

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry, Reconciliation

- Written submission by Pivotal
- *Submitted 3 June 2026*

1.0 [Pivotal](#) is an independent public policy think tank, with the mission to use research, analysis and engagement to inform and influence policy making in Northern Ireland. A registered charity, [Pivotal](#) is governed by a board of Trustees with wide-ranging experience in public service, the voluntary and community sector, and business. We have no political affiliations and take no position on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

1.1 Pivotal has published research examining how society in Northern Ireland can become less segregated along traditional community lines. **This work leads us to conclude that greater integration in places of study, work and neighbourhoods is essential to advancing a more deeply rooted process of reconciliation.** By increasing the opportunities for meaningful friendships and neighbourliness to develop, between individuals and households currently segregated, a more united community can be built, where diverse views of the past and constitutional future can co-exist.

1.2 Pivotal's research in this area has been based upon in-depth engagement with young people through surveys and focus groups – learning from their experiences of school and community life and hearing how they perceive broader questions of community relations, integration and reconciliation. Although a diversity of views were expressed during our research, it is clear there is a widespread hunger for a more speedy process of reconciliation, and a belief that having more school friends and neighbours from 'the other community' would improve the social and economic life of Northern Ireland, including helping heal some of the divisions of the past.

1.3 The reports that form the basis of Pivotal's conclusions are based upon policy and literature reviews, research interviews with specialists in the field, surveys, and extensive focus groups with young people from areas impacted by ongoing division. The relevant reports can be found on our website:

- 1) [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#)
- 2) [Youth voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland](#)
- 3) [Achieving greater integration in housing and education](#)
- 4) [Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people's voices](#)

What does reconciliation in Northern Ireland mean today?

2.0 Pivotal wished to add value and new insights by focusing our work on how reconciliation can be advanced by breaking down the barriers that lead to extensive residential segregation, and a school system still largely divided along religious lines.

2.1 Within Northern Ireland's complex school system divisions along traditional community lines remains pronounced. Only 14% of schools in Northern Ireland have both at least 10% Catholic and 10% Protestant pupils enrolled. The Integrated sector educates only 8% of

pupils, despite survey data showing approximately two-thirds of respondents have consistently in recent years expressed support for the principle of the Integrated sector becoming the main model of school. In housing there are positive examples of 'mixed' housing expanding, but the vast majority of social housing remains segregated. In some areas paramilitary influence and sectarian intimidation seek to dictate who can and cannot move into a community.

2.2 These are the building blocks of a divided community. **There is also a dynamic relationship between residential and educational segregation – for historical and practical reasons, they reinforce each other and encourage communities to build parallel, separate, lives.** Building and facilitating more shared spaces - in schools of all models and in more private and public housing - with diverse populations, would open space for more interactions, respectful dialogue, learning about other traditions, and new shared identifications with places.

2.3 It is also striking that when young people who participated in our research were asked questions relating to community relations a significant number responded by discussing the integration of newcomer and ethnic minorities within their schools and communities. This reflects the new diversity of many parts of NI, and the impact of the serious disorder of summer 2024. However, it can also be seen as evidence that for some young people the 'traditional' community divisions of NI are not as pronounced or urgent a reality as they were for previous generations. New reconciliation strategies and policies therefore need to be formed in the context of the new diversity of Northern Ireland, and the distance that many young people now feel from the conflict and pre-1998 society.

What are the current social, economic, and/or political factors helping to shape or constrain reconciliation in Northern Ireland today?

3.0 Our work has highlighted the ongoing twin challenges of reconciliation and tackling deprivation. **The areas that experienced the worst of the conflict and which remain most marked by the physical division of communities – through peace walls and other markers – are those most impacted by poverty, low employment, poor health, low educational attainment and other indicators of deprivation.**

3.1 Some voices involved in community development in areas with pronounced socio-economic problems told us that building cohesion, resources and confidence within some single identity areas is required before effective cross-community work could be undertaken. In other words, this argument suggests intra-community development is often required before cross-community work can be undertaken. Other voices we spoke with stated that impactful cross-community work was occurring, and should be expanded, but agreed that economic development and the spreading of opportunity within communities was an essential building block for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

3.2 Efforts towards reconciliation and integration are being constrained by the housing market. The waiting list for social housing – which has just passed 50,000 – points to a housing market that limits the potential for mobility, frustrates young people seeking to build homes who may be open to moving to new communities, and creates a battle for

limited resources that too often encourages the scapegoating of ‘outsiders’. An increased housing supply, with matching improvements in infrastructure that connects communities would move the dial towards greater sharing, integration and community cohesion – all key building blocks for lasting reconciliation.

3.3 Political leadership is required to solve the housing supply problem, and to drive greater sharing and integration in education as a priority across government. Pivotal is realistic about the limits of what can be achieved in the short-term, especially at a time of fiscal constraints, but there are economic, as well as social and cultural, rationales for encouraging greater integration. One clear example is demographic change, the coming reduction in the number of school-age children and its impact on the school estate. Many communities have two schools separately serving one side of the community, but both with falling enrolments. If one of these schools closes, and residents do not feel the remaining school is ‘their school’, this can encourage the longer-term residential segregation of an area, without necessarily increasing the long-term viability of the remaining school. If instead the two schools with falling numbers considered Integration, or various models of joint-management or shared schooling, this could retain the school places, the diversity of the locality, and the life-blood of the area.

3.4 The demographics of Northern Ireland’s complex education system are changing. The rising number of pupils from families who identify as ‘Other’, and the growing number of newcomer pupils ensures that measuring the diversity of schools is more complex than in previous generations. There is evidence that a significant number of schools which have been traditionally Protestant in terms of their pupil intake and/or ethos have become more diverse. In many cases this is due to the rise in those identifying as Other, but some of these schools also have a growing proportion of Catholic pupils. Many Catholic Maintained schools now reflect the new diversity of NI brought by newcomer pupils and ethnic minorities, but there are only a handful of examples of schools within this sector attracting a significant number of pupils from a Protestant background.

3.5 The gap between the size of the Integrated sector and the broad support it receives from citizens is complex, as is the relationship between supply and demand for Integrated schools. Parental choice of school is informed by a variety of competing priorities, including the school’s reputation and performance, its ethos, family connections, proximity, selection policy and, vitally, the other realistic alternative options. The Education Department is correct to state that demand for the Integrated sector is unevenly spread across NI, however, so too is proximity to a good Integrated school that could stimulate demand. Another aspect of this complex geographical and community picture is that the vast majority of schools that have transformed to become Integrated have been schools popularly understood as traditionally Protestant.

3.6 Taken together, the housing crisis, creaking infrastructure, demographic change, and pressures on school budgets all highlight the need to reimagine and rebuild many aspects of public services and communities. There is an opportunity to place integration, breaking down old barriers, and connecting people at the heart of this construction. Building and encouraging shared spaces for young people is key.

Pivotal's recommendations

4.0 Drawing on our research reports, we would make the following recommendations:

4.1 Reconciliation requires a strong component of greater integration and sharing of resources, most obviously in education and housing as the key building blocks of society. This offers the opportunity for the development for better mutual understanding and a more united community. As the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement itself stated: "An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing."

4.2 We suggest that the Executive agrees an aim of achieving substantially more integration and sharing in schools and housing by 2040. This vision and ambition should be driven by realism, acknowledging the limits of what schools alone can achieve, and the other pressing concerns facing education, housing and community life.

4.3 In education, this process requires measurable progress towards greater mixing, sharing and diversity in all models of school. Meeting existing demand for places in Integrated schools should be a priority, along with encouraging the expansion of the sector. All models of school should be active in seeking greater religious diversity within their pupil enrolment, learning from the schools within these sectors which have advanced greater pupil diversity. Progress requires both greater diversity within the traditional models of schools and a growing Integrated sector.

4.4 Integration and sharing should be prioritised when managing the school estate, especially when adapting to falling pupil numbers in an area.

4.5 The future success of Shared Education projects will depend on reversing recent declining participation rates, supported by appropriate funding, and targeting areas most impacted by community divisions.

4.6 The potential to connect shared housing with Integrated education should be further realised, as part of building more shared community spaces, supported by infrastructure that connects rather than divides communities.

4.7 Meeting the demand for affordable, sustainable housing is the best way to facilitate greater integration across social and private housing. The Housing for All programme has demonstrated successful models of integration. Greater supply of housing requires fixing and funding a wastewater system capable of supporting all communities, including shared communities.

4.8 An inclusive community should not equate to a bland or neutral cultural space. Instead, the expression of contrasting national or cultural identities will often have to be facilitated in successful shared spaces. In this context, local agreements about flags and other cultural expressions, with cross-community engagement, should be encouraged where

possible. Ending the control and influence of paramilitaries is also key to more inclusive communities but remains elusive.

4.9 Finally, supporting shared youth facilities and groups in the community should be a policy priority. The voices of young people who participated in our research highlighted the positive impact these shared experiences often have.