Cross-nation Policy Learning and Research Series:

England Roundtable Full Report

Introduction & Overview

In April 2025, PolicyWISE organised a roundtable in Manchester to examine cross-nation and administration policy learning during the devolution era so far, with a particular focus on England's relationships, and devolution within England.

The event brought together senior policymakers, analysts, academics, think-tank colleagues, regional leaders, economists, and parliamentary officials – from across England, 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 final event in our cross-nation roundtable series, following previous sessions in **Edinburgh (May 2024)**, **Cardiff (July 2024)**, and **Belfast (November 2024)**.

The series has promoted comparative learning across administrations, aiming to inform and improve policymaking across the nations, through comparative and cross-nation learning.

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. The representation of England – its regions, and as a nation – and the challenges of identity.

2. There is more to be done to build England's regional data infrastructure, and statistical alignment with governance and policy boundaries.

3. Asymmetric devolution has made cross-administration policy learning difficult, but there is interest in doing more.

Our roundtable takeaways were:

The unfinished map of governing England is a significant barrier to genuine policy learning which could deliver for citizens.

Lots can be learnt from the successful Greater Manchester model – particularly its approach to partnership – but it will take work to replicate in areas with different historical approaches.

Devolution capacity and capability – at national and regional levels – should be embedded in policymaking. Current gaps lead to significant missed potential.

Representation of England and challenges of identity.

Our discussion highlighted that the current map of devolution in England is incomplete and that without full coverage, English mayors cannot fully speak as "the voice of England". The current asymmetry was viewed as a democratic and strategic gap for representation of all people living in England. This creates a challenge for policy learning and collaboration within England, and across the UK.

The success of combined authorities depends not just on powers and funding, but also on perceptions of identity and legitimacy. Regions with weaker identities may struggle to engage the public or justify the role of elected mayors. This raises deeper questions about how new governance structures are rooted in place.

Attendees reflected on the challenge of navigating political differences within combined authorities. GMCA's progress is partly attributed to a shared political culture and long-term cooperative working. Due to not having that shared history, it is anticipated that more newly formed combined authorities may face tensions which challenge collective decision-making.

It was also noted that devolution within England has been shaped by a stop-start history due to changing commitment from central government. Despite this, there was consensus that further devolution is now inevitable, evidenced in part by the absence of major parties campaigning to reverse it. Yet there remains considerable uncertainty about what a fully devolved England will ultimately look like.

Currently only England has directly elected mayors or equivalents, although the representative group is named 'UK Mayors'.

Manchester as a case study

The roundtable met in Manchester at the end of April 2025, just before the local elections in England, which included four mayoral elections. The move towards greater devolution of powers was central to our discussion, alongside the English Devolution White Paper which sets out a "permanent shift of power away from Whitehall".

Manchester was chosen as the meeting location, reflecting its high profile in the devolution landscape and the leadership role of key figures such as Andy Burnham in shaping devolved governance for England.

Alongside the West Midlands, Greater Manchester benefits from an integrated settlement arrangement, providing a consolidated funding pot that enhances the Authority's autonomy and strategic control over budgetary decisions.

In some ways, GMCA sets the way for others to follow and has been a successful example of bringing together a group of local authorities under one banner. However, the journey of Manchester has taken 30 years – most areas are not going to have anything like that kind of time.

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, was seen by participants as an influential and experienced figure, with experience of working in both central and local government. He is well known and has a good public profile.

Greater Manchester also has a history of cooperative working between the local councils and leaders, in part due to the dominance of local Labour leaders (although there has been Conservative leaders historically and currently).

Data infrastructure and statistical alignment

As with our other roundtables, discussion included a consideration of data collection, with participants noting that alignment of data with emerging boundaries is a problem. The question was asked (and not yet answered) about what happens when the newly formed combined authorities cross the 9 statistical regions as set out by the office for national statistics?

Conversations covered that the lack of consistent, comparable data across emerging regions and devolved authorities remains a barrier to learning. As devolution evolves, there is a need to align data with new boundaries and ensure robust mechanisms for performance monitoring and accountability.

Further concern was mooted that historically, there has been low voter turnout in mayoral elections, how to meet the challenges in embedding this new form of democratic decision making with low public approval or even awareness.

Improved, and more comprehensive, spatial data should be an important national and regional objective. It would support local decision-making, and accountability, but also play a role in re-balancing how national decision-makers appreciate the local and regional dimensions of policy development, decisions, and delivery.

Asymmetric devolution and relations with devolved nations?

How do we bring together areas who do not feel bonded together?

Our discussion covered how we bring together areas that have little common identity – and no history of common decision making within a regional structure.

For example, the ports in Kent serve as critical gateways, processing cargo that supports supply chains across every part of the UK, therefore place-based decision making will need to consider national and international needs as well as local and regional.

Moves towards a more collective form of governance and working – with shared identification of strategic issues that cross regional and national responsibilities was a key consideration.

This discussion reflected a sense that while individuals are interested in learning across nations there can be institutional "slowness" in actually developing the mechanisms or culture to enable to this to happen.

There was also agreement that there are complicated questions around accountability for public money with the move towards devolution, where does scrutiny of decisions sit?

It was noted that the nations have legislatures holding to them account and there is not an equivalent in the English regions (apart from the halfway house of the London Assembly).

Cross-nation learning: untapped potential. Our discussion highlighted the sense from participants that the move towards more devolution in England has not been informed by learning from the devolved nations. While participants expressed interest in learning from devolved nations, cultural and institutional inertia was cited as a barrier.

Building on the insights from our roundtables in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, the Manchester roundtable reinforced the importance of both local context and shared learning across nations and administrations.

Roundtable Takeaways

› **Devolution in England is still evolving, creating a representative gap for people living in areas not currently covered by a combined authority. This is a barrier to genuine policy learning and co-ordination within England, and across the UK.**

› **The Greater Manchester model is viewed as a successful example of collaborative partnership but is not easily replicable in areas with less history of working together or less experienced leaders.**

› **Cross-nation learning is not embedded in policy making – addressing this would improve policymaker capacity and capability, whilst also becoming more devolution literate.**
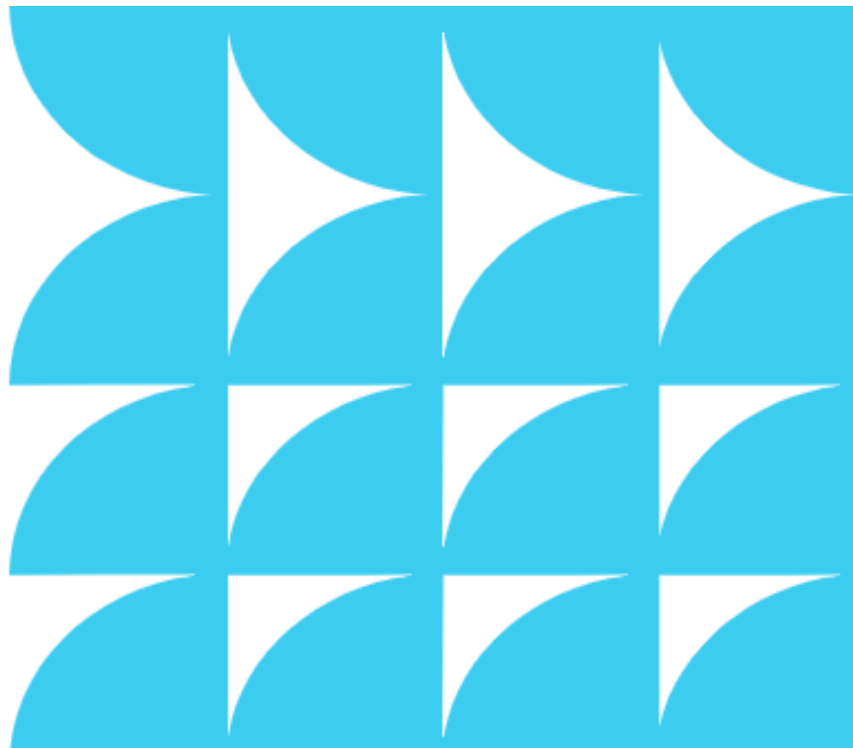
Conclusion

As the final event in our cross-nation roundtable series, the discussion in Manchester provided a timely and thought-provoking reflection on 25 years of devolution. Whilst the story of devolution within England is still unfolding, there is an appetite to learn the lessons from devolved policymaking in the nations.

While Greater Manchester offers valuable lessons in leadership, collaboration and integrated governance, its experience also underscores the time, trust and infrastructure needed to make devolution work.

What came through strongly in Manchester, and across our earlier sessions in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast is the untapped potential of cross-nation learning.

Despite structural and informal barriers, participants expressed a clear appetite to work across boundaries, sectors and disciplines. Whether through better comparative research, improved data systems or more information networks there is a clear recognition of the benefits of learning from one another.

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Dewi Knight, Director

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Our funder

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