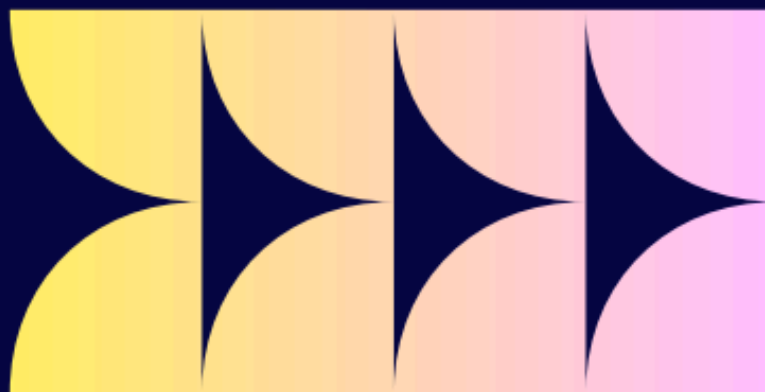




# **Cross-nation Policy Learning and Research Series: Northern Ireland Roundtable Full Report**



**PolicyWISE**



# Overview

In November 2024, PolicyWISE convened a roundtable in Belfast to examine cross-nation policy learning, best practice and challenges in devolution in the last 25 years with a particular focus on skills, enterprise and the economy.

The event brought together senior policymakers, analysts, academics, think-tank colleagues, politicians, economists, and parliamentary officials – from across Northern Ireland, and beyond.

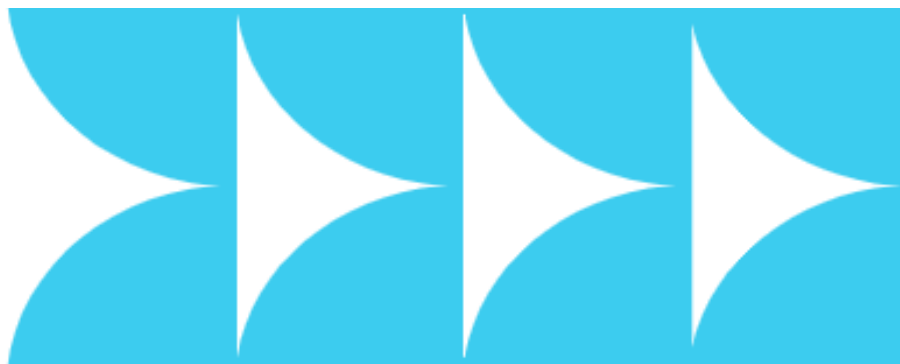
We welcome comment, questions and interest in any or all of the themes, points and take aways in this report.

This was the third in our series of cross-nation roundtables, following our Edinburgh event in May and our Cardiff event in July.

The discussion reflected on the devolution era so far and looked forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across nations and administrations.

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.



## Key themes that emerged from this roundtable were:

- The restoration of Government in Northern Ireland emphasises the need for renewed scrutiny and a focus on skills development.
- Connections between Northern Ireland and Ireland (North–South), and between Northern Ireland and England, Scotland and Wales (East–West), allow for enhanced opportunities for policy learning.
- There is a need for comparable and comprehensive data to capture the unique context of Northern Ireland, whilst avoiding a disconnect from UK and Ireland data.

## Our roundtable takeaways were:



**Scrutiny is essential to good policy development and requires constructive engagement and input from all sides and sectors, supporting a strong Legislature and good government.**



**Cross-administration learning and co-operation, east-west and north-south, will help build an understanding of skills gaps and the necessary policy and data interventions in Northern Ireland.**



**Northern Ireland's devolution story is unique, and other administrations and policymakers should consider (and learn from this) in their engagement, comparisons, and relationships.**

## Restoration of Government – Time for scrutiny and skills focus

The roundtable met in Belfast in November 2024, soon after the publication of the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Programme for Government. The very fact that the Executive and Assembly are restored, with a live policy agenda on issues such as education and skills, ensured a positive backdrop for the roundtable.

Roundtable attendees welcomed the opportunity to come together in-person, and from different sectors and organisations. Noting the publication of the Programme for Government, and the (then) imminent Irish General Election, they called for **more regular cross-nation and administration policy learning and knowledge-exchange opportunities**.

There was consensus that the Executive has a large "in-tray" of policy issues, with education, employability and skills as high priorities. In this spirit, there was **hope that external stakeholders would not be hesitant in bringing forward ideas, challenges and evidence** to both the Legislature and Executive.

It was noted that parliamentarians from all sides are receptive to evidence and proposals on skills development and delivery. This encouraged a discussion on **the importance of scrutiny as a key element of the policymaking process**, in both design and evaluation.

Attendees expressed frustration that there have been structural, and political, **barriers to comprehensive parliamentary scrutiny and accountability to date**. The power-sharing arrangement ensures a system with a less clearly defined "Government and opposition" than in Britain and Ireland.

There was a consensus that during this initial phase of restored devolution, reinforcing the role of scrutiny during policy development (including comparative analysis) will be crucial, particularly on issues such as education, employability and skills. As noted in our reports from other roundtables, **inter-parliamentary co-operation can play a part** in such policy learning, scrutiny, and comparative analysis.

There was a call for **greater analysis of the post-pandemic shift in skills supply and demand**, and how this compared north-south and east-west. The match of curricula (school and post-compulsory) with the local job market, and the need for strengthen relations between colleges, universities and employers, were highlighted as issues for further analysis and policy consideration.

Particular attention should be given to incentivising workplace learning and supporting SMEs and employees to manage this. This was highlighted as a productivity and mental health objective.

## Moving beyond, but recognising, The Troubles

Participants noted that Northern Ireland remains behind other parts of the United Kingdom across a range of measurements, including economic activity and public health. In connection to this, attendees remarked that the impact and legacy of The Troubles had not been discussed explicitly until the final minutes of the roundtable.

This was perceived, in the context of policy learning and development, as a positive focus on current and future challenges. However, it was agreed that failing to take account of Northern Ireland's status as a post-conflict society means that any comparative analysis of current and historic data would be flawed.

The nuances of the current political settlement were discussed (as set out in the 'Restoration of Government – time for scrutiny and skills focus' section) as challenges for scrutiny and policy development. Particularly when controversial or contested issues are avoided.

However, these were not insurmountable challenges to improved policy implementation, and the development of a shared endeavour across the Legislature and Executive to focus on key policy priorities such as skills, education and economic development.

There was a shared commitment to the importance of democratic ministerial-led decision making (informed by parliamentary scrutiny), as opposed to the "governing without Government" periods where civil servants (and/or UK Government) have taken decision-making roles. The Executive's consultation on its draft Programme for Government was welcomed by attendees as a sign of openness to challenge, comparative analysis and ideas for implementation.

## North–South, East–West, Greater opportunities for policy learning

It was noted that policymakers and politicians in Northern Ireland can sometimes be reticent to use comparative research and evidence as part of policy development and scrutiny.

It was suggested that policymakers often feel that analysis and evidence from elsewhere is not directly relevant to a Northern Ireland policy and community context or **fails to recognise the distinctives of the political settlement and process in Northern Ireland**. This point was made in relation to both researchers and GB-based policy community.

Within this discussion, it was highlighted that **north–south comparisons are considered more helpful for policymakers**, even within the context of UK devolved policy structures and relationships.

In–spite of this previous point, some colleagues highlighted the **continuing importance of east–west relationships**, and that the (perceived) historic reticence to draw on this type of comparative analysis is a challenge that should be addressed.

It was felt that (with the new Programme for Government) greater comparative analysis and evidence – from across the UK, on an all-Ireland basis, and from international comparisons – would **help improve parliamentary capability and capacity** to scrutinise and improve devolved policy development.

Continuing to engage east–west, and north–south, should be an important element of inter-governmental (and inter-parliamentary) relations and structures for Northern Ireland policymakers.



There was recognition that policy learning and development (and evaluation) in Northern Ireland could benefit from the “reset” in approach taken by the Prime Minister and new UK Government in particular.

Recognising the development of the Council of the Nations and Regions (and the continuing work of the British-Irish Council), some attendees highlighted the need for Northern Ireland’s policymakers to be **nimble in building mutually beneficial, “regional” policy relationships in Britain and Ireland**, as well as the Government-to-Government relations embedded in existing structures.

It was noted that the other devolved governments, and regional governments in England, could learn from local and regional practice in Ireland, and not be confined by UK or GB structures.



## Comparable and comprehensive data – Capturing a unique context whilst avoiding a data disconnect

There was a strong feeling amongst attendees that, even during the devolution era, **Northern Ireland is frequently “left behind” in UK data reporting**. This is often due to a mismatch of timescales and related isolation of data points and maps.

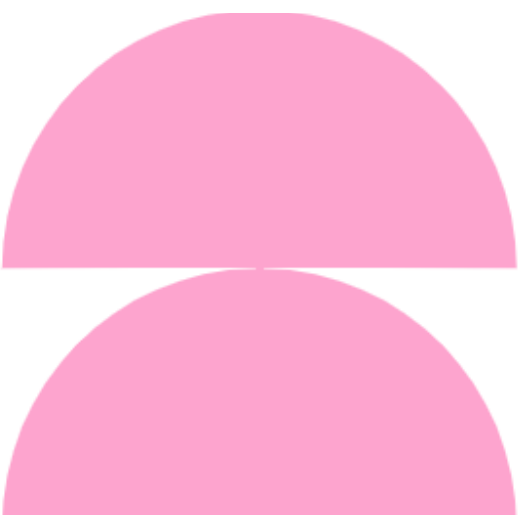
It was recognised that the development of **ONS Local was a positive change** in addressing some of these issues, and to help inform devolved research and policy.

The issue of **timeliness in data collection and reporting in Northern Ireland**, compared to GB or devolved statistics, creates issues for comparability. Attendees felt that this issue was a key barrier in analysing and developing evidence-informed policy for education, skills and the economy for Northern Ireland.

There was agreement that more comprehensive data is needed to reflect and inform policymaking in Northern Ireland – data which recognises the local context and allows for comparability across British and Irish administrations.

The **“border blur” was highlighted as a significant issue**, which potentially skews official statistics and, in turn, decisions and analysis around policy development.

A number of workers cross the border into Ireland daily or weekly, activity which is not captured accurately when analysing the economic, labour or skills outputs in/from Northern Ireland. This example was recognised as a substantial problem by attendees and led to a discussion on the need for Northern Ireland statistics to be examined for gaps on labour supply and movement, and skills levels, within the context of border communities.





There was a related discussion about student/graduate retention and recruitment. Attendees felt that there was **insufficient analysis of the student/graduate flows out of Northern Ireland**, both towards the south and east, and how this compared with statistics in Britain and Ireland.

This discussion also included a focus on the attractiveness of Northern Ireland's universities to students from elsewhere, the desirability of student number cap policies, how to incentivise Northern Ireland domiciled graduates to return home from studying elsewhere, and institutional and policy approaches to life-long learning.

Across all of these areas, it was felt that policy discussions would benefit from greater contemporary data, as well as comparative analysis and knowledge exchange – particularly from Scotland and Wales on education policy interventions.

As noted in the 'spotlight' section, it was felt that blunt "league table" approaches to data and policy comparison across UK jurisdictions **fails to appreciate the legacy of The Troubles**, or the significant periods where there hasn't been devolved decision-making during the last 25 years.

The roundtable was an open and constructive discussion, whilst noting the many challenges and frustrations of recent years. Attendees highlighted that a cross-sector approach, and bringing research and researchers together with policymakers, should be a more prominent feature of policy development for Northern Ireland. It is through such activity that priority policy issues can be analysed and addressed, whilst still recognising the unique political, structural and historical context.



# Roundtable Takeaways

**Scrutiny is essential to good policy development and requires constructive engagement and input from all sides and sectors, supporting a strong Legislature and good government.**

Researchers and stakeholders must better support Stormont parliamentarians to be effective in their scrutiny function. In this new phase of restored government, constructive challenge and evidence (including comparative policy analysis), must take advantage of the principle and practicalities of “shared responsibility”, as the power-sharing arrangement creates a different dynamic to Westminster’s “Government and opposition” style.

**Cross-administration learning and co-operation, east-west and north-south, will help build an understanding of skills gaps and the necessary policy and data interventions in Northern Ireland.**

The “border blur” is an under-considered and under-appreciated factor in policy analysis and learning. Furthermore, policymakers in Northern Ireland should be “nimble” in looking north-south, and east-west, for knowledge-exchange, policy learning and evidence gathering. Comparable nations and regions, across Britain and Ireland, can do much to share learning on skills and education planning and delivery.

**Northern Ireland’s devolution story is unique, other administrations and policymakers should consider (and learn from this) in their engagement, comparisons, and relationships.**

A “competitive” approach to inter-governmental relations and learning risks ignoring the context for Northern Ireland’s policy structures, challenges and performance. Refreshed relations and structures should emphasise the multi-lateral learning benefits that unique and diverse contexts can provide for different administrations.

# 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

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 Economic Devolution conference, our policy cluster programme, our developing Mind Your Policy Language tool, and monthly newsletter.

During 2024/25 we have hosted 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 Lucy Adams and Dewi Knight with support from Catherine May and 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.
3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

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### Rapid Response Capability

We work at pace to support policy analysis, development, and consideration.

### Comparative and Collaborative Analysis & Understanding

We are a partner of choice for collaborative and comparative projects, and we work across The Open University's four nations.

### Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

### Training

Utilising our distinct focus and skills we deliver impactful and dynamic training for any audience interested in learning how a comparative policy analysis and knowledge exchange can benefit their work.

## 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.