

The Public Policy Forum N.I. Limited - Pivotal Annual Report for year ending 31 March 2023

Company No: NI656627

Northern Ireland Charity No: 108659

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

Contents

	Section	Page
1	Vision, mission, context and strategic priorities	3
2	Charitable purpose	5
3	Governance and staff	6
4	Values	7
5	Chair's report for 2022-23	8

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 political debate here is rarely 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 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 severe: by far the longest health waiting lists in the UK; low average skill levels; inequality in educational outcomes depending on social background; low productivity and innovation; persistent 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 and broad need for improved policy decision-making in all of these areas.

Since devolution in 1999, the Northern Ireland Executive has not been in place for more than 40% of the time, including over four of the last six years. There has been no Executive since February 2022 and no Assembly since the following month. An Assembly election was held on 5 May 2022, but again no Executive was established.

New legislation meant that caretaker ministers were in place until end October 2022, but without an Executive or Assembly. This allowed some decision-making and accountability during this period, although without any major decisions that would have required Executive approval.

From end October 2022, civil servants were Northern Ireland's only decision-makers, but with limited powers. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland stepped in to make some legislative changes, for example setting Budgets for 2022-23 and 2023-24 and extending civil service powers.

The absence of an Executive for the whole of 2022-23, and the absence of ministers for part of it, has meant very limited progress on policy issues. Caretaker ministers (and to a less extent civil servants) were able to take some decisions, as long as they were in line with previous policies, for example initiatives to reduce health waiting lists, a mental health strategy delivery plan, and funding for education programmes addressing disadvantage. However, without an Executive, no Programme for Government or Budget could be agreed.

Overall, the operation of government was severely limited during 2022-23. At best, the situation was one of short-term survival rather than longer term planning for improved public services. Pivotal assessed how well government was working here in several papers during the year (see below).

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

- Peter Sheridan (Chair) – Chief Executive, Cooperation Ireland
- Sarah Creighton – Housing Advisor and lawyer (from January 2023)
- Lisa Faulkner Byrne – Project Co-ordinator, EPIC (until November 2022)
- Richard Good – Director, Turnaround
- Jarlath Kearney – Strategy Advisor and media contributor (from January 2023)
- Olwen Lyner – Chief Executive, NIACRO (until May 2022)
- Seamus McAleavey – retired Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- Andrew McCormick – retired Northern Ireland Civil Service Permanent Secretary (from January 2023)
- Rosalind Skillen – climate activist and columnist (from November 2022)
- 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, Roisin Brown, 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, Ann McGregor, 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 Ben Harper was Pivotal's Research Manager from May 2020 until August 2022. 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 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 about 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 2022-23

I am pleased to provide Pivotal's annual report for 2022-23. This was another year without proper government in Northern Ireland. Partly because of this, it was also another challenging year for Pivotal. Nevertheless I am pleased with how the organisation has continued to develop a reputation and track record as a valued independent public policy voice in Northern Ireland.

The absence of an Executive and Assembly throughout 2022-23 has led to a lack of progress on policy issues across the board, with caretaker ministers and then civil servants only able to take decisions in line with previous policies. Existing problems across multiple public services worsened and new issues emerged. The absence of a proper Budget for much of the year added to these difficulties. For Pivotal this has meant fewer opportunities to influence decision-making, but at the same time it has created chances to provide independent analysis of the impact of the absence of proper government.

Pivotal's main outputs during the year were: three reports on government in Northern Ireland; a substantial commissioned research report for the Equality Commission; and good progress on a new research project with young people about what would make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and study. We have also made numerous contributions about policy issues on local media and provided regular comment and analysis on Twitter.

It has remained challenging to secure the income needed to ensure Pivotal's financial sustainability. I am pleased to report a significant step forward this year, with three individual funders together committing to cover the organisation's minimum core costs (two staff) for the next 2-3 years. We continue to seek additional income from a range of funders to secure our longer term future and to enable the organisation to grow.

Research and policy publications

During 2022-23 Pivotal produced three reports about how government was working in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive and Assembly:

- [Governing Northern Ireland without an Executive](#) (September 2022)
- [Governing without Ministers – Northern Ireland after 28 October](#) (October 2022)
- [Who is governing Northern Ireland?](#) (February 2023)

Events and podcasts

In the run-up to the Assembly election in May 2022, Pivotal published a [policy priorities paper](#) and [nine policy 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 pleased to contribute to events and podcasts hosted by other organisations throughout the year, for example providing a presentation on our educational migration research at NIO's Wilton Park event on challenges facing young people in June 2022.

Research

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 examines the evidence about what has been achieved since 1998 in promoting reconciliation and address deprivation. It includes extensive consultation with over 300 young people through an online survey and a series of focus groups. The first report [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#) was published in May 2023. It will be followed by two further reports in June and September 2023. This project is funded from the DFA's Reconciliation Fund.
- **Impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland** (see [report](#)) – this was a commissioned research project for the Equality Commission. It involved a review of the existing published literature and data, plus new focus groups and interviews with people from these groups and organisations working with them.

Media and social media

Throughout the year we have been pleased to see an increase in the number and range of invitations we have received to participate on local radio and TV news programmes, including BBC Newsline, UTV News, UTV View from Stormont, BBC Radio Ulster, U105 and Q Radio. We have also had significant coverage of our reports and other outputs in print media in Northern Ireland and beyond, including on RTE News, Radio 4, BBC News Channel and in the Financial Times.

We continue to use Twitter to share our work. During the year we have increased the amount of comment on current issues that we provide on Twitter, for example on the absence of government, budgets and other policy issues.

Evidence submissions and consultation responses

We have provided submissions of evidence as below:

- Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - oral and written evidence for inquiry into the effectiveness of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement institutions in bringing about effective and stable government in Northern Ireland (see [written evidence](#))
- Department of Finance consultation on the devolution of increased fiscal powers (see [submission](#))

The absence of an Executive and Assembly has meant there have not been any opportunities to provide evidence to Stormont Committees during the year.

Partnerships with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

We are grateful to Queen's University and Ulster University for the generous pro bono support they provided to Pivotal during our first few years.

Until December 2022, we continued to partner with Professor Muiris MacCarthaigh at QUB as the Northern Ireland team for the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO). This included organising and running an evidence session on the impact of Covid on violence against women and girls, and leading a project to assess different models of Covid observatories.

We provided two half-day training sessions for Early Career Researchers at QUB and UU on how research can have an impact on policy.

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

Team development

We continue in our aim to grow the staff team from its current size (Director and one Researcher), but this depends on raising additional income.

In August 2022, we said goodbye to Dr Ben Harper who left Pivotal for a civil service role. We are very grateful to Ben for his contribution over the previous two years and we wish him well for his future career.

In February 2023, we were pleased to welcome Dr James Greer to Pivotal as Senior Researcher. James brings broad experience from his career so far in research and teaching at QUB.

During the year we have used Research Associates and a research assistant 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 Dr Clodagh Miskelly for her help with the project on the impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant groups for the Equality Commission.

Income generation

Pivotal aims to have a range of different income sources, including private donors, business supporters, charitable trusts, other grant-making organisations and commissioned research.

Although our income and expenditure were lower in 2022-23 than in previous years, we are delighted to have secured agreement from three individual donors to provide funding to cover our minimum core costs (two staff posts) for the next 2-3 years, beginning in April 2023. For the first time this gives Pivotal a stable platform from which to deliver our objectives, and to grow the organisation.

All our funders are clear about Pivotal's independence as a policy think tank. Funders are not involved in our work day-to-day. Our three current funders have each signed a legal agreement (which is available on our website) saying that they will not seek to influence the content, findings or timing of Pivotal's research outputs. The Board is clear that it is essential to maintain this separation between funders and Pivotal's work.

To date, 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)
- Commissioned research projects (e.g. Equality Commission)

We continue to actively seek additional funding from a range of potential supporters.

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

We have greatly benefited from ongoing work with 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 Board has agreed a business plan for 2023-24. In the early part of 2023-24 the team will be completing the research project with young people into how to make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and study (funded by DFA’s Reconciliation Fund). This will involve three research reports in May, June and September, including publishing new current evidence on young people’s views and ideas from a survey and focus groups.

We plan two new research projects during the coming year. The first will be about how to address Northern Ireland’s long-standing challenge of high economic inactivity. The second project will look at ways to ensure Northern Ireland has sufficient income to adequately fund public services here, including looking at possible ways to raise more revenue locally.

Pivotal will continue to provide independent assessment of the big policy challenges facing Northern Ireland and analysis of how government is working here.

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.

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.

My thanks to my fellow Trustees for giving their time and expertise to Pivotal. I am particularly grateful to Lisa Faulkner-Byrne and Olwen Lyner, who have now stepped down from the Board, for their contribution during Pivotal’s initial years. We were delighted to welcome four new Trustees during the year – Sarah Creighton, Jarlath Kearney, Andrew McCormick and Rosalind Skillen. Their insights, experience and connections have already enhanced our effectiveness as a Board.

Finally, my thanks to the staff team. We were sorry to lose Ben Harper during the year, but pleased to welcome James Greer a few months later. Particular thanks to Ann Watt who as Director provides vision and leadership to Pivotal across the board. The team covers an impressive amount of work over a wide range of issues; people are often surprised at how much Pivotal produces with such a small team. With our new stable funding base, a refreshed staff team and a renewed Board, we can already see a step-up in Pivotal's contribution. I look forward to seeing Pivotal develop further in the year ahead.

Peter Sheridan - Chair

12 June 2023