

The Public Policy Forum N.I. Limited – Pivotal Annual Report for year ending 31 March 2025

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Northern Ireland Charity No: 108659

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Contents

	Section	Page
1	Vision, mission, context and strategic priorities	3
2	Charitable purpose	6
3	Governance and staff	7
4	Values	8
5	Chair's report for 2024-25	9

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 crumbling wastewater infrastructure. In the past, the political system here has tended not to be focussed 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 seeks 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. 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.

The social and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland are severe: by far the longest health waiting lists in the UK; low average skill levels; inequality in educational outcomes; low productivity and innovation; persistent poverty and 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 need for improved policy decision-making in all of these areas.

Policy context in 2024-25

February 2024 saw the return of the Northern Ireland Executive, following the 'Safeguarding the Union' arrangements and a financial package for the restored institutions. Since then, Northern Ireland has seen a period of relative stability, with a broadly constructive and positive relationship between the first and Deputy First Ministers, and around the Executive table. There is an acknowledgement from politicians that there are serious challenges to be dealt with, and a clear expectation from the

public that public services have to improve. With no scheduled Assembly elections until 2027, there is an opportunity in this shortened mandate to make a difference.

The UK General Election in July 2024 saw the Labour Party return to government for the first time in 14 years. With this came a sense of optimism, an improved relationship between the UK Government and the Irish Government, and hopes of a more settled situation for Northern Ireland after the tumultuous years since the Brexit referendum. Despite a large injection of funding in the Autumn Budget, that optimism has faded in part due to the continued strains on Northern Ireland's finances, along with cuts to the Winter Fuel Allowance, changes to benefits, and a rise in employers' National Insurance Contributions. The Chancellor's Spending Review in June 2025 will put in place multi-year funding settlements for Northern Ireland, offering an opportunity for the Executive to plan strategically to tackle the big issues facing society.

Just over one year on from the return of the institutions, the Executive published its Programme for Government (PfG), the first time this has been agreed since 2011. It has nine priorities which reflect some of the biggest policy challenges Northern Ireland faces: the economy, childcare, health waiting times, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), Special Educational Needs (SEN), housing, Lough Neagh and the environment, safer communities, and public service transformation. While it is welcome that the PfG has been published, it lacks detail of specific actions and measurable targets, and there has been confusion about the funding behind the priorities, particularly for reducing health waiting times and house-building. We have seen action on a number of these priority areas, including childcare and SEN, a VAWG Strategic Framework, and health waiting times. However, action on issues such as housing, and the core economic issues like productivity and inactivity, have been insufficient. An Interim Public Sector Transformation Board was established and announced its first round of funding for departmental projects, which aim to help to drive a much needed step-change in our public services.

The Executive has agreed Budgets for 2023-24 and 2024-25, and the Finance Minister has published a Budget Sustainability Plan and Interim Fiscal Framework, including negotiating an agreement with the UK Government to add a needs-based element to the Barnett formula. This will all play a major role in putting public finances on a more sustainable footing. Multi-year budgets should help to continue this. However, many departments continue to report a financial squeeze, with the Health Minister estimating an overspend in his department of £600m in 2025-26. NI Water continues to struggle to fund wastewater improvements without increased stable revenues. Much more needs to be done to stabilise our public finances and drive transformation and efficiency.

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

- David Gavaghan (Chair) – Advisor, consultant, and director
- Sarah Creighton – Housing Advisor and lawyer
- Richard Good - Director, The Turnaround Project *resigned April 2025*
- Judith Gillespie – Former Deputy Chief Constable, PSNI
- Jarlath Kearney – Strategy Advisor and media contributor *resigned June 2025*
- Seamus McAleavey – Retired Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- Andrew McCormick – Retired Northern Ireland Civil Service Permanent Secretary
- Sinéad McSweeney – Former Global Head of Public Policy, Twitter *resigned June 2025*
- Rosalind Skillen – Climate activist and columnist
- Alan Whysall – Honorary Senior Research Associate, University College London

The Board decided to conclude the Reference Group that had been used during Pivotal's initial few years. We thank them for their valuable contribution and support during this time.

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 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 regarding politics and society in Northern Ireland, devolution and public policy across the UK, and the political history of Ireland.

Tom Burns joined Pivotal in September 2024. Tom is a Law with Politics graduate, with a Master's in Global Security and Borders from Queen's University Belfast. His focus has been on the politics and policies of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK.

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 2024-25

Pivotal has had a good year building upon the valuable contribution it makes as an independent voice to public policy in Northern Ireland. We produce relevant and timely research reports, and provide valuable independent analysis and commentary.

Pivotal is today recognised as an important and trusted voice on current issues, with much greater opportunity to contribute to discussions and decision-making since the Assembly and Executive returned in February 2024.

Pivotal's main outputs during 2024-25 were:

- Research Report on economic inactivity in Northern Ireland;
- two Tracker Reports reviewing the actions of the Executive and recommendations to improve;
- two Research Reports on barriers to integration in education and housing, one with interviews with sector experts and another with the voices of 48 young people;
- evidence to a number of Westminster and Stormont Committees and consultation responses;
- comment and analysis day-to-day on government and policy issues, appearing frequently on local media and provided regular comment on X/Twitter, LinkedIn, and Bluesky.

Tracker Reports

During 2024-25, Pivotal published two Tracker Reports, monitoring and analysing department's actions and priorities, and providing recommendations to improve in the future:

- [The first seven months of the restored Northern Ireland Executive](#) (September 2024)
- [Review of the first year of the restored Northern Ireland Executive](#) (January 2025)

Research Reports

We have published three major research reports this year:

- [Economic inactivity in Northern Ireland](#) (May 2024) – an analysis of the economic inactivity data and what it means for Northern Ireland, as well as considering policy responses.
- [Achieving greater integration in education and housing](#) (March 2025) – detailed analysis of the literature and 14 interviews with experts in both fields.
- [Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people's voices](#) (May 2025) – the voices and thoughts of 48 young people in focus groups from across Northern Ireland.

Evidence submissions and consultation responses

We have provided submissions of evidence to Committees and consultations:

- [Evidence to NI Assembly Finance Committee on Budget 2024-25](#)
- [Consultation on the draft Programme for Government](#)
- [Oral](#) and [written](#) evidence on funding and delivery of public services for the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
- [Consultation on the Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum](#)
- [Consultation on the Northern Ireland Budget 2025-26](#)

Pivotal Platform

At time of writing, there have been 56 Pivotal Platform articles published since it was established in February 2024. Topics have included productivity, educational disadvantage, cyber-security, arts funding, wastewater infrastructure, housebuilding, arthritis, children's social care, active travel and much more. Each week, it allows us to engage with people and sectors across Northern Irish society, sharing their experiences and challenges, with a solution-oriented focus about how government can work better. Pivotal Platform offers an insightful contribution to greater evidence-based policy discussion. We are grateful to all those who have written articles.

Events

We were pleased to contribute to events hosted by other organisations throughout the year, including:

- T:BUC engagement day on economic inactivity;
- British Irish Association Conference in Oxford;
- Various NICVA workshops, including on collaborative research;
- Northern Ireland Economic Conference on economic inactivity;
- Centre for Democracy and Peace Building on governance and policy;
- BBC Regional Committee on the NI policy outlook;
- ESRI events about poverty on the island of Ireland;
- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council Labour Market Partnership conference;
- Holywell Trust Leadership Collective on the Programme for Government;
- Secretary of State's speech to mark a year since the restoration of the NI Executive;
- Deloitte's State of the State report launch;
- SDLP's One Year in Opposition event;
- Careers roundtable event with St Columb's College in Derry.

Media and social media

We have contributed frequently to local radio and TV, including BBC Sunday Politics, BBC The View, BBC Radio Ulster, UTV News, UTV View from Stormont, U105, Q Radio and Cool FM. We have also had significant coverage of reports and other outputs in print media in Northern Ireland and beyond.

We continue to use Twitter/X and LinkedIn for day-to-day comment and analysis, and started using Bluesky this year for the same.

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU)

We are grateful to QUB for providing Pivotal with an office and IT support from October 2023. Having our own office space again has been very beneficial to the team.

We hosted two QUB politics undergraduates for 12-week placements as part of their degrees.

We provided a number of lectures at QUB and UU on public policy in Northern Ireland, the work of think tanks, and how research can have an impact on policy.

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

Staff team

Pivotal currently has a staff team of three – Ann Watt (Director), Dr James Greer (Senior Researcher) and Tom Burns (Researcher). We continue in our aim to grow the team to a bigger size, but this depends on raising additional income.

Income generation

We are very grateful to our donors who between them cover most of Pivotal's core costs. We remain committed to growing our base of supporters from different sources, including individual donors, grant-making organisation and commissioned projects.

Future plans

The team is currently working a new research report on 'Policy delivery in Northern Ireland' which we will publish shortly. We are also hoping to do some further work on economic inactivity, particularly as the UK Government's plans to cut some disability benefits have been announced. Other new research projects will be subject to securing the necessary funding. We aim to produce two short 'tracker' reports per year reviewing the Executive's actions, as well as responding to consultation and inquiries as appropriate. We will continue to engage with issues day-to-day on social media and on radio, TV and print media.

Thanks

Our sincere thanks to those who have funded Pivotal throughout this year, particularly our three main donors.

We are also grateful for all those individuals and organisations with whom we have worked in partnership and who have supported Pivotal in other ways including:

- QUB for generous provision of office space and IT support
- Thought Collective, particularly for their work on the website rebrand and the design of our reports
- Ryan Miller for his support for our comms and media work
- Dr Donna Kernaghan (Stats & Stories) for her contribution to our project with young people on integration in education and housing.
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I am grateful to my fellow trustees for giving their time and expertise to Pivotal. A particular note of thanks to Richard Good, who stepped down from the Board during 2024-25 having been involved since the very early days of Pivotal.

My final thanks are to Ann Watt (Director), Dr James Greer (Senior Researcher) and Tom Burns (Researcher), who together form an energetic, talented and hard-working team. As Trustees we are immensely grateful for their commitment to Pivotal and the high quality of their work.

David Gavaghan

17 June 2025