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## **Making policy delivery a priority in Northern Ireland**

*Policy implementation that falls short of expectations is a common occurrence in Northern Ireland. Executive Ministers and Senior Civil Servants may fail to show clear leadership and the NICS often lacks the right mix of skills. Concerns about risk and processes can overrule a focus on improving outcomes. The structure of government discourages collaboration, monitoring processes are burdensome, and front-line expertise is undervalued. Periods of unstable or absent government make it even more difficult to make progress. All are major contributors to why policy goals may not be achieved, according to a new report from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland.*

***Based on 30 long-form interviews with former ministers, Senior Civil Servants, Special Advisors and more, this new report shines a light on the many reasons why local policy delivery often fails to achieve its aims. These conversations showed the importance of this issue, offering valuable insights and suggesting ideas for positive change.***

Government is about making people's lives better. Both policy and public services should be dedicated to this aim. However, in Northern Ireland the delivery of this core function of government is often disappointing.

Strategies and policies are developed but are regularly either left on a shelf or not implemented properly – a cycle that then repeats itself when long-standing problems go unaddressed.

The transformation of the health service, construction of social and affordable housing, proper investment in wastewater infrastructure, economic plans to boost productivity and improve economic inactivity – these are only some examples of areas of public service and investment that have suffered from ineffectiveness, delay and the avoidance of tough decisions.

New research from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, shows there are many interconnected reasons for this. Published today [Thurs, 19 June], *Policy Delivery in Northern Ireland* finds that the ability to

improve outcomes and help people in their day-to-day lives is held back by structural, cultural and systemic hurdles across both Stormont and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

Based on 30 in-depth, semi-structured and anonymised research interviews with former Senior Civil Servants, former Ministers, former Special Advisers, Business representatives, Community and Voluntary Sector representatives, research organisations, and other public servants, the research found major shortcomings across several key themes: Leadership, Skills, Culture, Structures, Data and Targets, and Evaluation and Review. The seniority of the people Pivotal spoke to and the importance they placed on this issue emphasises the extent of the problems and the urgent need for improvement.

Pivotal's work suggests ways that many of these long-standing shortcomings could be addressed – allowing Northern Ireland to develop systems of public service and investment that provide a far greater benefit for local people, communities and organisations. In particular, it examined how a dedicated Delivery Unit – a Programme for Government (PfG) commitment – could help with this, if structured correctly.

Several core features of good delivery emerged from Pivotal's interviews. Strong leadership from both Ministers and Senior Civil Servants, quicker and clearer decision-making, basing policy on evidence not politics, using people with the right skills, a more proportionate approach to risk, and breaking down the silos that exist between government departments – all came up repeatedly.

**Ann Watt, the Director of Pivotal, said: “We set out to do this research with the aim of helping improve policy delivery here. What emerged from our long-form discussions with a variety of people with high-level experience was a clear set of themes that show why too many policies either fail to meet their objectives or never get off the ground in the first place. Changes in culture and structures are required at all levels for Northern Ireland to get the best-possible delivery from its public sector.**

**“There are lessons in this report for the whole of government across Northern Ireland – for the Executive, the Assembly and the civil service. Things are not working as they should be, for a great many reasons. This is not about individual blame, instead it shows the need to make changes in structures and in working culture.**

**“Executive Ministers need to provide clear leadership, strive for consensus despite their differences, and stop avoiding choices that are necessary but**

difficult or unpopular. They also have to learn to prioritise. Northern Ireland's current challenges cannot all be addressed at once.

**“The civil service needs to focus much more on achieving change rather than tick-box procedures. Accountability needs to work towards outcomes, the attitude towards risk needs to be clear-sighted and proportionate, and specialist skills need to be valued and encouraged.**

**“MLAs have to overhaul their approach to scrutiny. Current oversight is neither robust nor supportive. The Assembly and Committees need to work towards serving the public rather than party political aims. A step-up in MLAs' scrutiny role is needed, including training on the role of Assembly Questions and Committees.**

**“The Programme for Government commits to setting up a Delivery Unit to ensure the Executive's priorities move forward constructively. Given the nature of local power sharing, this will have to be structured very carefully, staffed by people with the right skills and experience, and will need the full support of all ministers and departmental Permanent Secretaries.**

**“Any such Delivery Unit will also need to take the same realistic and pragmatic approach to challenges that is required across government. Much like the Executive, it would need to choose some priorities and focus properly on those, rather than trying to do a little bit of everything and ultimately falling short on many fronts.**

**“Finally, we want to thank the 30 people who agreed to be interviewed for this research – for their time, their desire to be constructive and their candour. The eagerness people showed to not just speak to us but to speak so openly is a firm indication of the importance of these issues and how deeply they all want to see change.”**

Pivotal's report identified seven key themes where change is needed in order for local policy delivery to thrive:

### **Leadership**

One former Senior Civil Servant (Interviewee F) said that ministers want to improve outcomes but get **“pre-occupied by the day-to-day”** rather than focusing on long term goals. Ministers can fall victim to the speed of events, leaving little time to focus on previous commitments (Interviewee L).

Several participants pointed out that ministers can be more interested in making new announcements than ongoing, long-term projects. Similarly, when new

Ministers come into post they tend to want to put their own stamp on policy. Interviewee A called this, **“New minister, new strategy”** generating a repeated cycle of **“start all over again”** when roles change.

Clear ministerial leadership empowers the NICS and can **“unlock all the other things”** (Interviewee T). However, political disputes can be an impediment and chip away at the ambition to implement a policy. Furthermore, Northern Ireland’s ministers have a long history of avoiding difficult or unpopular decisions – such as health service transformation or Casement Park – resulting in **“policy paralysis”** (Interviewee R) or, at best, moving at **“a glacial pace”** (Interviewee L). Interviewee D said Project Stratum was quick and effective partly because **“there was no minister to get in the way”** of its management.

***“Other governments have much more urgency to get things done. In NI, time always slips.” (Interviewee T)***

Participants repeatedly said that the Assembly is poor at one of its core roles: scrutiny. Committee meetings and debates in the Chamber are about **“conflict and scapegoating”** rather than proper assessment of detail.

***“The Assembly wastes too much time on debates saying not much more than ‘good things are good, bad things are bad’.” (Interviewee Q)***

Leadership is not just down to politicians. The role of Senior Civil Servants is also crucial and, when they perform well, implementation tends to be better. However, they often work in an unstable political context and have to be **“a political priest, diplomat, firefighter”** in their support for ministers (Interviewee N).

Policies that don’t have proper attention or support from the senior levels of the civil service are more likely to fail. The welfare mitigations package was highlighted as an initiative that had this support and worked, in contrast to attempts at an economic inactivity strategy which lacked similar backing and so **“remained a document”** (Interviewee C).

External stakeholders – such as those in the private and third sectors – said that civil service hierarchies are sometimes given greater importance than the actual delivery of policy.

***“[The Civil Service is] a class system. People come into meetings and they talk about their grade. They’re not a person,” and the “NICS is very hierarchical and deferential to senior people. Certain grades don’t talk to each other.” (Interviewee V, a third sector representative)***

***“In the business world, people talk to you if they think they can help you, they don’t care who you are... they’re not always about the greater title.” (Interviewee I, from the private sector)***

Participants also said that Senior Civil Servants are too far removed from the realities of delivery and of the work involved in frontline services. At the same time, morale throughout the NICS was called into question, with Interviewee G saying, **“Many civil servants are fatigued and dejected.”**

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Ministers need to be clear about priorities and commit to resolving difficult decisions.
- Create a Delivery Champion in the NICS to promote and emphasise implementation.
- MLAS to take more responsibility for robust and constructive scrutiny in the Assembly and Committees.

### **Skills**

The commitment and talent of many civil servants was noted, but one common refrain in Pivotal’s interviews was that the civil service has too many generalists and not enough people with specialist skills. Shortfalls in commercial, digital, AI and data skills are particularly stark. People may be put into roles based on their grade rather than their skillset. The development of ‘professional skills’ that has happened in the GB civil service in recent years has not been mirrored in NI.

This lack of specific expertise in the civil service means specialist skills are often bought in from the private sector, with the amount of public funding being spent on **“creating middle class industries”** (Interviewee J) this way causing alarm amongst some interviewees.

***“Consultancies are making millions out of the NICS.” (Interviewee R)***

***“Consultants borrow your watch and tell you the time.” (Interviewee F)***

Several interviewees, particular those from the voluntary sector, said NICS staff could benefit from time working outside the civil service, with secondments raised as one possible path to improvement. Some participants from business backgrounds said that the private sector was willing to help, but that these offers had not been taken up.

There was criticism that civil servants move frequently from role to role within the NICS, leaving midway through projects and without developing deep or broad

knowledge of the policy area. At the same time, they lack the fuller breadth of insights and experience that could be gained from time outside the civil service.

Ultimately, being a generalist is rewarded with promotions and seniority while honing specific skills is undervalued.

***“There is no consistency and there is no continuity.” (Interviewee V)***

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Expand specialist professions within NICS, with training focusing on shortfalls (for example digital, AI, data, commercial).
- Structured programme of secondments in and out of NICS and building of peer network between the public, private and voluntary sectors.
- Recognise officials for specialising rather than continually promoting generalists.

## **Culture**

Civil servants are broadly committed and enthusiastic. However, they are held back by systemic burdens like disproportionate risk aversion and resistance to innovation or change. While delivery is a priority in principle, it doesn't always translate into practice. Too often, things move at a glacial pace.

Civil servants often make decisions based on a fear of being criticised in a NI Audit Office report or a Public Accounts Committee hearing, or being the subject of a Judicial Review or critical media report – with this caution apparently getting worse since RHI.

Difficult or controversial decisions are often avoided, with further time-consuming work on options being commissioned instead, sometimes from external consultants.

***“You can't de-risk to zero.” (Interviewee R)***

***“It shouldn't take years to get an innocuous policy delivered.”  
(Interviewee N)***

Participants expressed shock at the lack of focus on outcomes. Often little attention is given to whether a programme's aims are achieved, with a higher priority placed on making sure processes are done properly.

***“The concern of the system was as much finding their people something to do as it was having them doing something productive.”  
(Interviewee J)***

Innovation and change were not seen to be encouraged in the NICS, meaning that opportunities to improve or respond to changing circumstances were missed.

***“The status quo prevails in terms of what people do and working practices.” (Interviewee A)***

***“Every day a business will ask ‘How do I make my business better - quicker, stronger, better?’ There is very little of this in NICS.” (Interviewee N)***

Civil servants are very good at analysing problems, but much less good at coming up with solutions. The understanding of how policy is delivered in practice is undervalued with experts not sought at the policy design stage, effectively rendering their work **“conceptual” (Interviewee Z)**.

***“NICS is delivering policy without real understanding of people, place and problems.” (Interviewee Z)***

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Enhanced guidance to develop more proportionate approach to risk.
- Explore how other places encourage and support innovation.
- Properly involve service users and frontline workers in policy design.

## **Structures**

Northern Ireland Departments operate separately rather than as one government, making cross-cutting policy delivery very difficult. There is a lack of a strong centre of government to coordinate, control and lead, both at ministerial and civil service level.

The silo working of departments is exacerbated by political structures that leave officials responsible to their own minister alone, rather than the Executive as a whole – which is then exacerbated once more by the system of mandatory coalition, involving ministers who might have very different visions about a policy issue. Some interviewees even raised concerns that cross-cutting work not only lacked support but was discouraged.

***“They’re not one government, they’re a series of departments.” (Interviewee N)***

Impressive examples of breaking down silos exist but often rely on individuals taking the initiative to reach out and build relationships across sectors. Good

examples, like the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, are often driven from the ground up, with providers of frontline services building connections between different delivery bodies rather than government departments themselves removing barriers.

Ministerial roles have no hierarchy, despite the titles, and the First and deputy First Minister have no authority over other ministers. Instead, departments operate separately and government exists without formal leadership, central control and, as a result, without clear direction or unity.

***“If the UK Prime Minister really wants something, they can use their authority over the Secretary of State. The power base is more diffuse here.” (Interviewee F)***

This is mirrored in the NICS, where the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) has no formal authority over departmental Permanent Secretaries, who instead are accountable to their minister and the Assembly only, as well as the Department of Finance for the spending of public money.

At the same time, there can be a lack of trust between departments and their agencies. Departments’ use of Arms’ Length Bodies (ALBs) mean they can remain a step removed from delivery, which creates a target for blame when things go wrong. Several participants noted that ALBs don’t get the financial, resource, or strategic support they need, which can have a dire impact on delivery.

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Implement New Decade, New Approach commitment to have NICS working for Executive as a whole as well as their departmental minister, with Permanent Secretaries answering to the HOCS for the delivery of expenditure.
- Make HOCS the Senior Responsible Officer for the whole PfG.
- Establish a Delivery Committee to provide cross-cutting scrutiny.

### **Data and targets**

Good use of data is essential for policy delivery but, while it collects lots of data, the NICS often fails to use it well and instead allows it to create burdensome processes. Sometimes data is collected without a specific purpose in mind, which only serves to complicate work and slow down governance.



There have been occasions where data collection and analysis has worked, such as with the plastic bag levy, but these are exceptions. Lengthy processes can also impact data quality. If collecting information takes so long that the information itself is old, this reduces effective delivery.

***“All the data we have is so out of date that it becomes almost irrelevant.” (Interviewee N)***

Often departments collect and hoard their own data, opening up the possibility of work duplication across the civil service. While there have been positive examples of data sharing in the past – such as with the THRiVE programme and Complex Lives partnership – overall it is too siloed, which will not be broken down without leadership.

The use of targets was praised for helping to clarify goals and provide accountability. Clear targets with good data mean that progress can be measured over time, enabling reporting and scrutiny, and effective targets will provide a solid measure of outcomes.

***“Targets are effective. They concentrate minds.” (Interviewee Q)***

However, poorly-designed targets can backfire, cause distractions or even force civil servants to choose whether they **“hit the target or meet the outcomes,”** (Interviewee DD).

Interviewee S, a former Minister, said that departments tend to pick targets that paint themselves in the strongest light rather than ones which benefit delivery and improve outcomes.

***“Whenever you set targets which people don’t believe are deliverable, then you’re almost guaranteeing failure.” (Interviewee B)***

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Always use SMART outcome-based targets.
- Provide incentives for Senior Civil Service to improve outcomes.
- Ministers and Permanent Secretaries to sign up to comprehensive data sharing agreement and a full review of current data use.

### **Evaluation and review**

Many participants believed evaluations have become tied up in processes to check how public funding is spent rather than monitoring whether outcomes are

improved, with the spectre of NI Audit Office (NIAO) or Public Accounts Committee (PAC) reviews making the NICS ever more cautious.

Lengthy processes for checking are a burden, and they also ultimately backfire. If the web of feedback stretches too wide and too thin, accountability barely exists, creating a **“dashboard culture”** (Interviewee M) where lots of data is collected but it isn’t used to inform choices or improve outcomes. Interviewee L, a former minister, said this amounts to **“box ticking”**.

***“[Civil servants] ask ridiculous questions about the small things when they should be asking much more interesting questions about the policy challenges.” (Interviewee BB, from the voluntary sector)***

Departments are overly concerned with how money is spent, rather than the effects that money has on public services – meaning that accountability focuses on the NICS’ own processes rather than what their work achieves.

***“If you employ a builder to build a house, you will not evaluate his success by checking his receipts. You will only evaluate it by checking is the roof on? Is everything working right?” (Interviewee A)***

When the lessons of evaluations are taken on board, it is often far too late to affect the policy in question, amidst a broader reluctance to admit mistakes and learn from them.

The current response to NIAO and PAC oversight can be delays and processes that aim to eliminate risk at the cost of proper effectiveness, but that does not mean that either body is not trying to be helpful. Interviewees said the NIAO is trying to get officials to manage risk sensibly rather than avoid it in a self-defeating way, although the PAC was accused of having a **“gotcha”** culture of shuffling through **“bad holiday snaps”** rather than truly probing oversight – with one former Senior Civil Servant (Interviewee D) saying they **“wouldn’t be afraid [of the Committee’s] poor questioning and scrutiny skills.”**

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Include regular evaluation points in policy delivery, allowing ability to change course when needed.
- Focus monitoring on outcomes rather than procedures.
- Ensure a constructive relationship between NIAO and PAC to promote innovation.

### **Establishment of a Delivery Unit**

The Programme for Government commits to establishing a Delivery Unit to ensure Executive priorities receive the focus needed to bring about real change and improvement.

Pivotal's interviews found a lot of support for a Delivery Unit and its potential to drive progress on delivery, especially on public sector transformation. However, there was significant scepticism about how such a unit would work in Northern Ireland's power-sharing system or be effective without a single point of central authority.

The current plan is to place the Delivery Unit within the Executive Office (TEO) but, if so, it must still ensure the unit carries the support of all departments and ministers. A previous iteration of a delivery unit – then-Finance Minister Peter Robinson's Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) – was seen by other ministers as a **“DUP creature”** (Interviewee E) which reduced its impact on delivery. Interviewee S, a former Minister, said TEO is the **“department of paralysis”** and worries the Delivery Unit will be **“suffocated”** by it.

Any new unit would also require strong leadership from the Head of the Civil Service, especially in building and maintaining trust. Interviewee L, a former Minister, warned civil servants may feel **“resentment”** at **“outsiders”** marking their homework.

The Delivery Unit will also need clarity on its precise role, scope and powers. Similar units have been used in various ways in other countries, with mixed success. The unit's capacity will determine what it can and can't do, and should also determine what it is tasked to do.

***“The Delivery Unit should identify a few key aims and make sure they happen.” (Interviewee F)***

Many participants suggested the Delivery Unit should have more specialist knowledge than departmental officials they are working alongside otherwise it may find it difficult to steer changes, although some participants also stressed the unit would still need generalist skills too. It will also need to use data effectively – which relies on having good data in the first place – and must avoid being opaque and embrace openness and accountability.

#### **PIVOTAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Publish clear terms of reference defining the unit's role.
- All Ministers and Permanent Secretaries to sign a joint declaration of support and cooperation.
- Choose a small number of PfG priorities to focus on.

- Realistic budget and resources, including staff skills and knowledge.
- Regular stocktake meetings between the unit and political and NICS leadership.
- Proper transparency, with regular reviews made public and special committee sessions to scrutinise the unit's performance and to allow NICS to learn from both good practice and errors.

***List of interviewees and their roles:***

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Role</b>
A	Former Community and Voluntary Sector representative
B	Former Senior Civil Servant
C	Former Senior Civil Servant
D	Former Senior Civil Servant
E	Former Senior Civil Servant
F	Former Senior Civil Servant
G	Former Senior Civil Servant
H	Former Senior Civil Servant
I	Business representative
J	Former Special Advisor
K	Former Public Servant
L	Former Minister
M	Former Minister
N	Business representative
O	Former Public Servant
P	Business representative
Q	Business representative
R	Business representative
S	Former Minister
T	Former Civil Servant
U	Business representative
V	Community and Voluntary Sector representative
W	Research Organisation
X	Public Sector Leader
Y	Former Public Servant
Z	Local Government representative
AA	Community and Voluntary Sector representative
BB	Community and Voluntary Sector representative
CC	Former Minister
DD	Community and Voluntary Sector representative

ENDS

### **Notes to Editors**

**Ann Watt is available for media interviews.**

**For further information or to schedule an interview, contact Ryan Miller on 07789 552 340 or [ryan@millercomms.co.uk](mailto:ryan@millercomms.co.uk)**

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's published reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are David Gavaghan (Chair); Sarah Creighton; Judith Gillespie; Jarlath Kearney; Sinéad McSweeney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey; Alan Whysall
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 25 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. 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
6. For further information about Pivotal see <https://www.pivotalpolicy.org/> or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
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