



The Public Policy Forum N.I. Limited - Pivotal Annual Report for year ending 31 March 2021

Company No: NI656627

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As Pivotal has still not been called forward for registration by the Charity Commission NI, there is no legal requirement to submit an Annual Report. We have however provided this report as a matter of good governance practice.

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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.

Our vision

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

Our 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. But politicians' focus here tends to be on addressing short-term issues, rather than 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 often 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.

Policy context

The Northern Ireland Executive continues to operate in a very challenging context. It was re-established in January 2020 following almost three years without government. During 2020-21, the Executive's primary focus has been dealing with the impact of Covid-19 on the health service and on the economy. At the same time, Brexit created new economic challenges and opportunities, but addressing these properly was often hampered by political disputes.

The Executive continues to face recurring disagreements and threats to its stability, and indeed its continued existence. Meanwhile, the social and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland are stark: by far the longest health waiting lists in the UK; inequality in educational outcomes depending on social background; low productivity and innovation; high levels of poverty; and an absence of legislation or targets on climate change. There is an urgent and broad need for improved policy decision-making in all of these areas.

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The New Decade, New Approach deal which brought back the Executive was very welcome. It has an impressive focus on social and economic issues, and contains numerous commitments to investment and reform in health, education, infrastructure and criminal justice. The Executive has made some important progress towards these commitments in the 18 months since its return, but there is a long way to go. With an Assembly election due in May 2022 (or earlier), there needs to be a focus on decision-making that prioritises these longer term social and economic problems.

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

Our 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 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

- Peter Sheridan (Chair) – Chief Executive, Cooperation Ireland
- Lisa Faulkner Byrne – Project Co-ordinator, EPIC
- Richard Good – Director, Turnaround and public policy consultant
- Olwen Lyner – Chief Executive, NIACRO
- Seamus McAleavey – Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Associations
- Alan Whyall – 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. We have been pleased to welcome a number of new members to the Group this year. Current members are:

Tim Attwood, Jessica Caldwell, Eamonn Donaghy, Roisin Brown, Marianne Elliott, Richard English, David Gavaghan, Neil Gibson, Simon Hamilton, Cathy Gormley Heenan, Leo Green, Eva Grosman, Will Haire, Robert Hazell, John Hunter, John McCallister, Fergal McFerran, Angela McGowan, Ann McGregor, Brigid McManus, David Phinnemore, Trevor Ringland, Suneil Sharma, Suzanne Wylie.

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. Most recently, Ann was the Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland for five years.

Dr Ben Harper joined Pivotal at the start of May 2020 as Research Manager. Ben has a Doctorate in psychology and has worked in research, teaching and leadership roles for ten years in local government, the health service and academia.

Dr Jayne Finlay joined Pivotal in March 2021 as Research and Engagement Officer. Jayne has a PhD in the area of prison education and has previously worked in education research roles in the UNESCO Centre Ulster University.

Clare McAuley joined Pivotal as Senior Administrator in October 2019. Clare is an experienced senior manager with 12 years' experience in the public and voluntary sector.

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 2020-21

I am pleased to provide this Annual Report about Pivotal for the year 2020-21. During the year, Pivotal continued to establish itself as a new independent voice on public policy in Northern Ireland. As set out below, we produced a range of published reports, podcasts, discussions and blogs, all aimed at informing and enhancing public policy debate in Northern Ireland. We were pleased to have the opportunity to engage others in policy discussion through media, social media and online events. We grew the team from two to four staff, and significantly increased our outputs as a result. Like other organisations, our activities were hugely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the team and Board adjusted well to remote working to pursue the organisation's objectives despite the restrictions.

Research and policy publications

During the year Pivotal produced the following reports:

- [Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - moving out of lockdown](#) (May 2020) explores international evidence about how other countries are relaxing Covid lockdown measures, and makes recommendations for Northern Ireland.
- [Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - a new economic vision](#) (June 2020) looks at the impact of Covid on the Northern Ireland economy, and urges the Executive to pursue an ambitious economic plan that addresses both immediate and longer term economic challenges.
- [Priorities for recovery - a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess](#) (September 2020) explores the policy priorities for the Executive as it comes back from summer recess.
- [Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years old](#) (December 2020) looks at education and training options for young people
- [New Decade, New Approach - one year on](#) (January 2021) reviews the first year since the Executive's return and sets out the priorities ahead
- [Imagine Change - youth perspectives on government in Northern Ireland](#) (February 2021) – in collaboration with TedX DerryLondonderry, this report looks at young people's vision for the future
- [Mental health matters](#) (February 2021) – research and report written in collaboration with Secondary Students' Union Northern Ireland.
- [Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland](#) (March 2021) looks at educational migration from Northern Ireland and urges the Executive to develop a strategy to retain more of this talent.

Events and discussions

Unfortunately Covid-19 restrictions removed the possibility of hosting in-person policy discussion events during this year. However, we changed our approach to use virtual engagement and were able to provide the following [podcast discussions](#):

- Covid-19 and challenges facing health and social care – two podcasts with Ulster University

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- Economic impact of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland – podcast with QUB and UU
- Leadership during Covid-19 – podcast with QUB
- Covid-19 and education – podcast with QUB
- Priorities for recovery – podcast discussion on the NI Executive’s priorities on its return from recess

We were pleased to release a series of [short videos](#) to mark Pivotal’s first birthday in September 2020.

Blogs

As well as full reports, we have published shorter [blog articles](#) on our website throughout the year, including:

- Analysis of the NI Executive’s Budget for 2020-21
- Covid-19 in Northern Ireland – a new economic vision
- Covid 19 - what next for testing and tracing in Northern Ireland?
- Challenges facing school re-opening
- How can we promote inclusive learning in education?
- Job retention schemes in Europe and the UK
- Post-primary transfer tests – full steam ahead?
- Addressing disruption to learning and exams in Northern Ireland
- Youth participation in policy making
- RHI report – one year on

Research

Following the appointment of Dr Ben Harper as Research Manager in May 2020, we were able to significantly increase our research capacity. Ben’s appointment meant a big increase in our ability to produce high quality outputs on a range of issues (eg see list of reports above) and also to develop our research methods and approach. We have now started collecting original data for our projects on *Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years*, *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland* and *Vision 2040*. This new, current data for Northern Ireland will greatly enhance the quality of our policy ideas.

We were delighted to welcome Dr Jayne Finlay to Pivotal in March 2021. Jayne will be contributing to all our research projects, as well as working in partnership with QUB as part of the new UCL-led [International Public Policy Observatory \(IPPO\)](#) which finds and disseminates good practice evidence for addressing the impacts of Covid-19.

Media and social media

We have been pleased to be invited to contribute policy analysis and ideas to many radio and TV interviews and discussions. Each of our reports has received encouraging coverage from local media,

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with many different interviews throughout the year on BBC Radio Ulster, BBC NI Newline, Q Radio and U105, as well as contributions to BBC Radio 4 and the World Service. We have also had significant coverage in print media.

We have continued to build up our content and followers on social media through Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.

Evidence for NI Executive and NI Assembly

We have provided evidence on a number of topics to the NI Executive and NI Assembly, either by invitation or in response to consultations, for example:

- Evidence to Assembly Committee for Finance on the Executive's draft Budget for 2021-22
- Consultation response on the draft Programme for Government outcomes framework
- Contribution to Assembly Economy Committee's micro inquiries on Covid-19 recovery and on skills

Partnership with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

Our academic partnership with Queen's University and Ulster University has been of great benefit this year. We are grateful for the financial support the two universities give Pivotal through funding the Senior Administrator post and providing pro bono office space. We have also enjoyed opportunities to work together with academics on a range of topics for the podcast discussions listed above. We are delighted to be partnering with QUB to form the Northern Ireland team for the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO).

Organisational development

Pivotal has grown in both size and impact during this year. In May 2020 we were able to recruit Dr Ben Harper as Research Manager, and in March 2021 Dr Jayne Finlay joined us as Research and Engagement Officer. Both have made important contributions in increasing Pivotal's capacity and output, particularly developing our research approach, research projects and comms outputs.

We have been able to start offering placements and internships at Pivotal, which we hope give students a useful experience of working in a public policy think tank. At different times during 2020-21 we have enjoyed hosting seven students and it has been good to hear how they have appreciated and benefited from their time with us. We look forward to building on this through offering more internships in the future.

Throughout the year the staff team has been working from home and the Board has been meeting virtually. This has been challenging in many ways, not least the reduced time together as a team with fewer opportunities for joint working and learning. However, there have also been efficiency benefits for the team like reduced travel time and easier management of work and family responsibilities.

I am sorry that we will be losing Clare McAuley, our Senior Administrator, at the end of July, as we have come to the end of the two-year period for which QUB/UU funded this post. Having joined us just after our launch, Clare has been central to establishing Pivotal's governance and operations, taking on a range of role from finance and HR to office management and IT. We will miss Clare and we wish her all the very best for her new role at QUB.

Funding

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Pivotal aims to have a range of different funders, for example private donors, business supporters, charitable trusts, other grant-making organisations and commissioned research. With all our funders we are clear about Pivotal's independence as a policy think tank. Funders do not determine the content, findings or timing of our research or policy outputs.

In our start-up phase, Pivotal received funding and support from:

- 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

We were pleased during 2020-21 to secure further funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund, and from a private business donor. We continue to actively seek additional funding from a range of potential supporters.

During this year we continued to greatly value our academic partnership with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. The two universities agreed to provide in-kind support for two years (office space, IT, administrator salary), together with access to their academic staff and a commitment to joint research and events.

We also benefited from much-reduced rates from Thought Collective (report design) and Ryan Miller (media consultant).

Future plans

We look forward with excitement to what lies ahead for Pivotal in the coming year. The research team are currently busy gathering new current data on *Education, skills and training for 14-19s* and on *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland*, with reports featuring research conclusions and policy ideas due in autumn 2021. We are beginning our Vision 2040 project looking at aims and aspirations for the future here. We will continue to build on our previous work providing analysis and recommendations on improving how government works in Northern Ireland. In addition, we are pleased to be starting a number of new commissioned research projects for external organisations.

We have recently held a useful Board strategy session where we reviewed what Pivotal has done so far and discussed our future direction. The key challenge underpinning all of this ambition is ensuring a stable and sustainable funding base for the organisation.

Thanks

We are very grateful to those organisations and individuals who have supported Pivotal financially. As an independent think tank without any alignment to governments or politics, we are operating in a very challenging funding environment. We greatly value those who have shared our vision and supported us financially.

I am grateful to all my fellow Trustees for voluntarily giving their time to support Pivotal in its initial years. We also greatly value the advice and guidance provided by the Reference Group.

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Finally, I want to thank the staff team at Pivotal for their hard work and commitment throughout the year. It is a challenging task to establish a new organisation of this nature and there have been numerous hurdles along the way. This year has brought additional difficulties with the impact of Covid-19, which for several of the staff meant juggling working at home with overseeing home learning and childcare. Despite all this, they have remained focussed on the aim of making a positive contribution to improving public policy here, and I commend them for that. Their work rate, dedication and expertise are central to all of Pivotal's success.

Peter Sheridan - Chair

21 June 2021