

ONE year ago the Executive was restored following negotiations and the publication of the New Decade, New Approach by the governments.

The five Executive parties agreed to cooperate on the basis of openness, transparency and accountability and to deliver on health, education and jobs.

We made it clear it would not be a return to the status quo, it would be a new era of government.

Covid-19 changed the way governments work across the world.

The last year has reinforced the vital importance of having locally elected ministers, working with ministerial colleagues across the island, taking decisions in the best interests of all.

Our communities minister stepped up to coordinate and support the community response to Covid, providing funding to those most in need.

Our finance minister acted to make financial support available to businesses, workers and their families to help them through this.

The Executive has shown we can do things differently to what went before. The pandemic changed the priorities of ministers but we still must tackle disadvantage, address regional imbalance and deliver better government. When The Executive Office green-lighted the Magee Medical School it sent a clear message this Executive is committed to tackling historic underfunding.

When the communities minister announced the biggest shake up in public housing for 40 years it was obvious we are in a new era.

The Executive moved swiftly to resolve the nurses' pay dispute to ensure these front line healthcare workers get the pay they deserve.

We acted on people's rights; lifting the ban on gay men donating blood, progressing marriage equality, making plans to ban so-called conversion therapies and taking steps to end holiday hunger.

The restoration of the political institutions also meant that the north-south bodies of the GFA are back up and running.

The benefits and necessity to cooperate across the island in response to the pandemic became abundantly clear.

We must improve this coordination but it has already proved invaluable.

We are also dealing with the continuing Brexit uncertainty.

The Assembly successively voted to reflect the northern majority who rejected and continue to reject the reckless Brexit, recognising the harm it will have here.

One year on from New Decade, New Approach huge challenges remain.

Many pledges are still unrealised.

At the heart of the Executive's return was a commitment to power sharing and equality.

That is why legislation to ensure respect and protection for the Irish language and identity is so important and needs to be enacted as soon as possible.

The British government has reneged once again on pledges in New Decade, New Approach and in the Stormont House Agreement to deal with the legacy of the past.

It is unacceptable it continues to frustrate families seeking the truth on the killings of their loved ones.

The Irish government must also deliver its financial commitments in New Decade, New Approach and ensure the British government does not shirk its responsibilities.

Despite these challenges we face new opportunities, where we can shape a new Ireland for everyone.

The economic impacts of Covid and Brexit have reinforced the need to rebuild our economy on a fairer, more equal, all-Ireland basis.

People rightly expect the parties to work together and while we have distinctly different outlooks, our shared commitment must be to provide political leadership, and deliver public services for taxpayers.

This means looking beyond Brexit and beyond the union; to a new Ireland with the whole island back in the EU through a referendum on Irish unity.

The future holds great opportunities and we must all work together to seize them for the benefit of everyone.