



Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland

From Public Problem to Public Benefit

How public commitments become reliable
delivery in practice

September 2026

FOREWORD

Northern Ireland has had autism legislation since 2011 and successive autism strategies for more than a decade. **The expectation is clear - commitments must be delivered and demonstrated in practice.**

The public problem lies in the barriers that remain unaddressed, the needs that go unmet and the failures in public systems that leave people without reliable support, undermine their rights or expose them to preventable harm. It is not autism, autistic people or their families and carers.

Public action should address these problems so autistic people can exercise choice, participate, belong and live fulfilling lives on their own terms; with the support they need.

My first Annual Report, covering September 2024 to March 2026, found that delivery was not yet reliable across the areas examined. Responsibility was not always clear or coordinated, and outcomes could not consistently be demonstrated.¹

This public guide explains what government should be able to demonstrate about the delivery of its commitments to autistic people, and how I examine that evidence through independent scrutiny.

It follows the route from identifying a public problem to decisions, implementation and benefit in everyday life. It asks who is responsible, what changed in practice, who benefited and what happened when delivery fell short. Throughout, the concern is what public action means for autistic people, their families and carers.

The Autism Strategy is an important part of this work, alongside legislation, practice, services and funding arrangements. Government remains responsible for delivery and its own monitoring. My role is to test its account against evidence from public systems and people's lives.

This must now change.



¹ Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland, *Annual Report September 2024–March 2026* (2026) 2–3, 39 and 44 ('Annual Report').

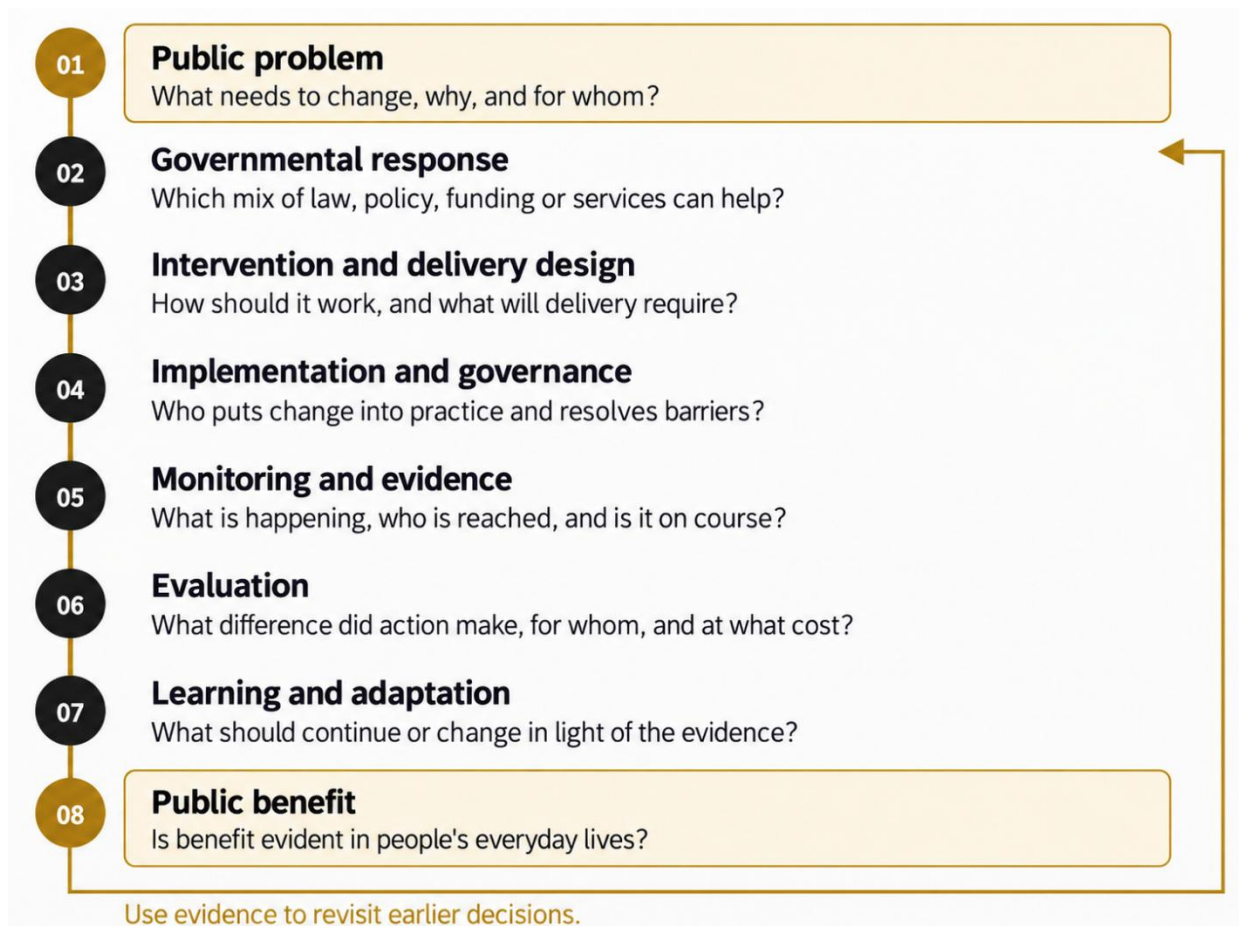
The evidence behind this guide

This guide draws on my ongoing work and a broader evidence review. The footnotes and selected sources identify the legislation, official guidance, audit, inquiry and research evidence supporting the analysis.

Although the guide concerns delivery for autistic people, the principles also apply to public commitments more widely.

How change reaches people

Government should be able to show how its response addresses the problem, who is responsible and how delivery will be coordinated. Each part of the route should connect to the next.²



Participation, lived experience, equality and rights should inform every stage. People should be able to contribute in ways that meet their communication and support needs and see how their evidence influenced decisions.

The stages are shown in sequence to make the route clear. In practice, they overlap and may be revisited.

² Northern Ireland Civil Service, *Making a Difference: The NICS Guide to Making Policy that Works* (revised April 2025), pp 3-4, 8-17 and 23-25 ('NICS Guide').

What delivery must demonstrate

These nine propositions set out what I look for when examining whether public commitments are being delivered:

1. **Governmental intention is not governmental delivery** - Delivering a commitment requires decisions, resources and changes in practice. Announcing or endorsing it does not establish delivery.
2. **No instrument guarantees public benefit by itself** - Law, strategy, funding and service reform do different work. They must connect where delivery depends on more than one.
3. **Implementation is change established in practice** - Publishing guidance and providing training can support implementation. Evidence must show whether the intended approach is used and how consistently.
4. **Responsibility must be allocated** - Shared responsibility must still be clearly defined, coordinated and exercised. Government should identify who delivers each contribution and who resolves outstanding decisions.
5. **Political commitment should be visible in decisions** - Political commitment is visible in the priorities leaders set, the resources they commit and their response when delivery falls short.
6. **Governmental monitoring is part of delivery** - Those responsible need reliable, comparable evidence to understand progress across systems, manage risk and decide what happens next. Monitoring is part of implementation, whether or not a specific law requires it.
7. **Monitoring should produce a consequence** - Evidence should lead to a reasoned response: continuing what works, improving delivery or changing course. Material shortfalls require a decision and follow through.
8. **Independent scrutiny tests the governmental account** - It examines how law, policy, funding and services operate in practice, drawing on evidence across systems. Government retains responsibility for delivery.
9. **Public benefit is the ultimate test** - The question is whether commitments are experienced in everyday life through reliable support, rights respected in practice and benefit that lasts.

The route from public problem to public benefit

1. Public problem

What government must address

Barriers, inequality, unmet need, unfulfilled duties and preventable harm call for public action. Public systems should understand and respond to autistic people's needs, respect their rights and support participation in everyday life.

Government should establish what is happening, why, who is affected and what needs to change. A waiting list shows that people are waiting. It does not, by itself, explain whether the causes lie in staffing, referral decisions, service design, resources or a combination of these.

Research, service and financial records, frontline knowledge and people's experiences should be considered together. Government should check what has already been tried and why the problem remains. It may need to act before every uncertainty is resolved, but it should explain its assumptions and review them as evidence develops.³

2. Governmental response

Choose a response capable of delivery

Government can make or change law, allocate funding, provide services, change practice or combine these measures. The response should address the causes of the problem and have a credible route to benefit.

³ NICS Guide (n 2) 8-11.

Instrument	What it contributes
 Law	Establishes rights, duties, powers and standards. Some provisions require further action before their intended effect is experienced in practice.
 Strategy and policy	Set direction and priorities, including how organisations should work together.
 Funding and programmes	Provide resources and organise work towards defined results.
 Service reform and guidance	Introduce or set out changes to how services operate and how people are supported.

These instruments do different work. A strategy cannot supply missing staff or resolve an access barrier simply by describing the ambition. Government should explain how the measures chosen will work together and what delivery requires.⁴

The Autism Strategy has a statutory basis. That does not mean every statement in a delivery plan is a separate legal duty. The status of a particular commitment depends on its source, wording and context. Commitments remain open to scrutiny according to their terms.

3. Intervention and delivery design

Set out the route into practice

An intervention is the action government chooses to address a problem. Its design should explain how that action is expected to help, who it is intended to reach and what must be in place for it to work.

A credible delivery design explains how the proposed response will be put into practice. Government should identify the responsible organisations, approvals, staff, funding and systems, together with a realistic timetable.

⁴ NICS Guide (n 2) 6 and 12-17; Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, ss 2-3, as amended.

It should show where organisations depend on one another, how unresolved barriers will reach someone with authority to act, and what evidence will be used to assess progress and results.⁵

Move preparation towards a decision

Scoping, review and consultation may be necessary. Each should build on what is already known and have a clear purpose. A route into practice connects this work to a decision, then to named responsibility, resources, a timetable and evidence of change.

Preparation becomes a holding pattern when repeated scoping, review and consultation do not lead to timely decisions or changes in practice. A problem is recognised, work is commissioned and recommendations are made. Yet decisions remain unresolved, or responsibility, resources and timescales remain unclear. The issue returns for further work while people continue to experience the problem.

Further preparation may be justified. The question is what it adds and whether it moves delivery forward at a pace that reflects the urgency of the problem. Government should explain what remains unknown or unresolved, why further work is needed, what decision it will enable and when change in practice is expected.⁶

Preparatory work needs a clear decision point and a route into practice.

What is needed	A question government should answer
 A decision	What decision will this work enable, and who will make it?
 A timetable	When are the decision and changes in practice due?
 Delivery	Who will put the decision into practice, with what authority and resources?
 Follow through	What changed, what remains unresolved, and what happens next?

⁵ Department of Finance, *Better Business Cases NI Supplementary Guidance: Evaluation Guidance* 5-7 and 14-15 ('Evaluation Guidance'); NICS Guide (n 2) 20-23.

⁶ NICS Guide (n 2) 20-23; Pivotal, *Policy Delivery in Northern Ireland* (June 2025) 8-9. The description and questions are the Reviewer's synthesis.

4. Implementation and governance

Establish change in everyday practice

Implementation means the intended change becoming established in decisions, services and everyday practice. Staff need the authority, skills, time and support to use the approach. Delivery may develop unevenly between services and places.

Governance means directing the work, checking risks and securing decisions. Management organises and carries out the work. Boards, working groups and reports should help those responsible understand what is happening and act when needed.⁷

Keep responsibility clear across organisations

A lead department can coordinate the overall picture, but each organisation remains responsible for its own contribution. Where progress depends on another service or department, identify the decision required, who can make it and when it is needed.

Delivery through public bodies, trusts, contractors or voluntary and community organisations still requires clear responsibilities, evidence, and arrangements for resolving problems. Separate organisations can each report progress while the combined service remains difficult to use.⁸

People experience the combined pathway, not the organisational chart.

Test what governance is achieving

The Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry showed the danger of relying on governance structures and reassurance without adequately testing evidence or acting on risk. Its findings make clear why those overseeing services must examine whether arrangements protect people in practice.⁹

⁷ Department of Finance, *Senior Responsible Owner*, sections on responsibilities and post-implementation review.

⁸ Department of Finance, *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland* (2024) chs 4 and 7; Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Partnership Working: Departments and Arm's Length Bodies* (25 March 2026) paras 2.10-2.12 and 3.2-3.7.

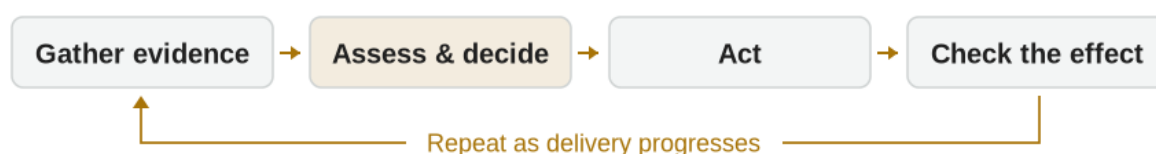
⁹ Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry, *Report* (18 June 2026), Executive Summary paras 182–188 and ch 13 paras 13.95–13.106 ('Muckamore Report').

Limited money or staffing can constrain what is possible immediately. Government should still identify risks, raise unresolved matters with those able to act and explain how risks will be reduced within the authority and resources available.¹⁰

Constraints should inform decisions about delivery. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate that a commitment was implemented or that people benefited.

5. Monitoring and evidence

Monitoring is part of government's work to implement its commitments. It means gathering, checking and using evidence throughout delivery. A progress report contributes information; monitoring requires someone to assess it, decide what it means and follow through. The depth and frequency should reflect the scale, cost and risk of the work.¹¹



Government needs this information to direct delivery, whether or not a particular law expressly requires monitoring. This is an expectation of responsible administration; it does not create an additional legal duty for every public commitment.

Check what happens in practice

“*Work as imagined*” is what law, policy or guidance says should happen. “*Work as done*” is what happens in the conditions staff and people actually face. Evidence from autistic people, families, carers and frontline staff helps test the account in service records.¹²

One person's experience can reveal a serious failure or risk needing attention. It does not show how many others are affected. Repeating that account in several reports does not provide separate confirmation. Scrutiny should

¹⁰ Muckamore Report (n 9), Appendix 4 paras 14–20 and 27.

¹¹ NICS Guide (n 2) 23–25; Department of Finance, *Programme and Project Benefits Realisation*, sections on summary reviews and governance.

¹² Muckamore Report (n 9), Appendix 4 paras 35–36.

check what each source establishes, whether other evidence supports it, and where accounts differ or leave questions unanswered.

Stage	What evidence should increasingly show
 Getting ready	Clear responsibility, approvals, resources and a workable plan.
 Entering practice	Actual use, the people reached, gaps and barriers.
 Established delivery	Routine use, quality, consistency and results that can reasonably be observed.

Results take time, but time spent preparing does not itself establish progress. Scrutiny should consider both the stage reached and whether the pace is reasonable.

My Annual Report identified gaps and inconsistent reporting that limited what could be established about delivery.¹³ Missing information can leave it unclear what changed, who was reached or whether the intended result followed. Government should explain and address those gaps. Scrutiny should examine other available evidence and pursue credible concerns. Missing evidence does not prove that nothing happened.

6.Evaluation

Assess the difference the action made

Evaluation examines how an approach worked, what difference it made, for whom and at what cost. It should be planned early by identifying the starting position, intended results and evidence needed.¹⁴

¹³ Annual Report (n 1) 20 and 27.

¹⁴ HM Treasury and Evaluation Task Force, *The Magenta Book: Central Government Guidance on Evaluation* (updated May 2026) chs 1-3 ('Magenta Book'); *Evaluation Guidance* (n 5) 5-10.

Implementation and effectiveness require separate conclusions. An approach can be used as intended yet fail to help. Outcomes can also improve for reasons outside the intervention. Evaluation should consider other explanations, unequal or unintended effects, and whether the change lasts.

Not every contribution produces an immediate, separately measurable benefit. Some work establishes the staff capability or systems on which later delivery depends. Its contribution should still be explained and tested as part of the wider route to change.

7.Learning and adaptation

Use evidence to decide what happens next

Evidence may support continuing or extending an approach, improving delivery, providing further resources, redesigning it or stopping it. The decision should explain how it responds to the evidence. Government should check whether its response worked.

Material changes should be lawful, explained, authorised and recorded. Government should show what changed, why, who decided and what this means for the people intended to benefit. Changing a plan does not, by itself, remove an existing legal duty.

Carry learning forward

Government should look back as well as forward. A new review or strategy should start from what is already known - the problems identified, recommendations made, action taken and results achieved.

The Muckamore Inquiry identified failures to track recommendations from earlier reports and establish what followed them. Public audit of the response to the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry also shows why completed actions must be tested against the concerns recommendations were intended to address.¹⁵

A clear record should link each original concern to the recommendation, government response, responsible body and evidence of change. Those links should remain visible when recommendations are absorbed into a wider programme. Unresolved problems should be explained and carried into the next plan.

¹⁵ Muckamore Report (n 9), ch 13 paras 13.50-13.57; Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Northern Ireland Non-Domestic RHI Scheme: Progressing Implementation of the Public Inquiry Recommendations – Second Report* (15 October 2024).

A new review must account for earlier recommendations and unresolved problems. A new strategy must not reset the record.

8.Public benefit

Show what changed in people’s lives

Public benefit is the worthwhile difference public action makes in everyday life. It includes preventing harm and maintaining essential support, and extends to choice, opportunity, relationships and belonging.

For autistic people, that means respect, choice and the chance to live a fulfilling life on their own terms. Public systems should uphold their rights and support them to participate, pursue what matters to them and be themselves, without pressure to hide or suppress who they are.

Benefit	What people could experience
 Choice and respect	Support to understand options, make and express choices, and have those choices taken seriously in decisions.
 Belonging and opportunity	Feeling accepted and able to build relationships, learn, work and pursue interests that matter to them.
 Reliable, accessible support	Timely support, with communication, sensory and other access needs recognised, so people can use services and take part in everyday life.
 Continuity of support	Support that remains coordinated as people move between services, through different stages of life or into new circumstances.
 Less avoidable work for people and families	Involvement in decisions without being left to piece services together and manage the gaps.

Check who benefited and who was missed

An overall improvement can hide little or no benefit for some people. Government should check what changed for different age groups, people with different support needs and people living in different areas. Shorter average waits, for example, may conceal continued delays for a particular group or place. Evidence should identify who was missed or disadvantaged, help explain why and show whether benefits last.¹⁶

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *What Makes a Good Indicator*, sections on technical quality, change over time and differences in Northern Ireland; *Magenta Book* (n 14), chs 1-3.

That includes children, adults and older people, with and without a learning disability, and people with substantial or different support needs. Autism-specific policy should make distinct barriers visible and work alongside wider disability, equality and inclusion policies. Participation must include people whose communication and support needs are not met by standard consultation methods.

My Annual Report describes the effects of fragmentation, delay and uncertainty on mental health, wellbeing and daily stability. People's experiences help establish whether public action is making the difference intended.¹⁷

Public benefit must be evident in everyday life.

¹⁷ Annual Report (n 1) 20 and 43-44.

Political commitment and public accountability

Examine decisions and sustained action

Political leadership must be sustained throughout delivery. Scrutiny should examine whether leaders maintained support, resolved barriers and acted on evidence as circumstances changed.

The six questions below examine what political leaders decide and do, and whether they follow through over time.

	Authorise	Were the decisions needed to move the work forward made?
	Assign	Was someone clearly responsible for each contribution?
	Resource	What resources were provided, what gaps remained, and what was done about them?
	Resolve	Were barriers between departments and services brought to a decision?
	Account	Were progress, evidence and outstanding problems explained publicly?
	Correct	Did those responsible act when delivery was late, uneven or ineffective?

A poor result does not, by itself, establish a lack of political will. Design, resources, capability and circumstances also matter. The fair assessment asks what decision was needed, who had authority, what they knew or should reasonably have sought to know, what they decided and what followed.

Different roles carry different responsibilities

Ministers and the Executive make political decisions within their authority. Departments and delivery bodies advise, implement and account for delivery. Accounting Officers have specific responsibilities for managing public money properly and accounting for its use.¹⁸

The Assembly makes law, authorises public spending and scrutinises government. MLAs and committees can question Ministers, examine evidence and pursue unresolved issues. They do not ordinarily manage departments or deliver services.¹⁹

Political parties should account for existing commitments before making new promises. What was delivered? What remains unresolved? What will they do to secure delivery?

Political leadership must turn commitments into delivery. Legal duties still apply when political priorities change.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Act 1998, ss 20 and 28A; *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland* (n 8), chs 1 and 3-4.

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Act 1998, ss 5, 29, 44, 57 and 63; Northern Ireland Assembly, *Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly*.

Independent scrutiny

Test government's account against the evidence

Oversight keeps the wider system in view. Scrutiny examines particular issues in depth. Both draw on evidence across organisations, as set out in my Annual Report.²⁰

I independently monitor the Autism Strategy's implementation and effectiveness, assess the effectiveness of autism funding arrangements, and review the adequacy and effectiveness of autism law, practice and services. I commission independent research on best international practice on autism, advise the Assembly when requested and report annually.²¹

The Department of Health must monitor departments' implementation of the Strategy. Each department must implement the part falling within its responsibilities. These duties remain with government; independent scrutiny does not take them over.²²

The Delivery Plan is one means of implementing the Strategy. Examining its actions does not replace scrutiny of the wider statutory and strategic commitments.

Where scrutiny sits

Within my statutory remit, scrutiny can examine any part of the route: how a problem was understood, how decisions were made, whether preparation has a route into practice, how organisations work together, and whether people experience benefit.

Scrutiny may therefore examine delayed decisions, repeated review or gaps between organisations before an intended change has reached practice. It also examines what government learned and did when delivery fell short.

²⁰ Annual Report (n 1) 15–21 and 43.

²¹ Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, ss 3C(3), 3C(5)-(7) and 3D(a)-(f), as inserted by Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, s 5.

²² Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, ss 2(6)-(8).

Seven questions guide my examination

These seven questions summarise the approach explained in my Independent Statutory Monitoring Methodology²³.

Question	What I examine
 1. What was required?	What did the law or commitment say should happen?
 2. Who is responsible?	Who delivers each part and resolves outstanding decisions?
 3. What changed?	What is different in decisions, services or everyday practice?
 4. Who was reached?	Who was reached or missed, and where did delivery differ?
 5. What happens in practice?	Does evidence from services and people support the reported account?
 6. What difference did it make?	What results followed, including unequal or unintended effects?
 7. What followed the evidence?	What was learned, what decision followed and what should happen next?

I assess implementation and effectiveness separately, explain how much confidence the evidence supports, and consider whether delivery is on course. The depth of scrutiny reflects significance, risk and the evidence available.

Before publishing material criticism, I will give those concerned a fair opportunity to respond and consider their response.

The central test

Can government demonstrate a clear line from the public problem to reliable delivery and benefit in everyday life, and show what it learned and did when delivery fell short?

²³ [Independent Statutory Monitoring Methodology](#)

Sources and further reading

This guide presents the main principles from the broader evidence review underpinning it. The sources below (accessible through the footnotes within the document) support its discussion of public delivery and accountability. Sources concerning other policy areas inform the analysis.

The Reviewer's work and the statutory framework

Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland, *Annual Report September 2024-March 2026* (2026).

Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland, *Independent Statutory Monitoring Methodology* (September 2026).

Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, as amended.

Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Autism strategy and delivery

Department of Health, *Autism Strategy 2023-2028* (2023).

Department of Health, *Autism Strategy Delivery Plan 2025-2028* (2026).

Policy delivery and accountability

Northern Ireland Civil Service, *Making a Difference: The NICS Guide to Making Policy that Works* (revised April 2025).

Department of Finance, *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland* (2024), especially chapters 3, 4 and 7.

Department of Finance, *Senior Responsible Owner*.

Department of Finance, *Programme and Project Benefits Realisation*.

Northern Ireland Executive, *Ministerial Code*.

Northern Ireland Assembly, *Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly*.

Evidence and evaluation

Department of Finance, *Better Business Cases NI Supplementary Guidance: Evaluation Guidance*.

HM Treasury and Evaluation Task Force, *The Magenta Book: Central Government Guidance on Evaluation* (updated May 2026).

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *What Makes a Good Indicator*.

Enola K Proctor and others, 'Outcomes for Implementation Research: Conceptual Distinctions, Measurement Challenges, and Research Agenda' (2011) 38 *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 65.

Enola K Proctor and others, Ten years of implementation outcomes research: a scoping review | Implementation Science | Springer Nature Link. (2023) 18 *Implementation Science* 31.

Audit, inquiry and learning

Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry, *Report* (18 June 2026), especially chapter 13 and Appendices 4-5.

Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Northern Ireland Non-Domestic RHI Scheme: Progressing Implementation of the Public Inquiry Recommendations - Second Report* (15 October 2024).

Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Partnership Working: Departments and Arm's Length Bodies* (25 March 2026).

Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Evaluation of Programmes Addressing Educational Disadvantage* (31 March 2026).

House of Lords Statutory Inquiries Committee, *Public Inquiries: Enhancing Public Trust* (HL Paper 9, 2024).

Wider policy research

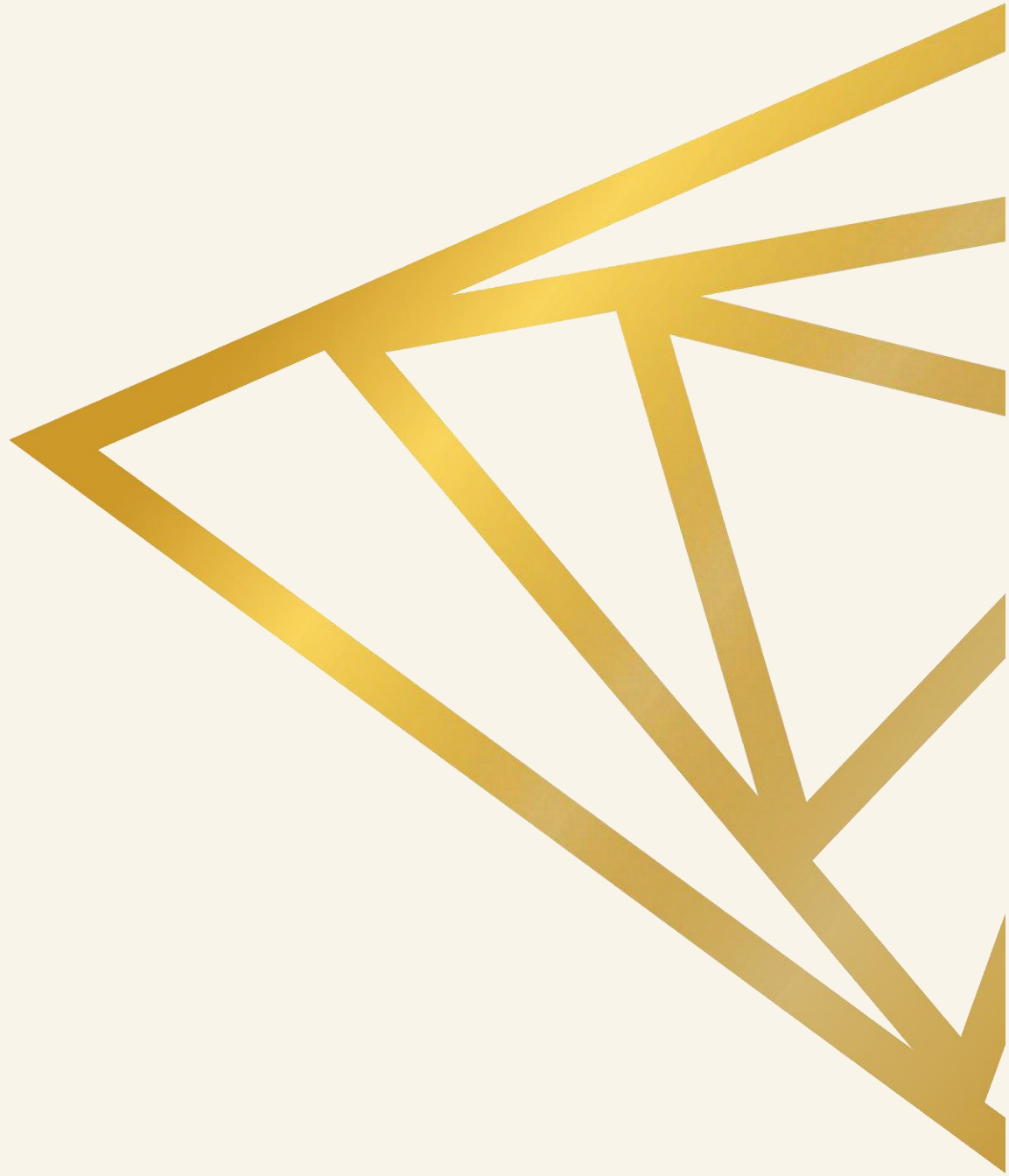
Pivotal, *Policy Delivery in Northern Ireland* (June 2025).

David Pedley, *Understanding Change as Politics not Political Will* (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office technical guide, 2024).

Publication information

Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland, September 2026.

Suggested citation: Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland, *From Public Problem to Public Benefit: How Public Commitments Become Reliable Delivery in Practice* (2026).

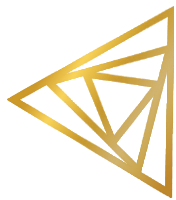


© Crown copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at <https://www.autismreviewer-ni.org.uk/>. Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at info@autismreviewer-ni.org.uk



Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland



autismreviewer-ni.org.uk