

Northern Ireland needs urgent policy change

16 December 2019

With another election over, now is the time for politicians to turn their attention to a crumbling health service, struggling economy and inequalities in education.

The Westminster election is over, the new government plans to finalise Brexit, and talks are set to resume this morning at Stormont. Now is the time to front up to the many policy challenges we face, according to the head of a new think tank focused on Northern Ireland.

While politics has lacked stability in recent months and years, unfortunately the social and economic problems people here face on a daily basis have become increasingly clear.

Many of these issues were laid out by Northern Ireland's new think tank, Pivotal, in its first report last month, *Moving forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future*.

The health service is crumbling, the economy is unbalanced, the education system produces serious inequalities while schools struggle to balance their books, poverty remains a major issue, Northern Ireland has done little to join the fight against climate change, and difficult community relations continue to cut across all other issues.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "Northern Ireland faces significant challenges in a number of different areas. These need to be addressed urgently by whoever is in a position to make decisions.

"The day-to-day problems faced by local people are the same whether or not an Executive is in place, and many of these issues are growing over time. But real change is possible, and with the right decisions we can work together towards a better Northern Ireland."

Local issues:

- Waiting times for planned care have shot upwards. The number of people waiting more than a year is far higher than other parts of the UK. In England, 1,154 have been waiting more than a year. In Wales, that number is 4,176. In Northern Ireland it is 120,201.

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- Our education system does not do enough to tackle inequality. Recent figures show 52% of children eligible for free school meals got five good GCSEs, compared with 80% of better-off pupils who achieved the same level.
- Northern Ireland has the highest percentage of low-paying jobs of all UK regions and is one of only three regions that has fewer high-paying jobs than low-paying ones.
- The UK's carbon emissions have fallen by 39% since 1990 – but have only fallen by 16% in Northern Ireland.

Time for change

Ms Watt continued: "The health service requires major structural reform, and while this will mean tough decisions it is necessary, otherwise the strain on the system will grow, and people will bear the cost of that through waiting times that only get longer.

"Finding solutions to the imbalances and areas of poor performance in our economy, and to the significant inequalities in the education system, should both be major priorities. If that can be achieved, it should help ease poverty in the long-term, albeit more immediate help and support for the most vulnerable is also vital.

"Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK in reducing carbon emissions and tackling climate change. We also need a vision of how we, as a society, address the deep divisions that remain between communities.

"These issues have to be tackled by government, and it is much better if decisions are taken by a government made up of parties from Northern Ireland.

"Creating a better future won't be easy, but it is possible and now is the time to get started."

Moving forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future was published in November. Pivotal is Northern Ireland's only independent policy think tank. Its next major report will focus on the need for good government in Northern Ireland while, early next year, the think tank will launch Vision 2040, its long-term project examining how we can work towards the best possible future for all of Northern Ireland over the next two decades.

Notes for Editors

1. 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.
2. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
3. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery.
4. 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
5. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
6. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf .

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PRESS RELEASE

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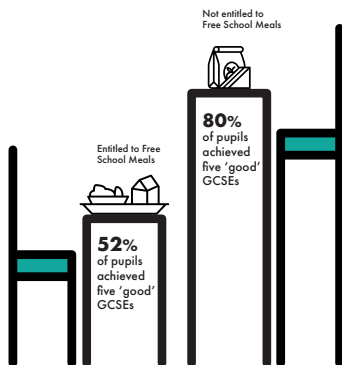
Health

Local waiting lists continue to grow – despite our small population, far more people have very long waits for treatment than in other parts of the UK. The number of people in Northern Ireland waiting more than a year for planned care is enormous compared with England and Wales.



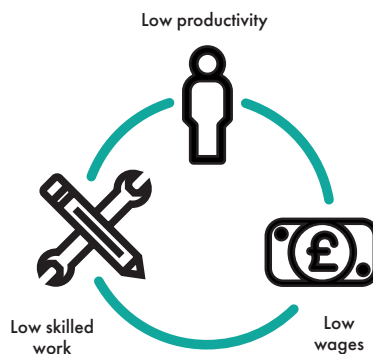
Education

NI schools' system has elements of excellence, but also significant inequality.



Economy

NI has highest percentage of low-paying jobs of all UK regions.



Climate change

NI has barely started on the UK's commitment to a 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050.

