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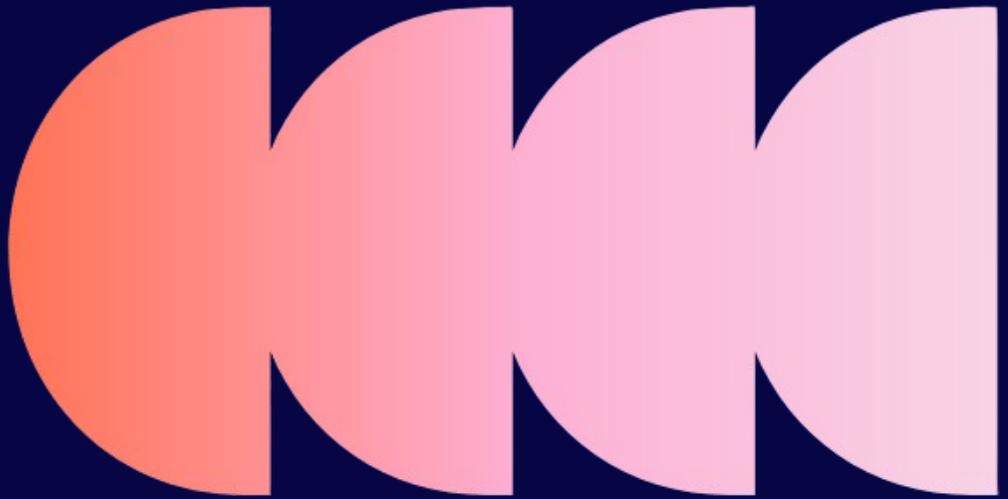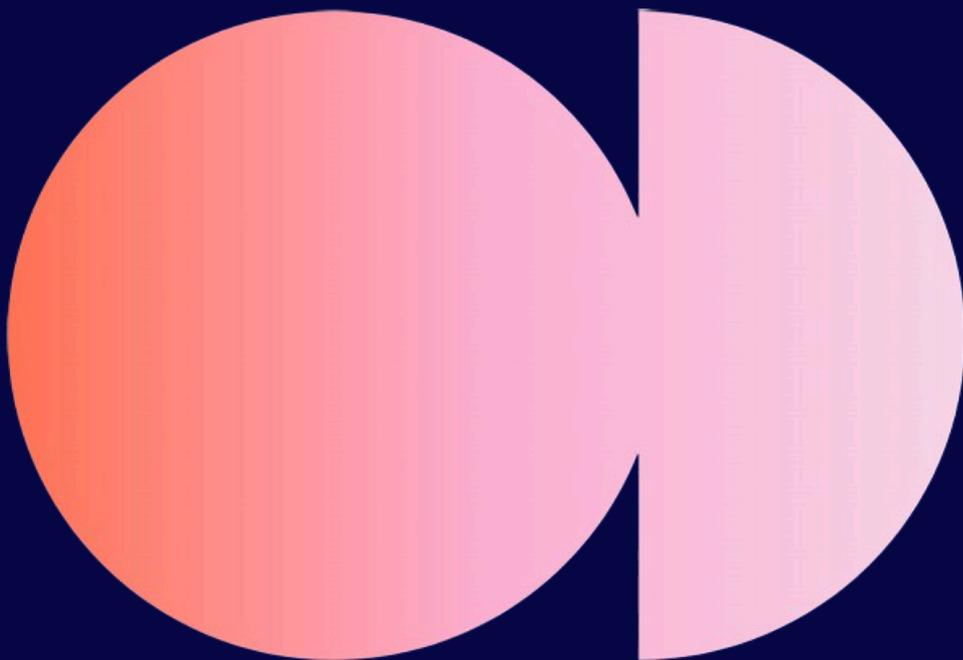**The Open University**

From isolation to innovation: a cross-nation agenda for better policy learning

The final report of PolicyWISE's cross-nation learning & research series

The lead author for this report was Catherine May, with support from Dewi Knight. The literature review was authored by Lottie Marsden. The report draws on the nation-specific roundtable reports, co-authored by Dr Eira Jepson, Lucy Adams, Catherine May & Dewi Knight.

From isolation to innovation: a cross-nation agenda for better policy learning

After 25 years of democratic devolution, the UK has developed four distinct policy systems. This briefing summarises what PolicyWISE's 2024–25 cross-nation roundtables reveal about why comparative policy learning remains limited, why that matters now, and what needs to change to realise the full potential of cross-administration learning and co-operation.

Why this matters?

Democratic devolution was intended to enable innovation closer to citizens. In practice, while policy divergence has increased, systematic learning between governments and parliaments has not kept pace. As a result:

- Successful innovations are underrecognised or underadopted.
- Policy failures are repeated across jurisdictions.
- Intergovernmental relations (IGR) default to competition rather than collaboration.

With renewed debate about England's governance, greater political divergence across the UK, and mounting fiscal and social pressures, the opportunity cost of not learning is growing.

A Five-Point Action Framework for Cross-Nation Learning

1. Institutional architecture must be strengthened

2. Data must be made fit for devolution

3. A culture of comparative learning must be actively built

4. Democratic renewal is essential to sustain learning

5. Innovation must be amplified rather than isolated

Literature Review for PolicyWISE's Roundtables: Intergovernmental Relations and Comparative Policy Learning in a Devolved UK

Introduction: PolicyWISE and the Roundtables

Reflecting on 25 years of democratic devolution across the UK, PolicyWISE's cross-nation roundtables (2024–25) aimed to promote comparative policy learning and knowledge exchange, strengthen intergovernmental and interparliamentary collaboration, and build capacity for evidence-informed policymaking across nations and regions.

Our discussions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England found that comparative learning must be intentional, structured, and context-sensitive. Key themes included:

- prioritising collaboration over competition in intergovernmental relations,
- the need for improved "devolution literacy" among researchers and policymakers,
- and the importance of building institutional capacity for comparative work.

The Evolution of UK Intergovernmental Relations

Since the late 1990s, there has been significant and growing scholarly and policy interest in how governments across the UK collaborate, learn from one another, and manage shared challenges. There is general consensus that the UK's IGR system is marked by asymmetry, informality, and complexity.

Brexit and COVID-19 threw these weaknesses in sharp relief. McEwen, Kenny, Sheldon and Brown Swan argue that without reform, disputes and lack of trust are likely to deepen. Similarly, Paun and Munro conclude that effective governance requires strengthened IGR through coherent strategy, better consultation, and reformed political mechanisms. The Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), once the primary forum, has been widely critiqued for its ineffectiveness and lack of transparency.

Comparative Policy Learning and "Policy Laboratories"

Devolved governments have often been described as "policy laboratories", experimenting with innovative approaches in areas such as public health, education, and climate policy. Wales's Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) and Scotland's minimum unit pricing for alcohol (2018) are frequently cited examples.

However, as Cairney notes, divergence can hinder learning if it fosters insularity or politicisation. Comparative learning requires intentional structures, shared data, and mutual respect.

Recent Developments: Towards Multilateralism

Recent work by PolicyWISE and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy calls for a more structured, multilateral approach, emphasising trust-building, shared priorities, and clearer delineation of roles – especially between the UK Government's England-specific and UK- wide functions.

The **Council of Nations and Regions**, established in 2024, represents a significant shift toward formalised multilateralism. Early commentary suggests it could foster strategic collaboration if it avoids replicating past failures. Key success factors include equal voice, long-term focus, integration of English regional leaders, and commitment to transparency.

Barriers to Comparative Learning

PolicyWISE roundtables and the academic literature converge on several barriers:

- Data misalignment: statistical boundaries often don't match governance structures.
- Institutional inertia: limited capacity and incentives for cross-nation learning.
- Cultural resistance: national pride or rivalry discourages borrowing from other jurisdictions.

The rise of evidence-informed policymaking across the UK has been uneven. Scotland and Wales have been historically more invested than their English neighbours, while Northern Ireland faces challenges due to political instability and limited scrutiny mechanisms.

Conclusion: PolicyWISE's Contribution to the Literature

Taken together, the existing scholarship highlights persistent weaknesses in the UK's intergovernmental machinery – asymmetry, opacity, and a tendency toward ad hoc, bilateral fixes rather than structured collaboration. PolicyWISE's roundtables directly address these gaps by creating intentional, comparative spaces for dialogue across the four nations. In doing so, they put into action many of the reforms long called for in the literature: embedding devolution literacy, fostering trust and transparency, and treating divergence as an opportunity for mutual learning rather than a barrier.

By situating practical, cross-nation conversations within the broader debates on collaborative governance, PolicyWISE not only reflects the trajectory of academic critique but also demonstrates how structured forums can begin to realise the promise of devolution as a genuine "policy laboratory" for the whole UK.

Evidence

PolicyWISE convened four roundtables in 2024 - 2025 bringing together over 100 policymakers, parliamentarians, researchers and practitioners from:
- Scotland (Edinburgh, May 2024)
- Wales (Cardiff, July 2024)
- Northern Ireland (Belfast, November 2024)
- England (Manchester, April 2025)

The aim was not to compare performance but to explore how learning happens, what blocks it, and what would enable it.

Core insight

Comparative policy learning does not happen organically. It requires:
- Intentional institutional design
- Comparable and trusted data
- Political and cultural permission to learn across borders

Without these, divergence risks becoming isolation rather than innovation.

What's blocking learning?

The current status is of four systems with shared challenges and increasingly divergent policy solutions (and the probability of more diverse political leadership). At our series of roundtables, we asked participants what they felt had been gained and lost in 25 years of democratic devolution.

Wales: Innovation without recognition

Wales has pioneered distinctive, values driven policies (e.g. longterm wellbeing, recycling, organ donation). However, participants noted a reluctance to actively promote success, driven by:

- Pressure to justify divergence from English norms
- Fear of political or media backlash

Implication: Other nations miss transferable insights from Wales's participatory, preventative approaches.

Scotland: Divergence with limited reference points

Scotland demonstrates confidence in policy divergence aligned to national values. Yet learning risks becoming:

- Overly inwardlooking, or
- Excessively framed against England as the default comparator

Implication: Multilateral, not bilateral, comparison is needed to avoid distortion.

Northern Ireland – Unique context, universal lessons

Northern Ireland's powersharing system and postconflict experience offer lessons in consensusbuilding and longtermism. Learning is constrained by:

- Periods without devolved government
- Data complications linked to crossborder dynamics

Implication: Stability and continuity are prerequisites for sustained policy learning.

England – Unfinished devolution

England is in the process of large-scale devolution of powers to the new combined authority model. Participants noted that

- While Greater Manchester illustrates what is possible, its model is not easily replicated
- Incomplete and asymmetric devolution landscape limits both accountability and learning

Implication: Without coherent English devolution, UK-wide learning remains structurally imbalanced.

Three Critical Gaps

1. The competition trap

Devolution is often framed as a zero-sum contest, reinforced by media narratives and political incentives. Policy differences are presented as wins or failures rather than experiments.

2. Data infrastructure deficit

Participants consistently highlighted:

- Misaligned indicators and timescales
- Inconsistent definitions
- Statistical boundaries that do not match governance structures

This prevents meaningful comparison and weakens evidence informed decisionmaking.

3. Institutional capacity gap

Cross-nation learning relies heavily on individual relationships rather than systems. Many organisations lack:

- Devolution literacy
- Skills in comparative analysis
- Formal spaces to exchange insight

What Needs to Change: A Practical Framework
A Five-Point Action Framework for Cross-Nation Learning

Realising the full potential of democratic devolution requires a deliberate shift from informal, ad-hoc exchanges to systematic, institutionalised learning. The following five areas set out what needs to change, both immediately and over the medium term.

1. **Institutional architecture must be strengthened**
Comparative policy learning should be embedded as a core purpose of the UK's intergovernmental machinery, not treated as an optional add-on.

- In the short term, this means using the Council of Nations and Regions as a forum not only for dispute resolution, but for structured learning and shared problem-solving.

- For this we should also look to relations with the Republic of Ireland. Whilst it is outside the architecture of UK IGR, there is great scope for engagement with Irish policymakers on shared learning and challenges. The comparative role of the British-Irish Council should be strengthened, and inter-parliamentary cooperation on scrutiny and evidence formalised, so that legislatures as well as executives are part of the learning system.

- Over time, this must evolve beyond reliance on individual relationships towards durable, resourced knowledge-exchange structures that survive political change.

2. **Data must be made fit for devolution**
Effective learning is impossible without comparable, trusted evidence.

- In the immediate term, sub-national datasets need to be expanded and aligned so that they reflect real governance boundaries rather than legacy statistical units.

- Shared definitions should be agreed where possible, enabling meaningful comparison without flattening national context or policy intent.

- Over the medium term, governments and data bodies should work towards real-time, comparable datasets across key policy areas, allowing policy decisions to be informed by timely cross-nation insight rather than retrospective analysis.

3. **A culture of comparative learning must be actively built**
Participants consistently highlighted that many policymakers and researchers remain "devolution aware" but not "devolution able".

- In the short term, skills in comparative thinking need to be developed across the policy and research ecosystem, alongside a conscious challenge to assumptions that England should act as the default benchmark.

- Over time, comparative analysis should become a routine part of policy development, scrutiny and evaluation, rather than a specialist or exceptional activity.

4. **Democratic renewal is essential to sustain learning**
Cross-nation learning is weakened where accountability and scrutiny are uneven.

- Immediate priorities include addressing representation and accountability gaps in England's incomplete devolution settlement and strengthening scrutiny capacity in contexts where governance is fragile or periodically disrupted.

- Over the medium term, greater effort is needed to improve public understanding of how devolution works, what it enables, and why learning across systems benefits citizens in every nation.

5. **Innovation must be amplified rather than isolated**
The UK already functions as a set of policy laboratories, but the lessons generated are too often lost.

- In the short term, governments and research institutions should systematically document and share successful policy innovations, and support "fast- follower" approaches where adaptation is appropriate.

- Over time, this requires a shift in mindset: treating the UK as a connected policy laboratory, rather than a set of isolated silos competing for recognition.

What success would look like

- In the short term, success would mean regular, formal learning exchanges between governments and the availability of comparable datasets in priority policy areas.

- Within three to five years, policy innovations would be routinely evaluated and shared, and research and policy institutions would demonstrate genuine comparative capability.

- In the longer term, shared learning would lead to demonstrably improved policy outcomes, with devolution understood not as a competitive threat, but as a collective asset for the whole of the UK.

The call to action

PolicyWISE's roundtables show that structured, multilateral spaces can unlock that potential. The next phase must move from insight to implementation; embedding learning into how the UK governs, scrutinises, and delivers policy for citizens across all its nations.

PolicyWISE

The Open University

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.

Get in Touch:

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Our offer:

PolicyWISE works cross-nation on comparative research and knowledge exchange which will change and improve how governments and academics work together in and across nations to solve policy challenges.

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.

Dewi Knight, Director

Our funder

DANGOOR EDUCATION

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.