

## Stormont will not work without a change in culture

05 March 2020

*A new report on good government in Northern Ireland from think tank Pivotal says Stormont will have to be more open and cooperative to have a chance of fixing public services.*

Past governments at Stormont lacked a common purpose, avoided difficult choices, and did not plan properly for the long-term. It will take a change in culture to turn this around, according to a report from the think tank Pivotal.

Politicians from different parties need to commit to working together for the long-term good of local people – representing a shift in course from what has happened in the past.

Stormont has suffered from major problems including a divided Executive with departments working in silos, inadequate scrutiny from the Assembly, and too many decisions taken behind closed doors.

The result has been serious problems with public services, doubts about the competence of some officials, and allegations of scandalous behaviour by ministers, Special Advisors and others.

Pivotal's new report says real change is possible, although it will require some effort. The *New Decade, New Approach* deal is a good starting point but does not go far enough.

*Good Government in Northern Ireland*, released today, identified ten specific features of good government as well as ways that Stormont could work to fulfilling each of those.

They include:

- **Making tough choices** – the Executive must collectively tackle challenging problems, such as reform of health and social care, where difficult decisions have been dodged for years before the current crisis was reached.
- **Long-term planning** – Stormont has lacked a true vision of what public services should look like five, 10 or 20 years in the future. Recurring issues like the poor economy cannot be solved by short-termism.
- **Engagement with those outside government** – major decisions are routinely made behind closed doors. Even *New Decade, New Approach* – which Pivotal's report welcomes – was the result of behind the scenes deal making. Politicians and civil servants cannot monopolise policy. Outside involvement should be the norm.

---

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “The Executive is back, and New Decade, New Approach sets out ambitious plans to improve health and social care, invest in infrastructure, tackle climate change, and address inequalities in education.**

**“All of this is welcome, but making sure it happens will require a change in culture at Stormont. Previous governments too often failed to deliver on commitments. That cannot continue to happen, especially given the current state of health, education, the economy and more.**

**“To put us on track for the future, politicians need to plan for the long-term, stop avoiding the tough choices, and have a relentless focus on improving the public services that impact directly on people’s lives.”**

Pivotal’s report says that creating a positive, future-focused government is possible. A culture change can happen. The ten features of good government can be achieved. However, the mistakes of the past must be avoided.

The paper identified three themes that capture many of Stormont’s problems over the past two decades.

It highlights a lack of collective **purpose and vision** from government and, in particular, the Executive, where politicians come from a number of parties and have struggled to work together in the public interest.

It raises doubts about **competence** in policy development and implementation, questioning whether civil servants are always equipped to perform their duties and whether the Assembly’s role in providing scrutiny is fulfilled.

It notes that **good standards** of ethics are either not encouraged by existing rules or, where they are, that breaches have few consequences.

The report suggests all these issues are fixable, and discusses ways this could be done – but ultimately argues that, without a culture change, little progress will be made.

ENDS

## Notes for Editors

For more information contact Ryan Miller – 07789 552 340 – [ryanmiller@nick-garbutt.com](mailto:ryanmiller@nick-garbutt.com)

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland.
2. Pivotal's first report *Moving Forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future* was published in November 2019.
3. 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; Olwen Lyner, Chief Executive, NIACRO; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London.
4. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
5. 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.
6. 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
7. For further information about Pivotal see [pivotalppf.org](http://pivotalppf.org) or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
8. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf .