



PolicyWISE

Cross-nation Policy Learning and Research Series:

Wales Roundtable Full Report

Introduction & Overview

In July 2024, PolicyWISE convened a roundtable in Cardiff to examine cross-nation policy learning best practice and challenges over last 25 years.

The event brought together senior policymakers, analysts, academics, think-tank colleagues, former government ministers, economists, and parliamentary officials – from across Wales, and beyond. We welcome comment, questions and interest in any or all the themes, points and takeaways in this report.

This was the second in our series of cross-nation roundtables, following our Edinburgh event in May.

The discussion reflected on the devolution era so far and looked forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across nations and administrations. A summary report of the roundtable is also available on the PolicyWISE website.

Our aims in hosting this roundtable, and the series, is to help inform and improve how:

- Policy learning and development works across nations and administrations.
- Comparative policy research and researchers can contribute to evidence-informed approaches to challenges.
- Better use of existing, and new, networks, structures and communities for cross-nation policy learning and development.
- Policymakers and researchers understand and use data, within a comparative context.
- We identify common challenges and issues across nations, whilst supporting nation-specific responses.



Some key themes that emerged from this roundtable were:

1. Policy Innovation – learning from success and challenges.

2. Learning through Devolution: favouring a ‘living laboratory’ over competitive tables.

3. Supporting comparative data and policy definitions.

Our roundtable takeaways were:



Inter-governmental relations should emphasise collaboration and learning, rather than competition.



Inter-Parliamentary co-operation is essential for policy learning and comparative analysis.



The need for multi-lateral learning – avoiding England as the “norm” and recognising that some “competition” can be positive.

Policy Innovation – learning from success and challenges.

The roundtable examined the attitudinal, as well as practical, aspects of policy learning from Wales. Participants discussed a reticence amongst Welsh policymakers to highlight innovation or successes, and whether this creates (or is a response to) a **lens through which devolved politics and policy is analysed**.

This lens was seen as being a significant barrier to **policy learning and exchanges** between Wales and other administrations. It was described as having to “justify” Welsh policy and decision-making when it is different to English policy, set within a wider “league table” approach to devolution.

Nevertheless, there were plenty of examples of pioneering policymaking highlighted during the roundtable. Many participants believed that smaller polities, such as Wales, to be the right scale for innovative and challenging policymaking.

Alongside examples relating to not-for-profit utility ownership, recycling rates and a recent pilot of Universal Basic Income, the Human Transplantation Act (Wales) 2013 was shared as a prime example of pioneering, devolved legislation.

Case-study: Human Transplantation Act (Wales) 2013

The Act operates under ‘deemed consent’, meaning that if you haven’t registered a decision in relation to organ and tissue donation (opt in or opt out), you will be considered to have no objection to becoming a donor. Despite UK organ donation rates lagging that of other countries in 2006, deemed consent was considered a radical policy approach at the time. An expansion of powers to the Senedd, cross-party backing and high levels of public support enabled the drafting and thorough scrutiny of the Bill, which came into force in 2015. Wales was considered the perfect size to test such a policy, but strong collaboration and buy-in from UK wide stakeholders (as organ donation is managed at this level) was also fundamental to planning and implementation. The other UK nations were able to adopt a ‘watch and wait’ approach and following a 77% increase in organ donation rates in Wales, similar legislation has been enacted in England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

Participants spent some time considering the **social contract between citizens** and government, and whether this had differed in the devolution era.

There were competing perspectives on whether the scope to innovate was greater through a ‘made in Wales’ approach, or whether innovation was more contentious because of perceptions related to legitimacy and diverging from the English “norm.” This was highlighted when considering Organ Donation and the pandemic experience and would benefit from further analysis and discussion.

The impact of the Well-being of Future Generations Act on how policy is considered, developed, and delivered (or not) was noted as a Welsh innovation. Participants noted that other nations and administrations had taken an interest in this model.

Policymakers in attendance shared their view that **learning how the Act and the well-being goals influence (and change) how government officials and ministers work towards policy decisions** (as well the real-world impact of decisions) was integral to strong comparative learning and analysis.

Participants spoke of positive policy consultation and citizen engagement experiences – noting a Welsh tradition of ‘communitarian’ approaches. The success of Wales’s recycling rates was highlighted as one example (a partnership between government, citizens, and local authorities). It should be noted that this success is perceived both as an absolute one (increase in recycling rates) and a relative one (Wales’s high position in international and UK league tables).

We heard about the extensive communication and consultation during the organ donation reforms, and the iterative approach to carefully choosing the appropriate terminology (i.e., deemed consent) which had led the way for other administrations. There was a brief discussion about the **methods and effectiveness of government and parliamentary public consultations**, this is worth further discussion and analysis, particularly within a cross-nation context.



Two policy areas that faced more challenges were also discussed: Foundation Phase reforms and the 20mph speed limits on urban roads.

It was suggested that the Foundation Phase “learn through play” approach hadn’t delivered the outcomes that might have been expected. Having been inspired by the Scandinavian approach to early schooling, **had the wrong lessons been learnt or had it been a sub-optimal template for the Welsh context?**

More recently, controversy surrounding the introduction of the 20 mile-an-hour speed limit has been a test to citizen engagement in Wales. Despite evidence to the contrary, a persuasive faction of society considers themselves to be ‘losers’ in the situation and have succeeded in dominating much of the public and political debate. The support of many citizens for the policy, in contrast, has been less vocal. Many believed that this is a lesson in the importance of government communication, the role of social media and the power of a dissenting minority in policymaking, especially when the desired impact of a policy is diffuse.



Learning through Devolution: favouring a ‘living laboratory’ over competition.

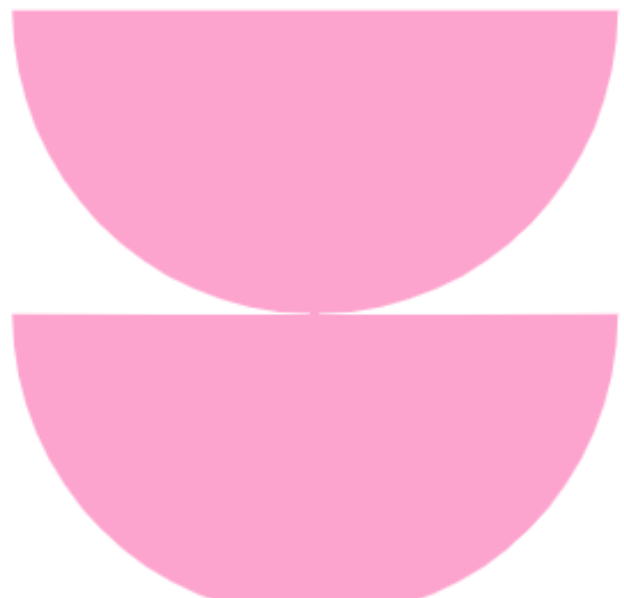
The tension between the ‘league table’ (competition) and ‘living laboratory’ (comparative) approach to policy learning cross-nation was a prominent discussion theme. There was a consensus that **collaboration and knowledge exchange, and the need for inter-governmental structures to formally enable and emphasise this**, could lead to better policy development and outcomes.

While many attendees were strong proponents of the ‘living laboratory’ lens, discussions recognised that it faces a strong opponent in a more ‘competitive’ view of devolution. Factors such as political divergence and media reporting often present a story of winners and losers, pitting the nations as **competitors rather than partners**. The governance and policymaking structures of the UK, as well as the framing of evidence, often reinforce this view.

Some participants argued that a **competitive view can be helpful**, if it leads to opportunities for cross-nation learning and does not hinder collaboration. The role of inter-parliamentary working and exchanges was noted here.

Comparative analysis within parliamentary scrutiny and cross-nation knowledge exchange was observed as being an important aspect of balancing collaboration and competition between administrations. Comparison can provide a useful ‘yardstick’ for progress and change, but this should be done with ‘humility’ and the purpose of gaining an understanding of what works, not simply of who is doing it better.

It was agreed that policy learning, and comparative analysis, **should not be limited to the national governments of the United Kingdom**. From a Wales perspective, learning from Irish Government offshore wind policy as well as probation services in Greater Manchester, were given as two examples.



Discussions identified the importance of institutional structures to support learning and exchanges, beyond individual policy initiatives:

- There was optimism about the UK Government's proposed new Council for the Nations & Regions. It was felt that previous structures hadn't always enabled positive policy learning. New structures should **formally commit to collaboration and learning as a core purpose.**
- Whilst learning at and from different levels is important, pan-UK structures must also recognise that **devolved national governments have different powers and responsibilities compared to English devolved authorities**, and that 'four nations' forums are important.
- Senedd reform potentially creates the capacity and capability for smaller and less complicated legislation, providing space for more detailed and specific scrutiny. **Policymakers and parliamentary colleagues in Wales should learn from Scotland**, which has tended towards more, but smaller in scope, legislation.
- As regional devolution in England evolves further, there is a structural and policy learning imperative across English regions, but also **between English authorities and sub-national government** in the devolved nations.
- It was noted that following the general election of 2024 there may be a change in the prevailing political culture across the UK, which might provide for more open and constructive collaboration and learning between administrations. There is an opportunity to **formalise this through inter-governmental relations and agreements.**

For the second roundtable in succession, there was frustration that "UK" policymakers, researchers and media often view Westminster policy as the default or "norm" and that Welsh policy is seen a "divergence" from this. Participants discussed how this characterisation of Welsh and devolved policy – often set within the "competition" approach – is not conducive to collaboration or knowledge exchange.

Supporting comparative data and policy definitions.

With the ‘spirit of learning’ in mind, it was clear to attendees that the current pursuit of more granular, local level data by all administrations in the UK **should not be done with the aim of creating league tables.**

Instead, an improvement in the creation and accessibility of local data is fundamental to **learning, mutual progress and comparative analysis.** In identifying cross-nation and region shared priorities for data and analysis, participants noted the idea that different administrations should look to policy areas where they have most to learn, and those where they can share learning.

Initiatives such as ONS Local have recently been put in place to support this area of work, aiming to provide regional analysis, address data gaps and build capability across the nations and regions of the UK. The remit of ONS Local is to draw narrative pictures of various policy areas, revealing a more coherent understanding of what is happening at a local level and where differences emerge. The availability of timely and more granular data at local and national levels is **essential for devolved decision-making, and for greater capability in comparative research and analysis which can inform that decision-making.**

Identifying analytical priorities across so many localities is nonetheless a significant challenge. This is further constrained by political and funding cycles, which often disincentivise looking more than 5 years ahead.

More needs to be done to **support horizon scanning processes for data generation, encompassing local, national, and shared priorities** for the future. At the same time, this will only be effective if local data is kept up to date, accessible, and nimble, and localities have the capacity and capability to use it to support decision making. There is a **role for everyone in supporting progress** in this area: government, universities, funders, think tanks and other stakeholders.

Discussions on data comparability included the issue of different policy definitions across nations and administrations. It was accepted that all administrations and agencies will develop terminology that is appropriate to their context.

However there should be **more efforts made across governments and the policy/research community to improve their knowledge and understanding of comparative policy, programmes, and outputs**. It was also highlighted that this was a citizen engagement and knowledge issue can lead to confusion on accountability and policy delivery – as noted in studies of pandemic response policies across the UK nations.

The importance of shared understanding, even if definitions and language differ, was also expressed when participants considered the issue of further devolution. If particular responsibilities are devolved as part of a process rather than as a “big bang” this allows devolved government to build trust and capability, as well as context-specific responses.

Roundtable Takeaways

▶ **Inter-governmental relations should emphasise collaboration and learning, rather than competition.**

The potential for refreshed inter-governmental structures and relations across the UK is an opportunity to move away from an overly “competitive” approach to one of collaboration, policy learning and exchanges. New formal structures could make this an official objective of these structures and relations, building on UK Labour’s manifesto and the Australian National Cabinet’s “principles based” working and decisions.

▶ **Inter-Parliamentary co-operation is essential for policy learning and comparative analysis.**

As governments and policymakers grapple with similar challenges, within a limited spectrum of policy ideas, the scrutiny and knowledge exchange role of all parliaments is essential for good public policy. Building greater capacity and capability across parliaments, so that they can share insight and “think comparatively,” could be essential over the next period, including more horizon scanning of shared issues and challenges.

▶ **The need for multi-lateral learning – avoiding England as the “norm” and recognising that some “competition” can be positive.**

It is important that devolved policy is appreciated (and analysed) as policy for its own context, rather than having to be “justified” as a “divergence” from the “norm” of Westminster policy. This is an ongoing challenge for media, policymakers, think-tanks, and researchers. Welsh policymakers should also accept that a “competitive” lens, on its own merit, can provide a focus on good and less-successful policy interventions – both to share learning from Wales, and for Wales to learn what works elsewhere.



Roundtable topics for further analysis and discussion.

(These are topics discussed in brief at the roundtable and/or have been identified through feedback as potential areas for further analysis. We welcome comment or interest in any or all of these.)

- Comparative and cross-nation learning on how the Welsh Wellbeing Goals and Act has changed how policymakers and Ministers work towards policy decisions.
- The methods and effectiveness of government and parliamentary public consultations for policy development, evaluation, and scrutiny, particularly within a cross-nation context.
- How policymakers and ministers identify the appropriate and relevant case study to support policy development within their local/national context (e.g. was the Scandinavian model the right case study for Wales's Foundation Phase reforms?)
- The opportunity of Senedd reform in creating the capacity and capability for more specific legislation and accompanying scrutiny. Policymakers and parliamentary colleagues in Wales could learn from Scotland, which has tended towards more, but smaller in scope, legislation.
- Greater collective efforts to improve policymaker/researcher/public knowledge and understanding of comparative policy, programmes, and outputs (e.g. the use of the same, similar, or different terms and names within policy areas such as education and health).
- (Collaborative) Horizon scanning processes for data generation, encompassing local, national, and shared priorities for the future, alongside local data that is kept up to date, accessible, and nimble, and localities have the capacity and capability to use it to support decision making.
- The social contract for policymaking in a devolved context – greater scope for innovation or a more contested context?



PolicyWISE

Through a unique comparative policy and knowledge exchange approach – creating cross-nation space and a common culture of sharing – PolicyWISE brings people and research together to help find solutions to issues facing all policymakers.

All our work is UK and Ireland by design, supporting policymakers and researchers across the nations to develop relationships, respect, and knowledge. We do this through our distinctive [Wise in 5 briefings](#), events such as our recent [Economic Devolution conference](#), our policy cluster programme, our developing [Mind Your Policy Language tool](#), and monthly newsletter.

During 2024 we are hosting a series of roundtables to examine cross-nation policy learning best practice and challenges over last 25 years. In reflecting on the devolution era so far, we hope to also look forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across nations and administrations.

All the roundtables are conducted under the Chatham House rule. This report of the key points is anonymized and unattributed. It pulls together key findings from discussions, identifies key insights and perspectives, highlights opportunities and challenges, and provides some recommendations for cross-nation policy learning and development.

This report was authored by Dr Eira Jepson, with support from Dewi Knight and Catherine May, all of PolicyWISE.





PolicyWISE

Our focus and ways of working makes us unique:

1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge.
2. **Sharing:** We develop and support a common culture of sharing and developing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.
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Dewi Knight, Director



Our funder

The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.