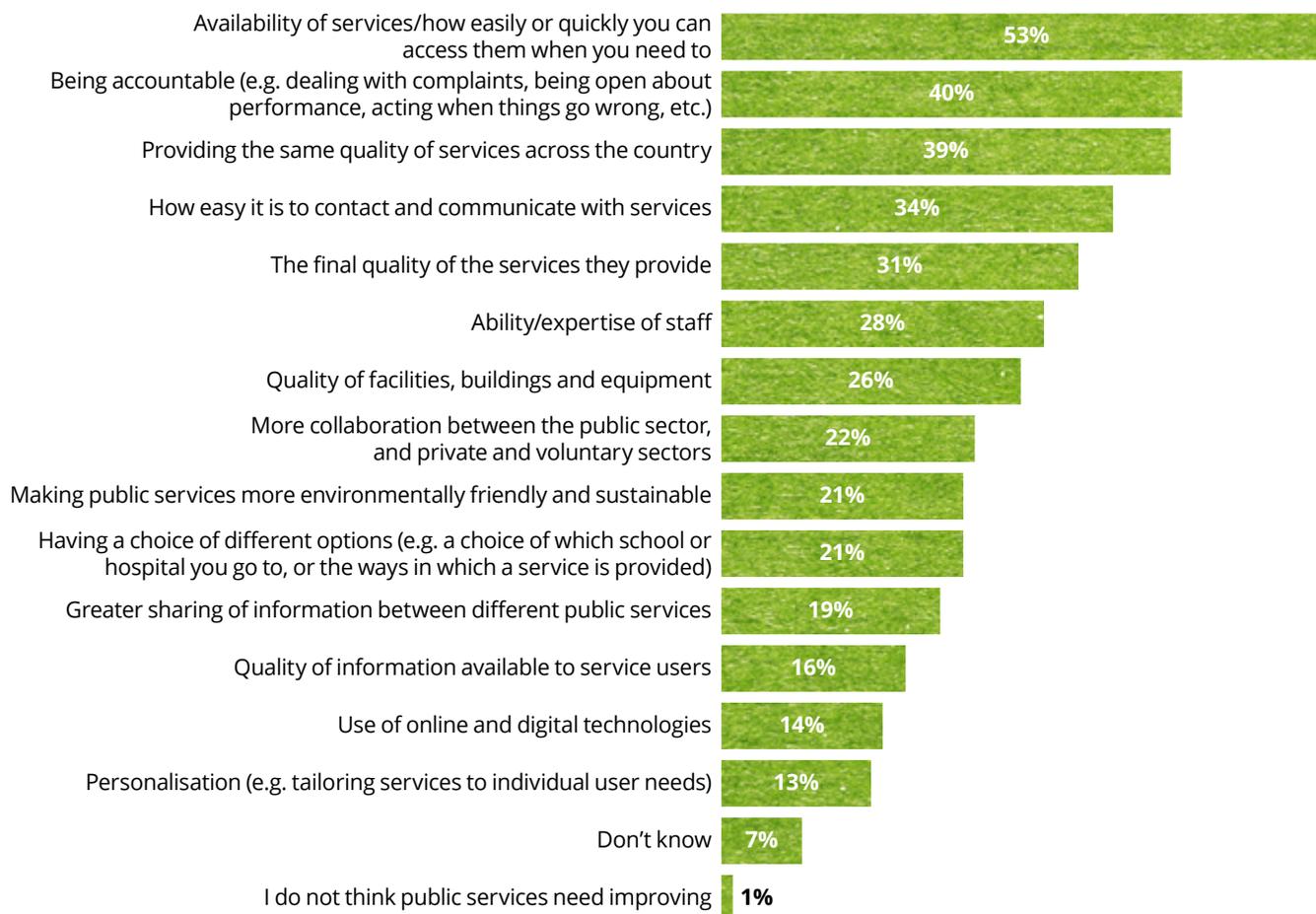
Our survey explored the public's own experience of public services and asked what they would most like to see improved. The chart ranks their responses.

Likely driven by NHS waiting lists, the top answer by some margin was ease and speed of access. The second most popular answer was accountability, suggesting the public simply want services that deal effectively with complaints. The third response was that people expect services to be the same wherever they live, closely followed by ease of communications. The fifth most popular answer was the quality of services.

There is a notable simplicity in these priorities: the public want decent quality services they can access when they need, contact easily and complain about when things go wrong.

In contrast, lower-ranking priorities include quality of information available, data sharing between agencies and personalisation. That suggests the public has limited interest in how public services are shaped and delivered – just the outcomes. And just 21 per cent think a top priority for public services is to offer more choice, perhaps suggesting that services should prioritise basic quality for everyone above choice for the individual.

**Q: Thinking about your experiences of public services, which of the following, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement over the next couple of years or so?**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

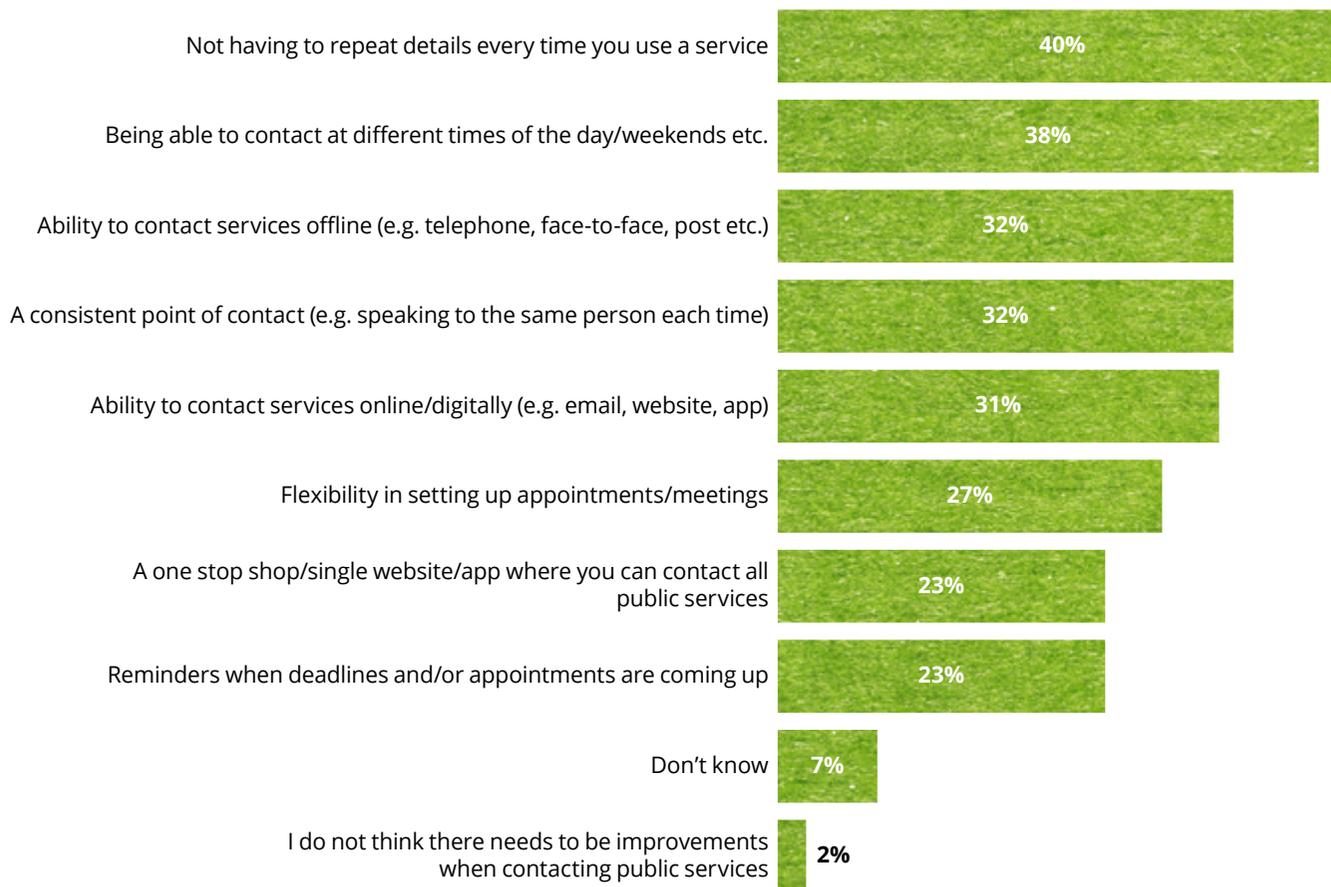
Use of digital technology comes surprisingly low down the public priorities. Again, this suggests a lack of interest in how the public sector works rather than a rejection of technology. Digital would in fact be a vital part of driving all the elements that the public prioritise.

Our survey also asked the public to name its priorities for improving communications with public services. As the chart shows, their most popular request is that they don't have to repeat their details every time they use a service. Other popular answers, mentioned by 40 per cent of the public, were being able to contact services at different times of day and having a consistent point of contact. Flexibilities around appointment times, deadline reminders and a one stop shop where you can contact all public services all come slightly lower down the order of priorities.

All of this points to the public wanting the same level of basic customer service they experience with much of the private sector, yet there appears to be an acceptance that the public sector may not be able to offer as many flexibilities.

However, 32 per cent of the public said that contacting services offline – by telephone or face-to-face – needs improving. Given that much of the sector is encouraging a shift to online channels, it could be that public expectations will need to be managed.

**Q: And thinking about when you contact public services, which of the following, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement over the next couple of years or so?**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

# The state of net zero

The Northern Ireland public is not confident the UK will meet 2050 net zero targets.

Our survey explored levels of public confidence in the UK's progress and ability to meet its net zero commitments. It found that 72 per cent of the Northern Ireland public lack confidence that the UK will reach net zero by 2050, as this chart shows.



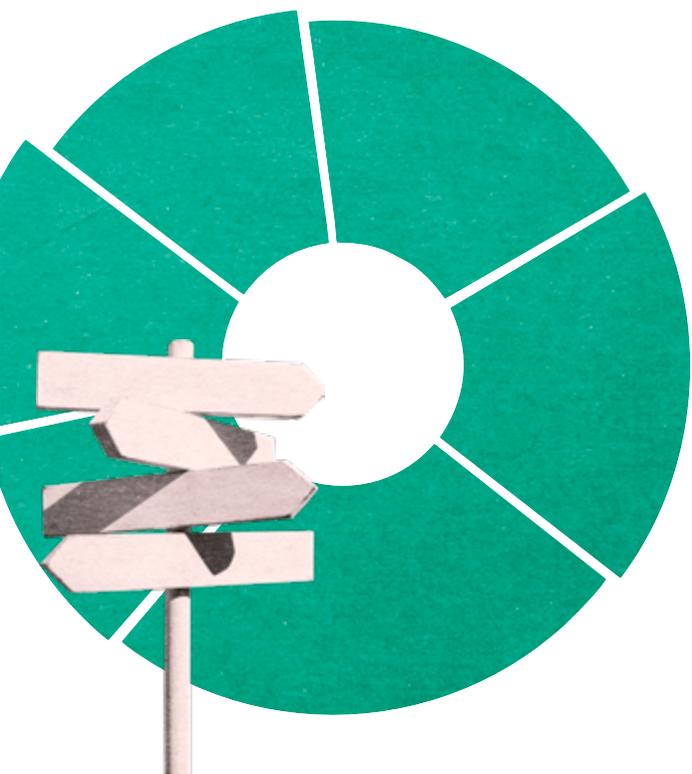
**Q: How confident, if at all, are you that the UK government will reach its target for achieving net zero emissions across the economy by 2050?**



Base: 5,815 Online UK adults 16-75

We also asked people in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales about confidence in their respective governments.

Overall, people in Northern Ireland are the least confident in their government's ability to deliver net zero compared to Scotland and Wales.



**Q: How confident, if at all, are you that the Scottish Government/Senedd/Northern Ireland Assembly will reach its target for achieving net zero emissions across the Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish economy by 2045/2050?**



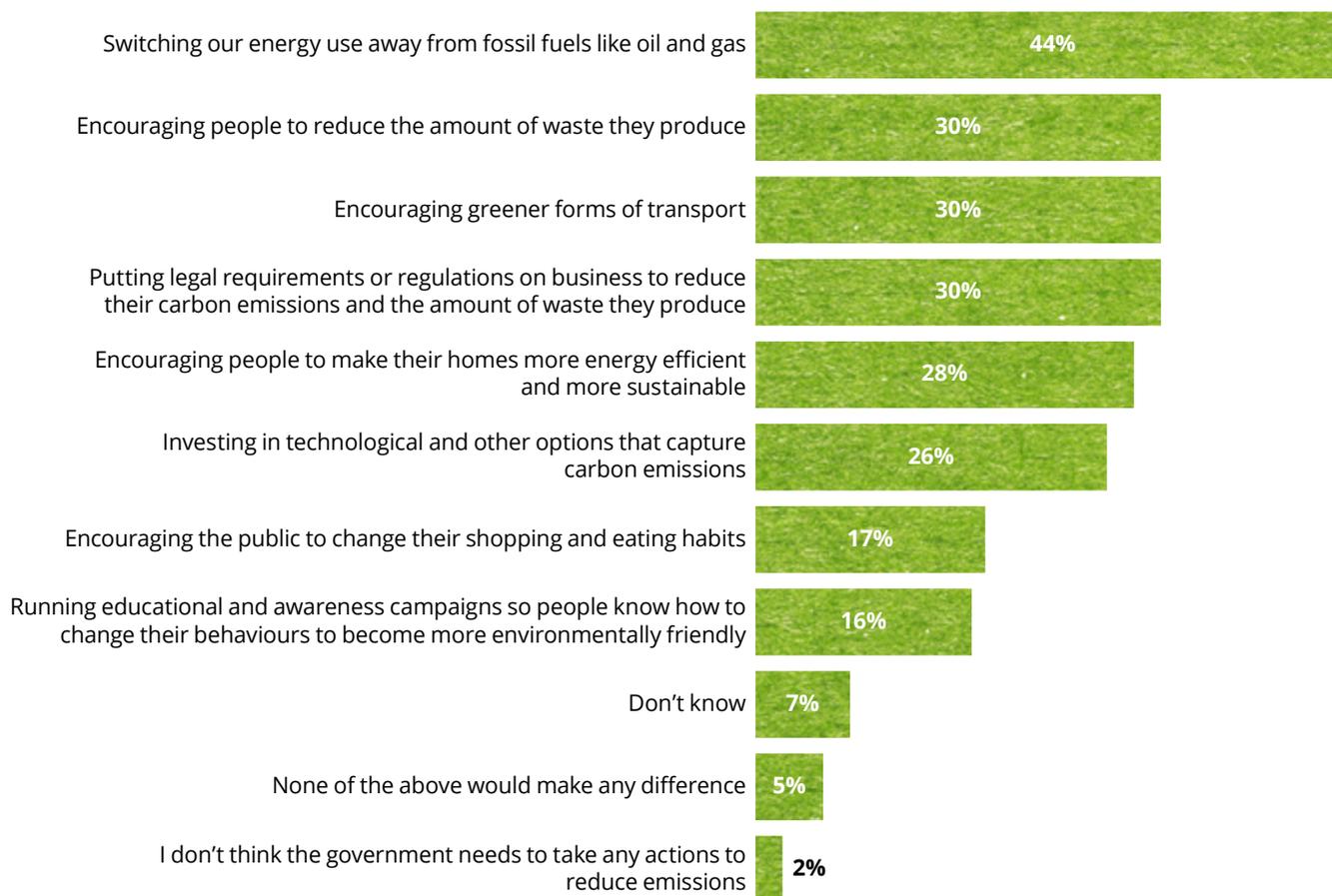
Base: 5,815 Online UK adults 16-75

## Emissions are mainly about fossil fuels, according to the public.

Our survey asked the public what actions government could take to have the biggest impact on emissions. As the chart shows, the most popular response by some margin is to switch energy use away from fossil fuels.

It's notable that actions involving individual changes of behaviour are much lower down the public's list – while 44 per cent say that the country's energy mix needs to change, just 17 per cent think that encouraging people to alter their shopping habits will make a difference.

**Q: Which of the following actions by government, if any, do you think would have the biggest impact on reducing the country's emissions?**



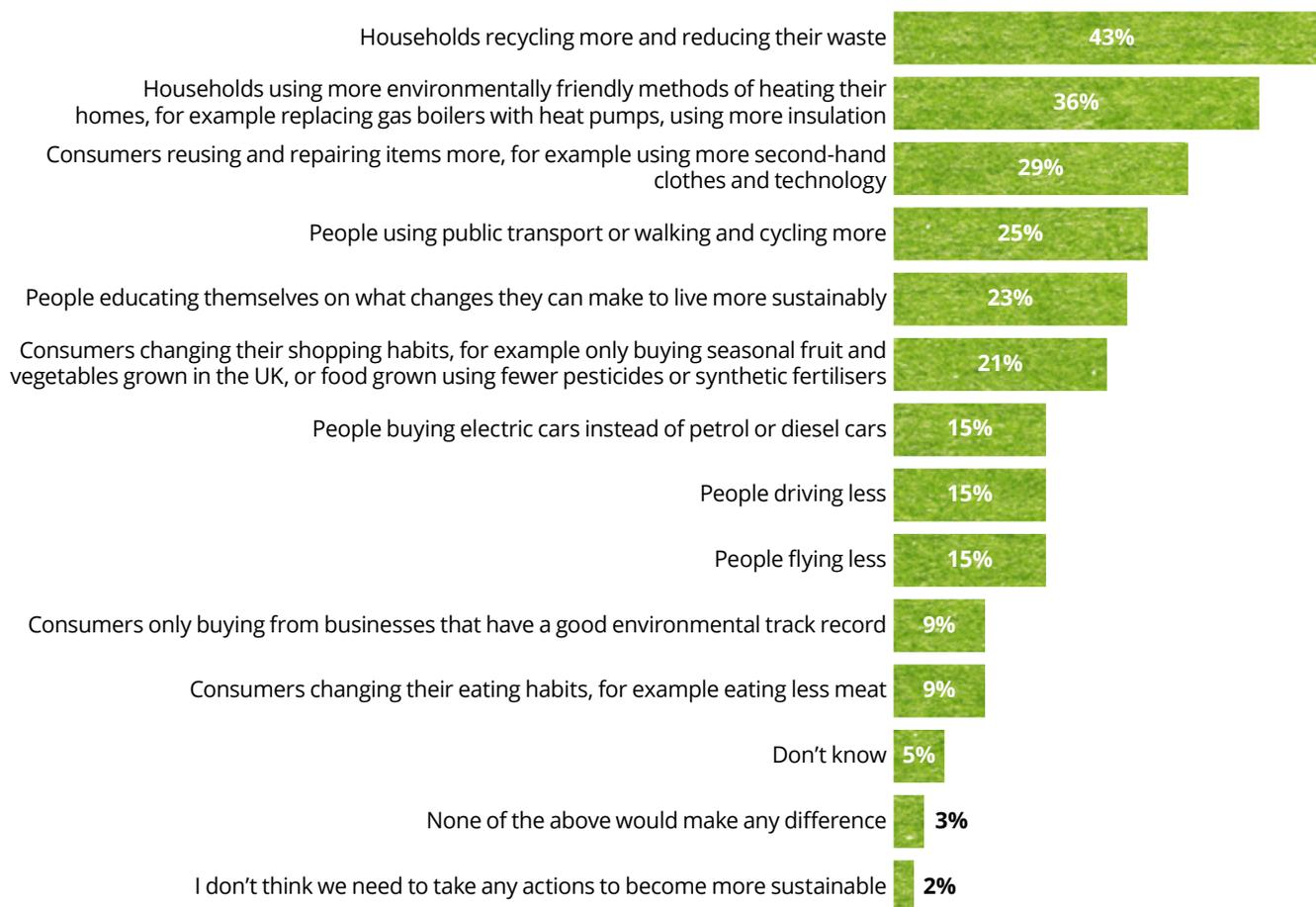
Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

## Public thinks sustainable living is limited to recycling.

Our survey asked the public what actions they can take towards a more sustainable lifestyle. The most popular answer is to recycle more household waste, with 43 per cent of the Northern Ireland public saying this. Northern Ireland places greater emphasis on recycling and reducing waste compared to the rest of the UK.

More significant lifestyle changes such as flying less or buying an electric car were much further down the public's list, as the chart shows. And even relatively marginal changes like sticking to seasonal produce were only seen as worth doing by less than a quarter of the Northern Ireland public.

**Q: Which two or three of these actions that households across the UK could take, if any, do you think would make the biggest difference to people in the UK having a more sustainable lifestyle?**



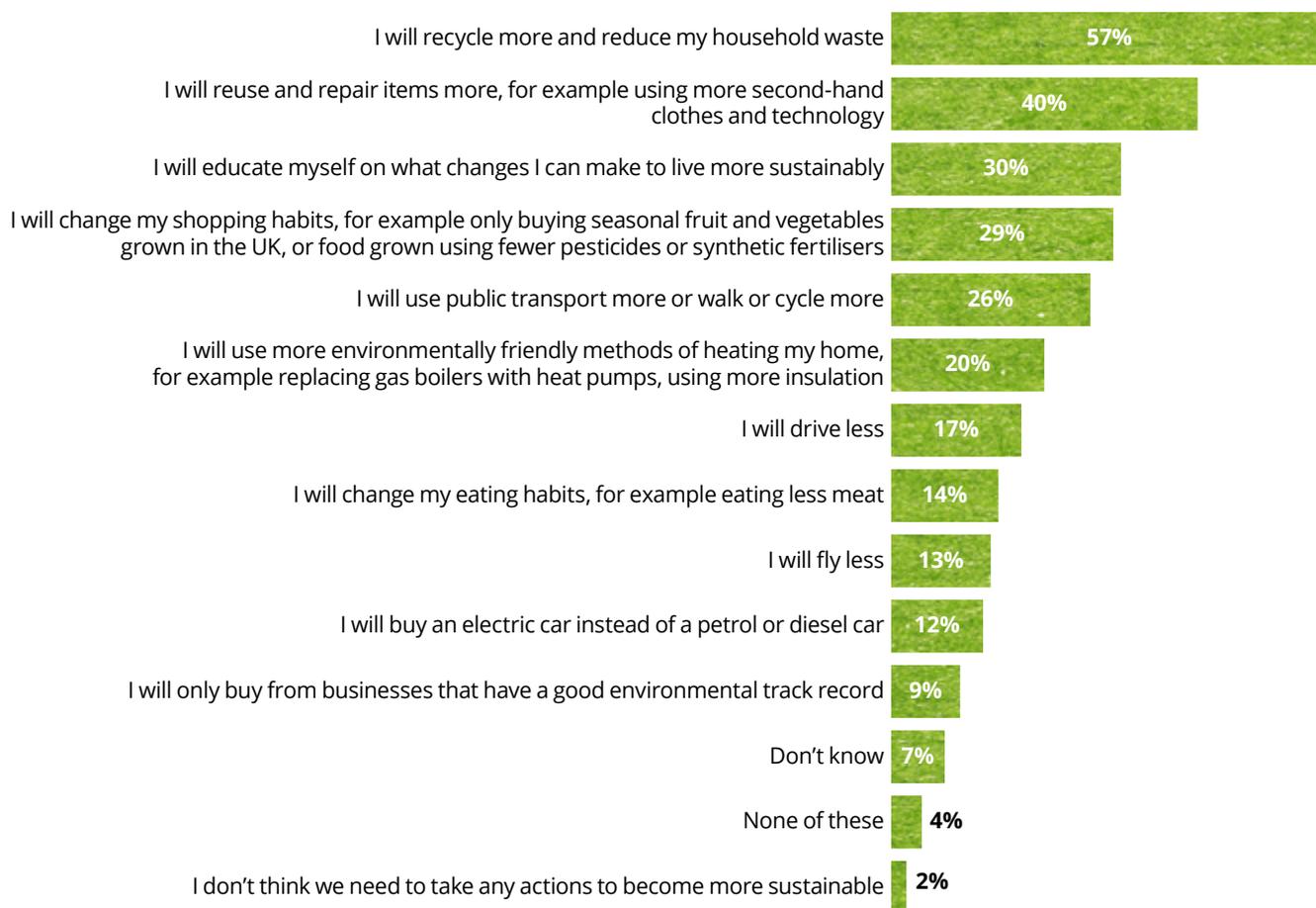
Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

## We then asked the public what lifestyle changes they plan to make in the next couple of years.

Again, recycling was by far the most popular answer with almost six in ten of the Northern Ireland public expecting to do more in the years ahead. As the chart shows, the next most popular responses were to re-use or repair items and then to self-educate on how to live more sustainably.

Northern Ireland is more likely to say they will educate themselves on how to be more sustainable compared to England and Wales (26 per cent and 25 per cent respectively). Again, few people expect to make bigger changes to their lives. Just 20 per cent expect to change their home heating and 12 per cent expect to buy an electric car.

**Q: And which of these actions, if any, do you think that you personally are very likely to do over the next couple of years or so? Please only pick those that you are confident that you are likely to do.**



Base: 420 Online Northern Ireland adults 16-75

# Conclusion: lessons for the public sector from within



# Conclusion: lessons for the public sector from within

For the past decade, government and public services across the UK have faced successive disruptions: austerity in the wake of the global financial crisis, the complex implementation of Brexit, the unprecedented battle against COVID and the stark challenge of the cost of living crisis.

This edition of *State of the State* finds Northern Ireland's public sector grappling with the cumulative impact of successive crises as well as the reductions in spending power, increases in demand and the workforce challenges that came with them. At the same time, the intermittent absence of the Executive continues to impact the public sector by limiting policy and decision-making abilities and hindering transformation, all against the backdrop of an unsustainable budget position.

This year's *State of the State* survey shows how recent years have taken their toll on the Northern Ireland public's optimism for the future. People are as pessimistic as last year and trust in the Northern Ireland government continues to drift down, especially on its ability to deliver. And when it comes to public services, peoples' current priorities are simply to access them within a reasonable timeframe and be able to complain when things go wrong.

The legacy of the last decade is also evident in our interviews with public sector leaders. Overall, our interviews found that public sector leaders in Northern Ireland want to put these years of crises behind them, find some stability and look to the future. They told us that Northern Ireland needs a strong and cooperative Executive willing to make tough decisions, develop policies, and work effectively to ensure stability and resilience.

Many also said an agreed Programme for Government must be focussed on a small number of strategic priorities. We heard that Northern Ireland requires a sustainable, multi-year budget from the UK Government to stabilise and improve public services, accelerate transformation in key sectors, and address industrial unrest by resolving outstanding pay claims. On net zero, public sector leaders said that Northern Ireland has an opportunity to build an ambitious, economy-wide approach to net zero and sustainability.

**CTRL**

Government could exert greater **control** on its delivery by focusing on outcomes rather than inputs.

**ALT**

Government could explore **alternative** ways of working including partnerships and deeper supplier engagement to become more productive and better leverage public spending.

**DEL**

Government could prioritise more effectively, making difficult choices on where to focus its resources – and that might mean **deleting** some programmes or moving them out of the public sector.

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