

For immediate release

Northern Ireland needs proper government

The campaigning is over and the votes have been counted. Now the political parties need to form an Executive that will take on all the big challenges facing Northern Ireland, according to independent think tank Pivotal.

Northern Ireland faces big policy challenges that need immediate action. This can only be done properly with an Executive in place, according to Northern Ireland's only independent think tank.

The health system is under huge pressure, school budgets are strained, and the cost-of-living crisis is leaving struggling families with a choice between eating properly or heating their home.

The parties need to form a new Executive quickly and agree an ambitious multi-year Programme for Government and Budget that will take on these challenges on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

Clearly there is strong opposition to the NI Protocol from some parties. However, it is one issue among many. Finding a resolution on the Protocol that is accepted by everyone is likely to be difficult. Northern Ireland's other concerns should not be set aside while political negotiations around the Protocol continue.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "Now that the election is over, our politicians need to form an Executive, agree an ambitious Programme for Government that makes efforts to tackle all of Northern Ireland's challenges, and pass a multi-year budget to support that Programme for Government and allow for some longer-term planning.

"During the election campaign period, there was resounding agreement between the parties about the importance and urgency of taking action on the cost of living crisis and the pressures in the health service. Northern Ireland needs a fully functioning Executive in place to address these and other challenges.

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“Recent legislation means that the parties have a period of up to 24 weeks to agree the formation of an Executive, with previous ministers staying in post during this time. While that is an improvement on earlier periods without an Executive, such a ‘caretaker’ government could not make any new, significant, controversial or cross-cutting decisions. This would be a wholly inadequate form of government, particularly given all the challenges facing Northern Ireland.

“The Protocol is one issue in a series of thorny issues. Challenges such as health waiting lists, an unequal education system with schools in financial stress, and rocketing costs for energy, fuel and food all need policy interventions as soon as possible. Efforts to resolve difficulties with the Protocol should not prevent the new Assembly and Executive addressing all these other challenges.

“Not only should an Executive be formed, it must have a sense of shared responsibility. Political parties might come from different viewpoints – but they should agree that they have a job to do collectively, helping to improve the lives of people and families in Northern Ireland during what is a very challenging time.

“This does not require agreement on every issue, but it does require compromise. Northern Ireland simply has too many problems to not have a proper government. Failure to form an Executive will make people’s daily lives more difficult, and the most vulnerable will suffer the impacts of this most of all.

“The UK Government also has a role to play in supporting and facilitating devolution, and it is responsible for negotiations with the EU about the NI Protocol. The UK Government should take account of all the diverse views in Northern Ireland when holding discussions and making decisions – and do this in a transparent way.”

Pivotal’s [latest report](#) - and its recent series of [podcasts](#) on policy priorities in Northern Ireland, featuring leaders from different sectors in Northern Ireland - set out some of the biggest challenges across health, education, the cost of living, economy and climate change. A clear common theme was the need for urgent action from a new Executive to address immediate and longer-term issues in all these areas.

[Post-election policy priorities for Northern Ireland](#), published in March, set out priorities across a range of policy areas that are affecting local people’s day-to-day lives right now, many of which are set to get worse. The report highlighted that:

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- Recent data shows almost 355,000 people in Northern Ireland are waiting for a first consultant-led appointment and nearly 187,000 (52.6%) of them have been waiting for more than one year.
- School budgets are extremely strained, and classroom spending per pupil here is now 20% lower than in Scotland and 5% lower than England and Wales. The most vulnerable children are the most badly affected by squeezed budgets, for example failures to identify and support children with Special Educational Needs.
- Home energy costs have skyrocketed due to a series of massive price hikes – and these rises could continue, given the state of the global energy market and the war in Ukraine.
- Northern Ireland’s economy needs support to boost the number of higher paid, higher skilled jobs. Improving this will require long-term strategies to increase the local skills base and encourage innovation.
- Major investment in infrastructure is needed. The public transport system is patchy, while the water and sewage system is bursting at the seams – with 25 of NI’s 27 ‘economic hub’ towns operating at or over capacity. The overworked wastewater system curtails the ability to build homes, schools, office buildings and factories.
- Northern Ireland also has to do more to tackle the climate crisis. Agreeing a Climate Change Act was a significant step – but it is now needs to be turned into realistic action plans that will deliver on these ambitious commitments to reduce carbon emissions. A changing world will provide opportunities, and environment sustainability should be linked together with social and economic development.

ENDS

Notes to editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal’s previous report – *Post-election policy priorities for Northern Ireland* can be found [here](#)

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3. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
4. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Lisa Faulkner Byrne, Project Coordinator, EPIC; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London
5. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance
6. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
7. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
8. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
9. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf