

**Embargoed until 00.01am on Thursday, March 13**

## **Leadership and vision are needed to break down barriers in housing and education**

*The Northern Ireland public wants greater integration but achieving it has not proved to be easy. There has been some progress towards the ambitious vision in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, but significant barriers remain. Not only do integration in education and in housing face serious obstacles on their own, but ongoing segregation in schools and in neighbourhoods mutually reinforce each other. A new report from think tank Pivotal indicates that there is no single path forward – but that political leadership and vision across a range of fronts are essential to making progress.*

Despite the broad peace since the Good Friday Agreement, large parts of Northern Ireland remain heavily segregated. In education and in housing, many communities live parallel lives.

There has been some progress but, while greater integration would bring significant social, economic and cultural benefits, there is no easy fix. The lines of division in where people of different backgrounds live and send their children to school mutually reinforce one another. Without more mixing and sharing in housing, big changes in education are unlikely, and vice versa.

A new report from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, says that to unlock the benefits of better social cohesion, we also need to define what “integrated” actually means – and then set clear goals that lay out what we collectively want to achieve.

*Achieving greater integration in education and housing*, published today [Thursday, March 13], is the first report from a project looking at the relationship between segregation in housing and education, and was based on a series of interviews with experts from public bodies, the voluntary sector, academia and frontline community workers.

The research found that there are many persistent barriers to greater integration in education, including strong family and community connections to established non-integrated schools, and a failure of many schools to attract children from

other backgrounds. In housing, barriers include the ongoing historical low level of new build housing, together with long-established marking of territory and intimidatory behaviour in certain areas that suggest newcomers will not be welcome.

Existing demand for integrated education is not being met, with admissions data showing that around 20% of first preferences for a place at an integrated school are not able to be fulfilled. The Department of Education has said that demand for integrated school places outstrips supply in six of NI's 11 council areas.

Survey data indicates that 73% of the population would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood, but only 31% of people perceive their area as mixed. Sweeping change in where people live is difficult, especially when – totally aside from community background – housing is so expensive and as a result people move less often.

It is also the case that demographics have changed. The traditional Green/Orange divide remains relevant, but it is not the whole story. A large cohort of the population now consider themselves 'Others' and, while the newcomer population remains relatively small, inward migration has increased and people from elsewhere are part of an increasingly diverse Northern Ireland.

Often the most pressure to integrate is placed on single-identity areas that are also suffering from poverty, poor health outcomes and educational underachievement. Even when people truly would prefer to live in a more mixed area, it won't be their highest priority.

The housing sector is itself in crisis, due to a lack of funding for new builds – including both social and affordable homes – and a wider degradation in infrastructure adding further obstacles. Seeking more integration is rarely a higher priority than simply putting a roof over your head. One Pivotal interviewee asked, "if there aren't enough houses being built, where do you start with integration?" Another, a manager working in social housing, went further: "You can't go into an area and only talk about Good Relations when they can't put food on the table."

Similar challenges exist in education. Currently only 8% of all school children attend an integrated school, despite the fact that 67% of the population want integrated education to be the main school model. Official figures indicate that only 14% of all schools have at least 10% of their pupils from a Catholic background and 10% from a Protestant background.

The details, however, are complex. Integrated schools do not have a monopoly on diversity.

Traditionally Protestant schools have become more mixed, with 62% of pupils in the sector identifying as Protestant, 9% as Catholic and 30% as Other – even if many individual schools remain heavily segregated. Community division persists most strongly in the Catholic Maintained and Voluntary schools, where 93% of pupils still identify as Catholic.

This is in large part due to different demographics seeing different cultural changes. The rise in political ‘Others’ has been driven most of all by people from a traditionally Protestant background deciding they do not want to officially record themselves that way anymore.

Critically, many schools that are highly segregated are simply reflective of the area they serve. One interviewee told Pivotal, “I can’t stand a Controlled school being criticised for supporting its local community,” and another said, “schools feel pressure that it is their role to somehow solve the tension in Northern Ireland, but it is not a panacea.”

Shared Education programmes – where pupils from different schools of different backgrounds share space, resources and even classrooms – offer an alternative way for children and young people to mix, build relationships, and learn more about each other. However, the number of schemes could be higher – while some critics argue that while sharing brings pupils from different backgrounds together it also highlights the differences between them.

**Pivotal’s research found many barriers to integration. But, while these obstacles are significant, they are not insurmountable. The paper’s recommendations for greater integration include:**

**Clear, agreed definitions** about what is meant by terms like integration, reconciliation and sharing. While there will always be differences of opinion and preference, having clarity of language will make discussions easier.

**A vision for greater integration by 2040 that can be measured against data.**

While firm targets for integration might be unrealistic, that does not mean the Executive cannot make commitments. Ministers should make it clear that by 2040:

- 1. Northern Ireland will significantly reduce the number of districts with less than 20% of residents from one of the two main traditions**
- 2. Schools with at least 10% of pupils from both of the ‘usual’ traditions should be substantially higher than 14% (the current figure).**

There is no single path leading to these headline aims. **For this to happen, there needs to be progress in many areas, including:**

- *In the first instance, expand the number of places in integrated schools to meet existing demand.*
- *Non-integrated schools need to be attractive to all communities in order to achieve increased diversity.*
- *Area planning should try to cluster integrated schools and shared housing projects.*
- *Build more social and affordable homes and expand Housing for All schemes.*
- *Increase number of pupils taking part in Shared Education.*
- *Decisions regarding school closures (which are inevitable given declining numbers of school-age children) should prioritise shared and integrated options.*
- *Encourage public transport to move between single-identity areas, to allow for a more liberal flow of people – to and from schools, workplaces and social spaces.*
- *Reduce paramilitary influence – and visibility – in particular in single-identity areas.*

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “In this research we aim to inform and encourage discussion about how we can achieve greater integration in education and housing. Most people want to see more mixing in schools and in the places where we live, but the reality is our communities remain very separate. In this report we look at some of the reasons for this and what could be done about them.**

**“At present only 8% of Northern Ireland’s pupils attend integrated schools, and we are not meeting existing demand for places at these schools. While some non-integrated schools have increased their a mix of pupils, most NI schools still largely serve only one community.**

**“Part of the reason for this is that many schools that appear segregated are simply reflective of local demographics. It is difficult to solve educational segregation without addressing housing and community segregation too.**

**“Parental choice is a key part of the education system, and for many parents, integration is only one priority among several, such as perceptions of school quality, location and convenience, family links and more.**

**“When it comes to housing, the best way to have more mixed areas is to literally build them from the ground up. Planned shared neighbourhoods with homes that people want to live in can have a big impact, as demonstrated in the Housing for All programme.**

**“Unfortunately, Northern Ireland’s significant housing crisis, including shortages in both social housing and in affordable homes, makes this very difficult. Moving house is becoming less common as housing becomes more expansive. In areas of high deprivation, people’s priority is just having a roof over their heads.**

**“Fixing this will require infrastructure investments, particularly addressing the enormous problems in wastewater management.**

**“Taking all this into account, progress will be difficult, but it is possible.**

**“Most of all, we need clear vision and leadership from politicians. Achieving this kind of societal change is extremely challenging, and it will require our politicians to set an ambition and ensure it is delivered.”**

Pivotal’s report contained analyses of ongoing issues in both education and housing. Some of the findings are listed below:

### **Education**

- There is significant, demonstrable unmet demand in the integrated sector – including oversubscription to leading schools – which is blocking its growth.
- Some interviewees cited the complex process by which a school can transform to integrated status, saying that this complexity is a barrier to more integration.
- Regardless, for many parents the exam performance seen in selective grammar schools remains hugely attractive. Integrated schools are often non-selective, even if they contain so-called “grammar streams”. Academic selection continues to shape huge parts of local education.
- Shared Education offers a different model of pupil mixing but has been criticised by supporters of integration for being a poor substitute for true diversity, with pupils of different backgrounds sharing spaces but wearing different uniforms, and also criticised by those keen on choice in education, who fear it is a stepping stone to general integration.
- Teachers, in particular, can live heavily segregated lives. The most common experience for a local teacher is that they attended three levels

of education largely segregated by community background, before commencing a career in the persistently divided school system. Most are also likely to live in an area with more than 80% of the population from one community.

- The proportion of pupils classified as Other grew from 6.5% in 2000/01 to 18.1% in 2021/22 – but during this time the proportion identifying as Catholic has remained stable while those identifying as Protestant fell from 42.8% to 31.3%.

## **Housing**

- The primary housing crises in Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK and Ireland, are ones of supply and affordability. Integration, sharing schemes and expansion of mixed areas all have public support – but are way down the agenda for most people looking for a home, or thinking about where the next generation will live.
- Building shared neighbourhoods can create more integration – and schemes like the Housing Executive’s Housing For all have seen successes – but the housing sector is in crisis, with the number of completed new builds historically low.
- Outside of building whole new developments, communities become mixed when there is a flow of people moving in and out of areas – which is impossible in many areas because of low housing supply and rising costs. In common with other jurisdictions, housing mobility– the number of times people move house – is falling.
- Regardless, many people would prefer to live near their own family and other connections. If this means staying in a segregated area, that might simply be their choice.
- Paramilitaries still have significant control over some areas of Northern Ireland. Those areas tend to be heavily segregated, and visible paramilitary markings mean people not from that tradition are much less keen to move nearby.
- While explicit paramilitary flags have, in theory, an easy solution (removal), successful integration involves much more complicated solutions for dealing with other traditional community emblems (such as British and Irish flags). A significant number of people fear that integration will mean the removal of their freedom to express their own culture. Crafting a more positive, expressive idea of integration will require work to find agreement on what that looks like.

- Good data exists around the community background of social housing but is much less clear in the private rental and owner/occupier markets. Better information could lead to better policy.

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 [pivotalppf.org](http://pivotalppf.org) or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
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