**The Public Policy Forum N.I. Limited - Pivotal**

**Annual Report for year ending 31 March 2022**

**Company No: NI656627**

**Northern Ireland Charity No: 108659**

**Registered Office Address: 15 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast, BT15 2GB**

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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. But the focus of the political system here often tends not to be 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.

**Policy context**

The social and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland at present 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 a lack of past focus on climate change. There is an urgent and broad need for improved policy decision-making in all of these areas.

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. Almost immediately the Executive faced dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, with huge implications for the health service and the economy particularly. At the same time, Brexit created new economic challenges and opportunities, but addressing these properly was often hampered by political disputes about the Northern Ireland Protocol.

During 2021-22 the Executive continued to face recurring disagreements and threats to its stability, culminating in the DUP First Minister’s resignation in February 2022. Without an Executive, Ministers and the Assembly stayed in place until the end of the Assembly term ahead of the planned election on 5 May 2022. At the end of March 2022, the likelihood of an early establishment of a new Executive after the election seemed low, given political positions on the Protocol in particular.

Nevertheless, some good progress by the Executive was made on policy issues during 2021-22. Commitments in New Decade, New Approach were taken forward, for example on mental health, educational underachievement, skills and climate change. A long-awaited apology was given to victims of historical institutional abuse. There was encouraging cross-party working in the Assembly on private member’s bills, for example on integrated education, autism and period poverty.

**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.
6. **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.

1. **Governance and staff**

[**Pivotal's Board**](https://www.pivotalppf.org/about-us/our-people/trustees)

* 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 (until May 2022)
* Seamus McAleavey – Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Associations
* Alan Whysall – Honorary Senior Research Associate, University College London

[**Pivotal's Reference Group**](https://www.pivotalppf.org/about-us/our-people/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, Roisin Brown, Marianne Elliott, David Gavaghan, Simon Hamilton, Leo Green, Eva Grosman, Will Haire, Robert Hazell, John Hunter, Fiona Kane, John McCallister, Fergal McFerran, Angela McGowan, Ann McGregor, Brigid McManus, David Phinnemore, Trevor Ringland.

[**Pivotal's staff**](https://www.pivotalppf.org/about-us/our-people/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. Jayne left Pivotal in September 2021.

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. Clare left Pivotal in August 2021 when the funding for this post from QUB/UU came to an end.

Pivotal also uses research associates, research assistants and interns to contribute to particular projects.

1. **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
1. **Chair’s report for 2021-22**

As Chair of Pivotal, I am pleased to provide my report for 2021-22. Once again it has been a challenging year, both for Northern Ireland politically and for Pivotal as an organisation. Our aim remains that Pivotal will be an independent, evidence-based and future-focussed voice that makes a positive contribution to policy-making here. We continue to develop the organisation and its work to that end.

We were pleased this year to publish a number of influential reports, including our first projects involving collecting new current data (see below). As well as these reports, Pivotal also contributed across a wide range of other areas, including podcasts, events, Committee evidence, consultation responses, media appearances and social media.

Research and policy publications

During 2021-22 Pivotal produced the following reports:

* [Pivotal tracker - policy priorities for the Northern Ireland Executive](https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Sept21_Report_Art.pdf) (September 2021) looked at the Executive’s performance in 2021 so far and set out policy priorities for the future.
* [Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions](https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/14-19-final.pdf) (September 2021) – this report used new evidence from young people, parents, employers and careers teachers to make the case for a modernisation of curriculum and careers advice in schools.
* [Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work](https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Stay-or-go-final.pdf) (December 2021) provided new evidence on why young people choose to leave Northern Ireland and not return.
* [Post-election policy priorities for Northern Ireland](https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Post-Election-Priorities-March-2022.pdf) (March 2022) looked at the biggest issues facing Northern Ireland as we approach the Assembly election on 5 May.

In particular, I would highlight the reports above on 14-19s education and training and on reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work. Both of these involved new primary research with young people and other stakeholders. This is the first time that Pivotal has gathered new data and I am pleased with how we have added to the evidence base in Northern Ireland on both of these important issues with a total of over 600 young people contributing to the research through surveys, focus groups and interviews. In particular, the report on educational migration reached some hard-hitting conclusions about why so many young people leave Northern Ireland and don’t return, namely continued community divisions and what they identify as dysfunctional government. This report generated considerable discussion in the media and generation a wide range of opportunities to speak about the research findings.

Events and discussions

Covid-19 restrictions and limited staff time removed the possibility of hosting in-person discussion events during most of the year. In the run-up to the May 2022 Assembly election, we published [nine policy podcasts](https://www.pivotalppf.org/our-work/podcasts) with experts on topics like the cost of living crisis, challenges in the health service, climate change, education, productivity and mental health and young people.

We were also pleased to contribute to events and podcasts hosted by other organisations throughout the year.

Research

Our research during the year was focussed in three main areas:

* Educational migration from Northern Ireland
* Education, training and skills for young people aged 14-19
* Improving how government works in Northern Ireland

Dr Ben Harper (Research Manager) has continued to do an excellent job heading up our research team. We were pleased to have Dr Jayne Finlay (Research Officer) join us for part of 2021-22. During the year we also benefited from research assistance provided by short-term unpaid interns and placement students.

Media and social media

Throughout the year we have been pleased to have opportunities to contribute to local radio and TV news programmes, including BBC Radio Ulster, BBC Newsline, U105, UTV and Q Radio. We have also had significant coverage of our reports in print media in Northern Ireland and beyond.

We continue to use social media regularly (mainly Twitter) to share our work, involve people in our research and provide comment on policy issues.

Evidence for NI Executive, NI Assembly and NI Affairs Committee

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

* NI Assembly Finance Committee – oral and written evidence on public sector reform
* NI Assembly Education Committee – oral evidence on education and training for 14-19 year olds and on educational migration
* NI Assembly Economy Committee – discussion on Covid recovery and high street voucher scheme
* Infrastructure Minister – briefing meeting on Pivotal’s work
* Economy Minister – briefing meeting on Pivotal’s work
* TEO Junior Ministers – briefing meeting on Pivotal’s work
* Independent Review of Education - briefing paper and meeting
* Fiscal Commission Northern Ireland – consultation response to interim report
* Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - oral and written evidence for inquiry into investment in Northern Ireland

Partnership with Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University

We are pleased to partner with Professor Muiris MacCarthaigh at QUB to form the Northern Ireland team for the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO). This year, this included organising an event on gender-based Covid recovery and hosting a session on mental health at the ‘Two years on’ IPPO flagship event.

We have been pleased to host placements students from the two universities during the year.

We contributed again this year to the UU undergraduate public policy challenge and to the Master Your Leadership programme at QUB.

Commissioned research projects

During 2021-22, Pivotal has been pleased to be commissioned by other organisations to complete research projects on public policy topics of relevance in Northern Ireland. These projects were:

* ‘Empowering Belfast’ report for Belfast Chamber of Commerce – short report reviewing the economic powers available to councils in Northern Ireland and assessing whether further devolution of decision-making would be beneficial.
* Strategic assessment for Linen Quarter Business Improvement District (BID) – report providing data on a proposed expanded BID area and assessing the area’s challenges and opportunities.
* Literature review on academic selection at age 11 for Independent Review of Education – report summarising the policy framework of academic selection in Northern Ireland and reviewing the literature on the impacts of selection.
* Impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland for Equality Commission (project started in March 2022 and will finish in November 2022) – research report, including new qualitative research, on how Brexit has affected the lives of minority ethnic and migrant people here.

It has been good to see other organisations recognising the quality of Pivotal’s research and we look forward to delivering future research projects on a commissioned basis.

Organisational development

At the end 2021-22, Pivotal had a staff team of two – Ann Watt as Director and Dr Ben Harper as Research Manager. While we very much want to grow the size of the team, this is dependent on generating increased income.

During 2021-22 we said goodbye to Clare McAuley (Senior Administrator) who moved on to another role after the two-year QUB/UU funding for her post finished. We are grateful to Clare for all she did to establish Pivotal’s governance, administration, systems and policies. We are also grateful to Dr Jayne Finlay (Research Officer) who was with us for a short period, but left in September 2021 to pursue her particular area of academic interest.

We have been pleased to offer placements and internships at Pivotal throughout the year, which we hope give students a useful experience of working in public policy think tank. In particular, we ran our first volunteer summer intern programme, where we welcomed six interns for a ten-week programme of training in research methods alongside practical experience. We are grateful for their contribution and hope that it was of benefit for their future careers.

We ran a recruitment process for Research Associates, who would provide research support for Pivotal’s projects on a ‘daily rate’ basis. We hope to use these Associates to supplement our research capacity.

Throughout the year the staff team continued to work from home and the Board has been meeting virtually. This has been challenging in some ways, for example 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 less commuting time and easier management of work and family responsibilities.

I am pleased that during the year Pivotal’s long-awaited application for charitable status was approved by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (NI Charity no. 108659).

Income generation

Pivotal aims to have a range of different income sources, 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.

So far, as well as donations from individuals, Pivotal has 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
* International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO)

We were pleased during 2021-22 to secure further funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Reconciliation Fund. We continue to actively seek additional funding from a range of potential supporters.

During 2021-22 Pivotal earned its first income from completing research projects commissioned by other organisations.

We are grateful to Queen’s University Belfast for continuing to support Pivotal this year through providing IT equipment and support, and for the offer of office accommodation.

We have benefited from much-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

We look forward to continuing to build Pivotal’s contribution to public policy in Northern Ireland. Projects for 2022-23 include completing a commissioned project for the Equality Commission on the impacts of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people. In addition we have two new research topics funded from a DFA Reconciliation Fund grant: youth solutions for reconciliation; and youth solutions for cycles of disadvantage.

Pivotal will continue to provide independent assessment of the big policy challenges facing Northern Ireland and analysis of how government is working here. Together with others, such external voices may become more important if there is a prolonged period without an Assembly and Executive.

We remain committed to generating additional income that will enable Pivotal to grow, so that we are better resourced to make a useful and impactful contribution across a range of policy areas.

Thanks

The Trustees and staff team 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.

In particular I want to say special thanks to Olwen Lyner, who stepped down from Pivotal’s Board in May 2022 following her retirement as CEO of NIACRO. We thank Olwen for her contribution during Pivotal’s first few years and send her every best wish for the future.

Finally, my thanks to the staff team Ann Watt and Ben Harper for their hard work and commitment throughout the year. They have dealt impressively with a huge workload across a wide range of areas. Once again there have been many hurdles along the way, but they have remained committed to Pivotal’s vision and continued to produce high quality outputs against the odds. I look forward to continuing to work with them as Pivotal seeks to make a positive contribution to public policy in Northern Ireland.

**Peter Sheridan - Chair**

**13 June 2022**