

# **The Public Policy Forum N.I. Limited - Pivotal Annual Report for year ending 31 March 2024**

**Company No: NI656627**

**Northern Ireland Charity No: 108659**

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# 1. Vision, mission, context and strategic priorities

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. Launched in September 2019, Pivotal aims to be a future-focussed, ambitious and innovative voice, promoting the use of evidence and research in order to improve policy decisions in Northern Ireland. Pivotal is independent of government and has no political alignment.

## Vision

Pivotal's vision is better policy making and improved economic and social outcomes in Northern Ireland.

## Mission

Pivotal's mission is to use research, evidence and engagement to inform and influence policy making in Northern Ireland.

## Strategic context

Northern Ireland faces many long-standing economic and social challenges, for example educational inequality, low productivity, ongoing tensions between communities, poor health and social care provision, persistent poverty, and the lack of a climate change strategy. In that past, the political system here has tended not to be focussed on finding effective solutions for these longer term problems. Decisions are often made for political reasons rather than being based on research or evidence. Tough but necessary decisions are frequently avoided, because of the political difficulties involved.

Pivotal wants to help improve policy making by promoting evidenced-based solutions to Northern Ireland's policy problems. As part of increasing the use of evidence in policy making, Pivotal wants to involve more people in talking about the public policy issues that matter to them. We aim to enable more people to give their views on issues and influence policy decisions, particularly young people and others who might not have had a voice in the past. All our research involves engaging with a wide range of people including users of public services, researchers, public service providers, politicians, policy makers and members of the general public.

The social and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland are severe: by far the longest health waiting lists in the UK; low average skill levels; inequality in educational outcomes; low productivity and innovation; persistent poverty and deprivation, particularly in areas most affected by the Troubles; continued divisions between communities; and a lack of focus on climate change. There is an urgent need for improved policy decision-making in all of these areas.

## Policy context in 2023-24

Since devolution in 1999, the Northern Ireland Executive has not been in place for more than 40% of the time, including over five of the last seven years. There was no Executive for a two-year period from February 2022 and no ministers from end October 2022.

Without an Assembly or Executive for almost all of 2023-24, civil servants were Northern Ireland's only decision-makers, but with limited and uncertain powers. The Secretary of State for Northern

Ireland made some legislative changes, for example setting a Budget for 2023-24, but otherwise he was adamant that other significant decisions should be taken by a restored Assembly and Executive.

The absence of an Assembly and Executive meant very limited progress on policy issues during 2023-24. While public services continued to be delivered, civil servants made only minimal decisions about changes or new initiatives. Unfortunately no programme for government had been agreed before the Executive collapsed, so civil servants did not even have this as a guide to follow. Over time a “governance gap” emerged, where no one was making important decisions, despite an urgent need for them.

There was a particular problem during the year with managing within the Budget for 2023-24 set by the Secretary of State, which was 0.9% lower in cash terms and 3.3% lower in real terms than the previous year’s budget. There were unresolved pay disputes and industrial action in multiple sectors. There was a particular tension with civil servants being required to manage within their department’s budget, but only being able to do so by making decisions about cutting spending for which they had no political authority.

An election was due after no Executive was formed by end October 2022, but was repeatedly postponed. Moreover, there was a complete lack of democratic accountability, transparency and scrutiny without the Executive and ministers, or the Assembly and its Committees. Some civil servants gave public statements or media interviews, but these were not consistently provided.

The Assembly and Executive returned on 3 February 2024, after the announcement of the ‘Safeguarding the Union’ command paper and a financial package for Northern Ireland from the UK Government. Ministers and MLAs were welcomed back with positivity and optimism, although the challenges they faced in both public services and budgets were enormous. The First and deputy First Ministers listed their policy priorities as public sector pay, health waiting lists, childcare, environment (especially Lough Neagh), Special Education Needs and public sector transformation. The financial package allowed most industrial disputes to be settled. A Budget for 2024-25 was agreed by the Executive at end April 2024, although it was opposed by the Health Minister. At the time of writing, a programme for government has not yet been produced.

## **Pivotal’s strategic priorities**

1. Inform, enhance and influence policy decision-making in Northern Ireland through promoting research and evidence of what works.
2. Encourage and enable discussion about public policy issues, including involving more marginalised individuals and groups.
3. Use our work to make convincing arguments for policy change.
4. Build a reputation for being authoritative, influential, independent and relevant.
5. Be a sustainable, effective and efficient organisation which is an excellent place to work and with whom others want to engage.

## 2. Charitable purpose

Pivotal's organisational purposes as set out in our objects in the Company's Memorandum of Association are:

- To advance citizenship by encouraging and equipping the public on a non-partisan basis to engage in the process of public policy-making, and by promoting the inclusion of sections of the community who are under-represented in public policy debate.
- To advance the education of the public by providing opportunities to learn about the processes and effects of public policy-making; and by undertaking, publishing and disseminating independent research on the potential implications and benefits of varied social and economic policy options.

### How our activities deliver public benefit

The Trustees have paid due regard to the Charity Commission guidance on public benefit. The Trustees are confident that Pivotal's vision, mission and strategic objectives are in accordance with the regulations on public benefit. The Trustees believe that our purpose satisfies both elements of the public benefit requirement. The direct benefits which flow from this purpose include:

- More people, and particularly those from disengaged sections of the community, will become actively engaged as citizens in the public policy-making process and in shaping the policies that directly and indirectly affect them.
- Elected representatives and public officials will be better informed and equipped to devise public policy.
- More people will understand how public policy is made and how it affects their lives, and public policy debate and implementation are informed by both expert evidence and public views.

These benefits will be evidenced through the collation of statistical information around participation in events and projects organised by the charity, and the range and numbers of sectors engaging. We will also provide qualitative information in the form of case studies and feedback from participants, politicians and policy-makers. We will assess the extent to which public policy-making reflects the outputs from the charity's work.

The purposes of our charity will not lead to any harm.

The charity's beneficiaries are the general public. The only private benefit that may arise would be to Trustees and staff who undertake skills training in good governance, finance, IT, event management, etc in order to enhance the charity's ability to deliver its services, but which may also be transferable to other settings. These skills are incidental and necessary to ensure the described benefit is provided to its public beneficiaries, the general public.

### 3. Governance and staff

#### Pivotal's Board

- David Gavaghan (Chair) – Advisor, consultant and director. *From January 2024*
- Peter Sheridan (Former Chair) – Chief Executive, Cooperation Ireland. *Resigned November 2023*
- Sarah Creighton – Housing Advisor and lawyer
- Judith Gillespie – Former Deputy Chief Constable, PSNI. *From November 2023*
- Richard Good – Director, Turnaround
- Jarlath Kearney – Strategy Advisor and media contributor
- Seamus McAleavey – Retired Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- Andrew McCormick – Retired Northern Ireland Civil Service Permanent Secretary
- Sinéad McSweeney – Former Global Head of Public Policy, Twitter. *From November 2023*
- Rosalind Skillen – Climate activist and columnist
- Alan Whysall – Honorary Senior Research Associate, University College London

#### Pivotal's Reference Group

The Reference Group provides advice and support, and helps connect us with useful contacts in Northern Ireland and beyond. Current members are:

Tim Attwood, Jessica Caldwell, Eamonn Donaghy, Marianne Elliott, Lisa Faulkner-Byrne, Ryan Feeney, George Fergusson, David Gavaghan, Leo Green, Eva Grosman, Simon Hamilton, Will Haire, Robert Hazell, John Hunter, Fiona Kane, John McCallister, Fergal McFerran, Angela McGowan, Brigid McManus, David Phinnemore, Trevor Ringland.

#### Pivotal's staff

Ann Watt was appointed as Pivotal's Director in September 2019. Ann is a former senior civil servant, with 15 years' experience working in London in HM Treasury, Home Office and Cabinet Office. From 2014, Ann was the Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland for five years.

Dr James Greer joined Pivotal in February 2023 as Senior Researcher. James is an experienced academic and researcher. He has researched, taught and published widely on issues regarding politics and society in Northern Ireland, devolution and public policy across the UK, and the political history of Ireland.

Pivotal also uses research associates, research assistants, interns and placement students to work on particular projects.

## 4. Pivotal's values

In all our work we adhere to the following values:

### **Independent and objective**

- We act only in the public interest
- We will not be associated with a single individual, organisation, political party, or ideology
- We will remain free to think radically and objectively, promoting policies based on evidence, not opinion

### **Authoritative, effective and influential**

- Our research, analysis and advice will be accurate, credible and authoritative
- We will have the expertise to communicate and influence in order to make an impact

### **Inclusive and accessible**

- We will seek to engage and involve the widest spectrum of people in our work
- We will provide a platform for new voices, particularly from those parts of the community under-represented in public debate
- We will make all our work accessible to the public

### **Open and transparent**

- We will be transparent about how we are funded, who we are working with and what we are doing

## 5. Chair's report for 2023-24

Pivotal has had another good year building its contribution as an independent voice in public policy in Northern Ireland. We have produced relevant and timely research reports, and provided valued, independent analysis and commentary.

Pivotal has become an important and trusted voice on current issues, with much greater opportunity to contribute to decision-making since the Assembly and Executive returned in February 2024.

Pivotal's main outputs during 2023-24 were:

- two reports reviewing how government was functioning in Northern Ireland;
- a series of four reports on reconciliation and deprivation, including new research involving over 300 young people about what would make NI a better place to live, work and study;
- a commissioned scoping study for Joseph Rowntree Foundation about their future role in NI;
- substantial new work on economic inactivity which resulted in a research paper published in May 2024;
- evidence to a number of Westminster and Stormont Committees and consultations;
- comment and analysis day-to-day on government and policy issues, appearing frequently on local media and provided regular comment on X/Twitter.

### Functioning of government in Northern Ireland

During 2023-24 Pivotal produced a report in the autumn about how government was working in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive and Assembly, and then another report to mark the return of the Assembly and Executive in February 2024:

- [Governing without government: the consequences](#) (September 2023)
- [The return of Stormont: time for real change](#) (February 2024)
- [Policy priorities for a returning Executive](#) (February 2024)

### Research projects

We have worked on two major research projects during the year:

- **Reconciliation and deprivation - what would make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and study?** This research study involved more than 300 young people through an online survey and focus groups. The project was funded by the DFA's Reconciliation Fund. We published a series of four reports:
  - [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#) (May 2023)
  - [Youth voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland](#) (June 2023)
  - [Youth solutions: improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#) (October 2023)
  - [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#) (October 2023)
- **Economic inactivity in Northern Ireland** – we completed an extensive literature and policy review, ahead of publication of a [research report](#) in May 2024.



## Commissioned research

Pivotal was successful in being commissioned to do two research projects during the year:

- [Scoping study for Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) about how they might increase their contribution to tackling poverty, destitution and economic insecurity in NI
- Research for Learning and Work Institute about career change and re-skilling in NI

## Evidence submissions and consultation responses

We have provided submissions of evidence to Committees and consultations:

- Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - written evidence for [inquiry into the funding and delivery of public services](#)
- Northern Ireland Affairs Committee – written evidence for [inquiry into integrated education](#)
- Department of Finance consultation on [the financial context for revenue raising](#)

## Pivotal Platform

In February 2024, we launched a new weekly blog series [Pivotal Platform](#), where we invite guest authors to write about a current policy issue. We take a light editorial approach, with the only guidelines being that the article is short and accessible, based on data and evidence, and includes specific recommendations for policy change. Topics have ranged from NI's productivity problem to the challenge of tackling educational disadvantage amongst young men, and from leadership in NI to the need for targets to restore our natural environment. It has been encouraging to see the interest and engagement that these articles have generated each week, and we hope it is a helpful contribution to greater evidence-based policy discussion. We are grateful to all those who have written articles for Pivotal Platform.

## Events

We were pleased to contribute to events hosted by other organisations throughout the year, for example:

- annual lecture for the National Education Union on education and training for 14-19 year olds;
- presentation at Community Foundation NI's strategy launch about the state of government;
- presentation at the Fiscal Council's conference on how public spending in NI supports growth;
- Involve NI event on citizens' assemblies;
- Shared Island Youth Forum on Opportunity

## Media and social media

We have contributed frequent comment and analysis on local and national radio and TV, including BBC Newsline, BBC Sunday Politics, BBC News Channel, UTV News, UTV View from Stormont, RTE

News, BBC Radio Ulster, Radio 4, U105 and Q Radio. We have also had significant coverage of our reports and other outputs in print media in Northern Ireland and beyond.

We continue to use X/Twitter day-to-day to share our work, comments and ideas, and have also started to use LinkedIn.

### Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU)

We are grateful to QUB for providing Pivotal with an office and IT support from October 2023. Having our own office space again has been very beneficial to the team.

We hosted two QUB politics undergraduates for 12-week placements as part of their degrees.

We provided a number of lectures at QUB and UU on public policy in Northern Ireland, the work of think tanks, and how research can have an impact on policy.

We contributed again this year to the UU public policy challenge for economics undergraduates.

### Staff team

Pivotal currently has a staff team of two – Ann Watt (Director) and James Greer (Senior Researcher). We continue in our aim to grow the team to a bigger size, but this depends on raising additional income.

During the year we have used Research Associates to support us on particular projects. We are particularly grateful to Dr Donna Kernaghan (Stats & Stories) for her contribution to our projects with young people on reconciliation and deprivation. We also thank Ruth Walker for her work on the scoping project for Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

We hosted four unpaid research interns during the year: two interns during summer 2023 and two QUB placement students in spring 2024.

### Income generation

Increased stable income underpinned Pivotal's work this year, meaning that 2023-24 was the first year that the team had a sound financial platform on which to work. Pivotal's core costs were covered by three individual donors, giving the Board and staff more financial security and freedom to pursue the organisation's policy objectives. We are very grateful to these three donors for their investment and commitment to Pivotal.

We are grateful again to the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Fund for a grant award during the year, which is partly funding further research into barriers to greater integration in education and housing.

We were pleased to be commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation and by Learning and Work Institute to complete projects for them. As well as being useful policy projects, these also earned some additional income for Pivotal.

Securing sufficient funding for Pivotal remains a challenge. Our current funders have committed to support us for a 2-3 year period and we continue to seek additional income to secure Pivotal's future

beyond this period, to enable the organisation to grow and support good public policy decisions. We aim to have a range of different income sources, including private donors, business supporters, institutional supporters, charitable trusts, other grant-making organisations and commissioned research.

Our funders support Pivotal's independence as a policy think tank; accordingly they are not involved in our work day-to-day. This understanding is set out in a signed agreement with each of our funders (copy available on our website).

To date, as well as donations from individuals, Pivotal has received significant funding and support from a variety of other sources including:

- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – Reconciliation Fund
- Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
- Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- Belfast Harbour
- NICVA – Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO)
- Commissioned research projects (e.g. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Equality Commission)
- Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

We have benefited from reduced rates from Thought Collective (design agency) and Ryan Miller (media consultant). We are very grateful for their support and partnership in Pivotal's work.

### Future plans

The business plan for 2024-25 agreed by the Board includes the following work:

- Research on barriers to integration in education and housing;
- Follow-up research on a particular aspect of economic inactivity, possibly about employment of people with disabilities;
- New research project on how well policy commitments are delivered;
- Two shorter reports on how government is functioning in NI

We will continue to seek opportunities to provide evidence-based analysis and comment on current issues, for example responding to consultations and inquiries, media opportunities and social media.

### Thanks

Our sincere thanks to those who have funded Pivotal throughout this year, particularly our three main donors.

We are also grateful for all those individuals and organisations with whom we have worked in partnership and who have supported Pivotal in other ways:

- QUB for generous provision of office space and IT support;
- my fellow Trustees for giving their time and expertise to Pivotal. We were delighted to welcome two new Trustees during the year – Judith Gillespie and Sinéad McSweeney – who have already begun to make a strong contribution;

- On behalf of the Board and staff team, particular thanks to Peter Sheridan, Pivotal's first Chair, who stepped down in November 2023. Peter's wisdom and support helped guide Pivotal through some challenging times in the organisation's early years. We remain grateful for Peter's generous contribution of his time, insights and connections.

My final thanks are to Ann Watt (Director) and James Greer (Senior Researcher), who have once again brought expertise, energy and dedication to everything they have done for Pivotal throughout the year.

As a Board, we are glad that this year we have had a stronger financial footing, which in turn has been evidenced in the substantial increase in the range of work the team have delivered and the positive impact this is making in the public policy arena.

**David Gavaghan – Chair**

**17 June 2024**