



PolicyWISE



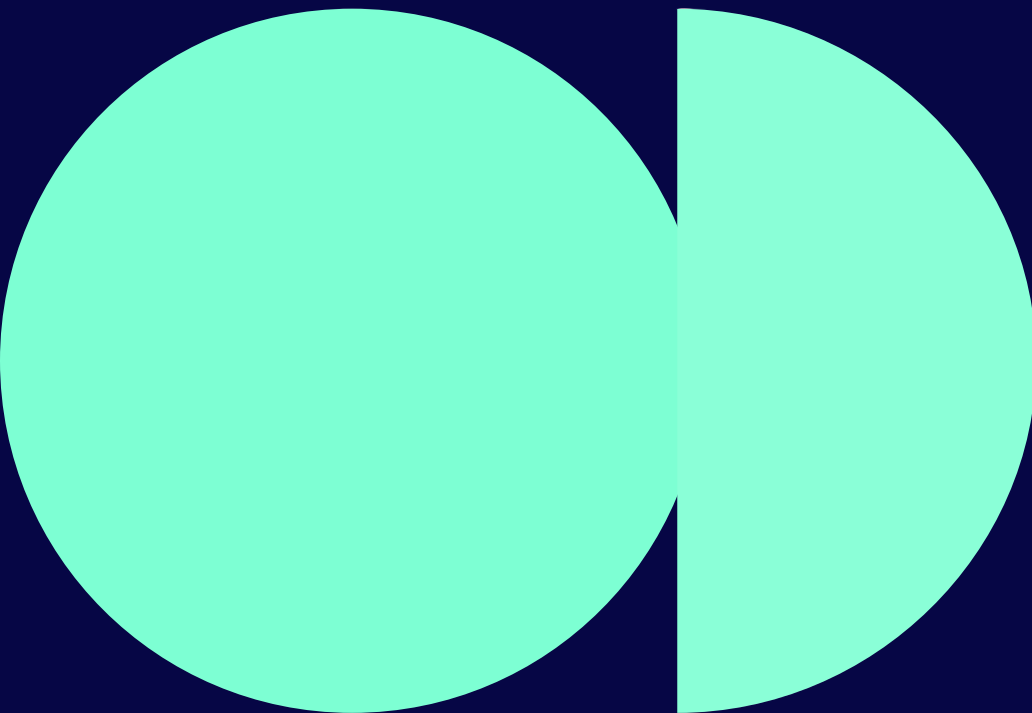
The strength to co-operate

The case for collaborative governance to achieve shared policy goals across the United Kingdom, 2026 – 2029

A report from PolicyWISE, sharing lessons and analysis from public polling, a cross-nation roundtable series, interviews with key stakeholders, academic literature, and practice in the UK and internationally. The recommendations and conclusions are those of the report's authors.

June 2026

Dewi Knight, Catherine May, Hannah Ellis



Suggested citation: Knight, D. May, C. Ellis, H. (2026) 'The strength to co-operate' PolicyWISE, The Open University.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank everyone who attended PolicyWISE's series of cross-nation roundtables, everyone who has shared insights with us as part of our ongoing work to inform and improve cross-administration working, our research collaborators at the Bennett School of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, the continuing support of colleagues at The Open University and Dangoor Education, and our friends at More in Common for their work on the polling in Scotland and Wales.

Contents

(1) Foreword	04
(2) Recommended policy priorities of strategic shared interest	06
(3) Policies of Shared Strategic Interest – Making Collaborative Governance a Reality	09
(4) Practical collaborative governance – where there is a will...	13
(5) Societal Challenges	15
• (5a) Safe and Prosperous Communities	15
• (5b) AI, Data and the future of public services	17
• (5c) International trade and security	19
(6) Canada: A Case Study	21
(7) Conclusion	24
(8) References	25

(1) Foreword

This report brings together recent PolicyWISE researchⁱ and analysisⁱⁱ, discussions at a cross-nation roundtable in Westminster, and ongoing engagement with policymakers, civic leaders and academics across the nations and regions of Britain and Ireland.

Drawing on this extensive engagement and work, we recommend that the UK's intergovernmental relations (IGR), for the period running from May 2026 until a possible UK general election in 2028/29, focuses on **selected policy priorities** which are of shared interest across the nations and regions.

Our report title '**The strength to co-operate**' draws on President Eisenhower's analysisⁱⁱⁱ during his last year in office that securing a state's "strength" (economic, spiritual, intellectual, defensive)^{iv} means it can, and must, "co-operate".

We are using it today in the sense that the UK's multi-governance context is a strength and advantage, but it needs to use this strength to co-operate and collaborate on the pressing issues of shared concern and importance.

We set out the case for a **new approach to intergovernmental relations and cross-nation working**. It builds on our research recommendations for a more collaborative way of governing and sets out the **urgent policy issues of common concern** across administrations. Each of these issues would benefit from a greater sense of **shared endeavour, of mutual understanding** across governments, and **collaborative action** where it can be agreed.

In making these recommendations, we recognise that the **political landscape across these islands is becoming more diverse, and potentially more complex**^v on constitutional and political perspectives. On the one-hand, parties of the left and centre-left lead each of the four governments (and the biggest mayoral authorities in England) and have common policy interests. On the other hand, Reform UK now has a significant leadership role in England and will play a prominent part in shaping debates in both Scotland and Wales. The combination of three nationalist First Ministers **marks a new era for UK intergovernmental relations, and the opportunity for multilateral and multinational governance**.

We argue – and our research demonstrates it is the expectation of the public^{vi} – that it is imperative that heads of governments, ministers and regional leaders find a way to **navigate these complexities, work better together**, and identify their **shared areas of concern** and interest.

To meet this moment in a collaborative manner – whilst the UK faces significant geopolitical, economic and societal challenges – would mean that we are finally harnessing the full capacities and capabilities of the UK's multi-governance context.

This report is aimed at policymakers, civil servants, political leaders, parliamentarians and parliamentary officials, regional leaders and officials, and all those with an interest in principled and practical policy co-operation across our governing authorities. We share it in the spirit of helping our leaders and policymakers navigate the complex, cross-cutting and crucial policy challenges facing all parts of the UK.

Dewi Knight,
Director, PolicyWISE

Our objectives in setting out recommended issues of shared strategic interest, which would be at the heart of intergovernmental relations for the next period, are that:

- It gives the UK's system of intergovernmental relations a renewed focus – on common and collective interests.
- It helps demonstrate to the public that the UK's leaders and authorities are willing to work together for the common good.
- It provides the opportunity for co-ordinated action and shared programmes where appropriate.
- It allows for greater policy learning and mutual understanding across the diverse politics of our governing authorities.
- It helps ensure that policy officials across our governments are given the authority to work in partnership across territorial, sector, and jurisdictional boundaries.

(2) Recommended policy priorities of strategic shared interest

Whilst the UK’s system of intergovernmental relations – multi-lateral and bilateral – needs flexibility in how our leaders, ministers, and policymakers shape agendas, it urgently needs a collective focus on major policy issues which are of shared concern and importance.

The issues presented below, and set out in more detail overleaf, are of concern to all administrations, no matter their political or constitutional perspectives.

Delivering for citizens across the UK requires more mutual understanding across administrations, co-ordinated strategic attention, and a more urgent use of practical intergovernmental relations.

Cost of Living

Energy, including security, sovereignty, infrastructure

Relations with the EU & opportunities for growth

Ending violence against women & girls

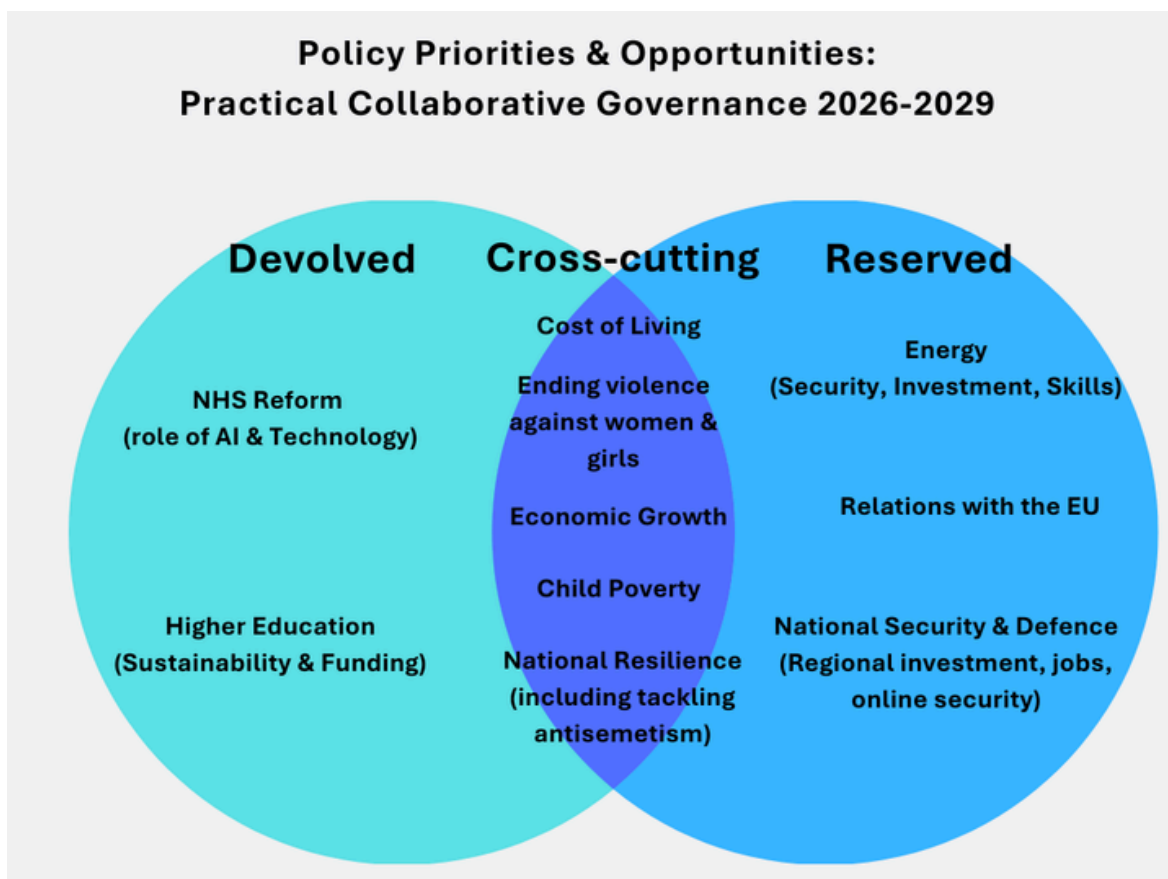
Health service reform, particularly the role of AI and technology

National Security & Defence, including collaboration on skills & investment

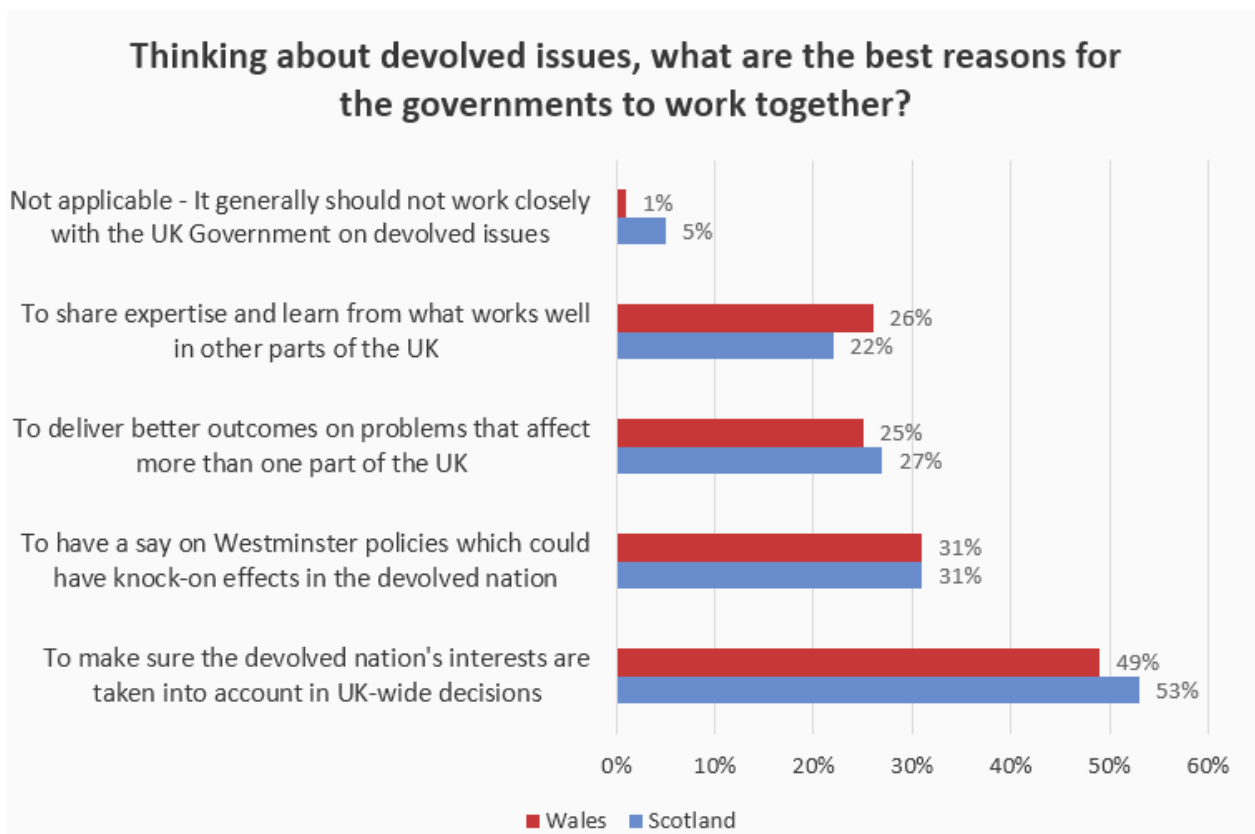
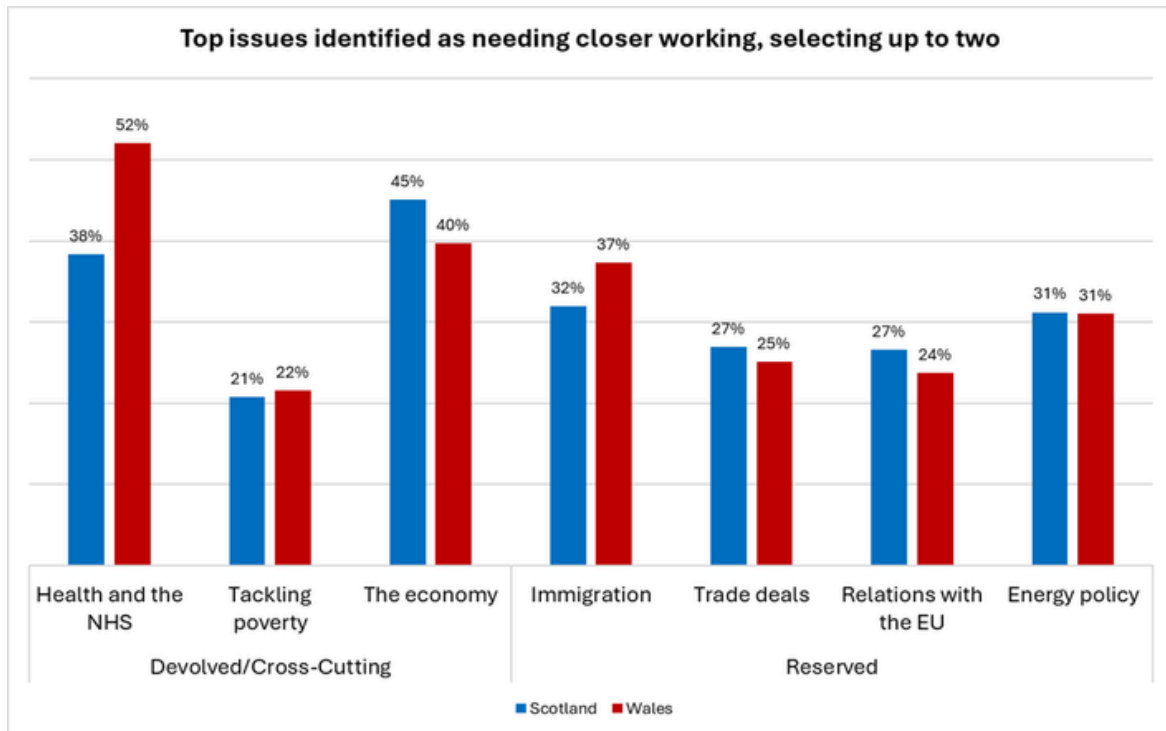
Child Poverty

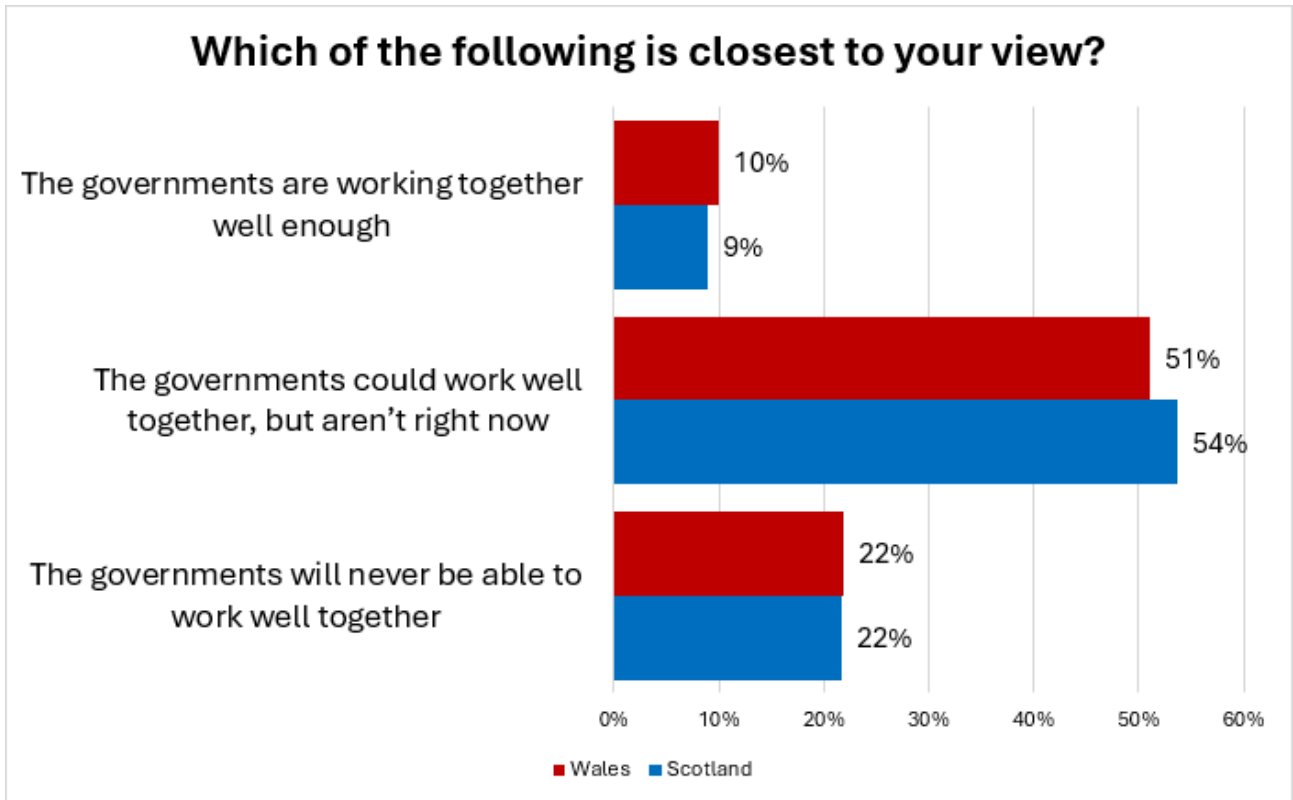
National Resilience

Higher education funding and sustainability



Attitudes in Scotland and Wales towards policy co-operation





Responses to polling conducted by More in Common on behalf of PolicyWISE between 30 January – 10 February 2026. 1,035 were polled in Scotland, and 806 in Wales. The poll surveyed attitudes towards inter-governmental relations, policy priorities, and policy co-operation across governments.

(3) Policies of Shared Strategic Interest – Making Collaborative Governance a Reality

In this era of permacrisis^{vii} we need a mature IGR system which enables participants to work together across boundaries to achieve shared policy goals and address major challenges. No matter the constitutional, or political, preferences of our governments, those goals and challenges exist in, and across, our jurisdictions. A more diverse political landscape makes such co-operation an even greater necessity.

Historically, there has been a lack of opportunities and structures which enable collaboration, policy learning and co-operation on areas of mutual interest.^{viii} New initiatives such as the Council of Nations & Regions can contribute to addressing this challenge. But it needs flexibility and positive engagement from all governing authorities, and a willingness to collectively identify issues of shared concern and importance, within jurisdictions and across the UK, no matter whether devolved, concurrent or reserved.

In this section we present our recommended policy priorities, with further details about the context and necessity for collaboration.

Each of these issues are interconnected across the boundaries and borders of our governing authorities. They are matters which would benefit from shared strategic attention, and greater urgency in the use of the intergovernmental capabilities. Only by doing this can each government secure better outcomes for citizens across the UK.

A focus on these issues also provides an opportunity for our legislatures – individually and collectively – to engage positively with intergovernmental relations, monitor progress, and scrutinise developments within their jurisdictions and across the UK. We welcome the recent recommendation of a Scottish Parliament committee inquiry^{ix} into these matters, and its recommendation for greater inter-parliamentary working.

Through recent PolicyWISE polling, discussions at the roundtable, and ongoing engagement with stakeholders across the UK, we have identified the following policy issues which would benefit from this ‘collaborative governance’ approach, starting immediately in this post-2026 elections period.

Our Policy Recommendations

Cost of Living

The **Cost of Living** is at the forefront of the public's concerns. We welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to the issue.^x However, no single government across the UK, including the Westminster Government, can address Cost of Living issues without collaboration with other administrations.

This is because it requires macroeconomic action, social security levers, and favourable trading conditions, as well as help with the cost of public services such as school meals or transport, childcare and business/employment support. Each of these cuts across jurisdictional boundaries and responsibilities.

Energy

A related policy matter is **Energy**. This would include planning, energy security, regional investment and skills, as well as an appreciation for the UK's approach to international relations and engagement which directly affects energy supply, investment and security here.

Cross-nation commitments to clean energy production, funding and jobs could be further harnessed through co-operation on public-private investment, supply chains, and energy efficiency. On this issue where localised decision-making is heavily influenced by geopolitical trends and international competitors, we should seek to avoid the 'closed system fallacy'^{xi} of greater intra-UK competition and instead see how the UK's authorities can co-operate for an international competitive advantage. IGR should be used to agree what energy sovereignty means in practice as a shared endeavour across the UK, and how it relates to planning, investment and infrequency responsibilities.

Relations with the EU

On the theme of international engagement, **relations with the EU** were a priority for people in Scotland and Wales for greater UK and Devolved Government co-operation.

We note the Chancellor of the Exchequer's recent commitment to a "deeper relationship"^{xii} between the UK and the European Union as a means towards "higher growth and investment, more jobs and consumer benefits." This should not be restricted to the UK Government working with European partners, but UK-wide co-operation to identify collective (and specific) interests in trade, investment, education, energy and labour market.

Violence against women and girls

Each government is taking strategic action to address **violence against women and girls**. It is a societal challenge that runs across jurisdictional responsibilities, including criminal justice, education, online regulation, public health and much more. A clear sign from all governments that they are willing to collaborate, share learning, and co-ordinate action where possible, would demonstrate that IGR can be a positive force for tackling major societal issues.

The Irish Government is a full partner in five-jurisdiction policy exchanges on this topic^{xiii} – it is a potential model for other societal challenges where north-south and east-west working across all governments helps progress policy learning and collaboration.

NHS

While the **NHS** is a devolved responsibility, it is frequently identified as an area where intergovernmental cooperation is essential to address persistent and shared challenges across health and social care systems.

We've been pleased to see commitments from the four ministers (prior to the 2026 elections) through the Interministerial Group for Health and Social Care^{xiv}. We recommend that the next period offers a constructive space for governments to collectively identify and share thinking on long-term health service reform, in particular the challenges and opportunities related to AI and Tech in healthcare.

Taken further, the role of AI and Tech in other public services, such as education, would also benefit from new ways of working in partnership and where information and best practice can be exchanged.

Poverty

As highlighted by Glasgow University's work^{xv}, public policy approaches to **poverty** (and child poverty) suffer from siloed decision-making, and a lack of collaboration and integration. There are significant opportunities for better multi-level governance approaches to child poverty issues, but it needs leadership from our heads of government to collectively agree on the practical collaborative approaches to policy development and delivery.

Higher education

Each **higher education** system across the UK (university sustainability, student funding, higher education's economic and civic contribution) is facing significant challenge. Whilst it is largely a devolved issue, there are significant interplays between devolved decision-making and UK Treasury conditions^{xvi}, as well as UK-wide matters related to immigration, student market and research & innovation.

The sharing of best practice, and challenges, and a genuine four-nations review of UK higher education may help each jurisdiction address its own context, as well as identifying shared actions.

Resilience

As set out in the UK Government **Resilience** Action Plan^{xvii} "all four nations of the United Kingdom share the common objective of protecting citizens from crises, with resilience encompassing both reserved and devolved matters." We note, and welcome, the ongoing cross-administration work (including English regional government) to map critical infrastructure and prepare for potential future shocks and crises such as another pandemic.

Intergovernmental political leadership should continue to focus on such strategic preparedness through a multi-governance lens and draw on the recommendations of the 2024/25 Heywood Fellowship's long-term national strategy project and playbook^{xviii}. All government communications must prioritise geographic clarity, especially when it relates to public safety, national emergencies or legal restrictions.

Antisemitism

We welcome the Prime Minister’s “whole of society” commitment to tackle **antisemitism**, and efforts to bring together a multi-sector approach. The UK Government should take this further and draw on the recent ‘national cabinet’ approach in Australia, to co-ordinate a national effort alongside devolved government leaders.

Tackling antisemitism – and hate crime in general – requires cross UK co-ordination, policy learning, and shared action. It is not a London, Manchester, or English issue alone, and should be a focus for practical cross-administration working.

National security and defence

We recommend that the Prime Minister uses IGR fora to share and test his own strategic thinking on geopolitical issues with devolved leaders – recognising how fast-moving current challenges are.

In particular, as the UK seeks to address short and longer term **national security and defence** matters (including but not exclusively through the Strategic Defence Review), the fiscal and policy implications, as well as the UK-wide collaboration needed on skills and investment, fora such as the Council of the Nations and Regions should identify, explore and address shared challenges on these issues – recognising it as not solely the remit of the UK Government^{xx}. Ensuring security at home and overseas is the major challenge of the day^{xx}.

Next Steps

We recognise that these issues straddle the ‘geometry’ of reserved, concurrent and devolved powers. The public (in Scotland and Wales according to our polling) are ahead of their governments and leaders on the necessity of collaborative governance to deal with their priority issues.

With an even more complex and competitive political landscape following the May 2026 elections, better co-operation must be a priority to reduce the cost of living, reform public services and grow the economy. The different governments and authorities across the UK – no matter their constitutional and political perspectives – should recognise that to achieve many of their core objectives, they need to work with others.

There is now a window of opportunity, with our new parliaments and governments in Scotland and Wales. We share these potential issues of shared interest as a constructive contribution to a new spirit of collaborative governance across our nations and regions. In the next section, we reflect on what we’ve learnt in our series of roundtables, culminating with the London roundtable, about how to practically approach intergovernmental relations in this way.

(4) Practical collaborative governance – where there is a will...

The social contract between government and the public – across the UK – is at stretching point^{xxi}. Growth is not strong enough to address the mismatch between demand and the supply of public services. And we have already highlighted the challenges around energy, technology and security.

Although the leaders of our different administrations increasingly come from a broader range of parties, there is an opportunity for collective action, for strategic planning and for new alliances which address the policy issues of that social contract.

Despite the seriousness of these challenges, and a promised reset of the UK's governing relationships by the Prime Minister, current improvements were described at the London roundtable as "modest" and lacking in consistency. As such, they are considered to have failed in reaching their potential.

This not only affects how IGR is perceived by policymakers but the public, too, with current IGR machinery often being viewed as performative. These risk meetings becoming talking shops that address nothing but non-challenging issues.

"Good faith" political disclosure and a "disposition to cooperate" were considered at the roundtable to be more influential in the success of IGR than formal codification. Personal relationships were also cited as a driving force, including those developed informally, although the personalities of those involved could still shape the outcomes.

Consequently, to ensure a parity of esteem and prevent any single participant from becoming overpowered, attendees suggested adopting a "rotating chair, rotating host" model for high-level gatherings. Further suggestions included appointing dedicated ministers for England to resolve the confusion surrounding the Prime Minister's dual hat role and ensure England is not always viewed as the norm from which others diverge.

Participants went on to agree that a primary benefit of formal meetings is the opportunity to develop personal contacts outside of official structures. A combination of formal guardrails and informal work was also credited as improving collaboration. This conveys the diversity at play when we talk of IGR and the importance of enabling continued dialogue outside of scheduled meetings.

Government officials are keen to stress that intergovernmental cooperation is pursued, even if perceptions would suggest otherwise. And various reasons can be attributed to this adverse portrayal, not least a failure in communication.

The internal "Whitehall sausage machine", as described at the London roundtable, was considered to be slow in adapting to devolution, leading to issues stagnating as they are passed between departments. Other attendees commented that governmental teams can also display contradictory "Jekyll and Hyde" behaviours, despite sharing policy responsibilities, which discourages collaboration.

This is further exacerbated by an asymmetry in capacity between administrations, with some officials left completing intergovernmental work on the side of their desk as it isn't an official part of their role – an imbalance that encompasses funding, resources, and skill.

The UK's frequent electoral cycles and different political calendars can also disincentivise good IGR, as parties of government inevitably shift into parties of competition as elections draw near.

A widespread lack of devolution literacy among politicians and officials is another major barrier. This knowledge gap leads to significant missed potential in policy outcomes and risks fostering Anglophobia when English needs are conflated with UK-wide objectives. An unwillingness of policymakers to state when decisions apply only to England not only causes confusion but is also a contributing factor to the tensions surrounding national politics.

Similarly, the term 'divergence' is viewed with some ambivalence in policy circles. There exists shared concern that it implies a norm (namely, England) from which policy design shifts, which undermines the fundamental benefit of devolution. That is, a capacity to act on local, regional and national needs as one size does not fit all.

Working more closely with Ireland, across the range of issues, was seen to be a positive development at the London roundtable. North-South, as well East-West, collaboration was considered to be as important in a Northern Ireland context, but also more broadly for working across the jurisdictions of these islands given the balance of similar sized populations and public services. Therefore, each government of the UK, and the UK's IGR structures, should seek positive policy learning and collaboration opportunities with Irish authorities.

(5) Societal Challenges

The shared policy issues which we've identified fall into three categories of societal challenges. These run across the geometry of legislative and policymaking jurisdictional powers, and across ministerial and departmental responsibilities in each, and every, administration. They also align with the central functions of the state that were identified within The Rycroft Review^{xvii}, namely defence of the realm, upholding the rule of law, and sustaining the UK's democracy.

They are:

- Safe and Prosperous Communities
- AI, Data and the future of public services
- International trade and security

We set these out below, in their wider context, as a potentially helpful way for intergovernmental policymakers to organise and plan their collaboration and consideration.

(5a) Safe and Prosperous Communities

In the pursuit of safe and prosperous communities, governments across the UK are having to address shared challenges that span several different policy areas.

Tackling 'Violence against women and girls' (VAWG) is a key example, as it introduces a shared policy space where no single government can act successfully in isolation to address the inter-connected policy issues. The effectiveness of any national strategy will therefore largely depend on intergovernmental coordination, including shared understanding of data, outcomes, and policy definitions.

A lack of mutual understanding, policy learning and partnership working on a pressing societal challenge such as ending VAWG can prove harmful – to the ability of government to act in the public interest, and to protecting citizens from harm.

We were pleased to see the UK Government's new strategy^{xviii} (mainly for England) says that it had *"been informed by best practices drawn from the approaches of all three Devolved Governments. We are committed to sharing learning and best practice to make our work complementary... and we will continue working (to) ensure a coordinated... response."* This is an exemplar in Whitehall avoiding "central chauvinism" and engaging in a practical and equitable way with the other governments.

Antisocial behaviour is another issue that can be recognised across borders, but how it manifests at the community-level very much depends on the local context. Education, justice, and housing are just three different policy areas that intersect under this heading, bringing agencies and commissioners into the discussion, while local councils have been empowered through the introduction of faster-acting flexible powers.

The cross-cutting nature of these societal challenges also emphasises the need for comparable and translatable data – not just between nations and regions but between policy areas, too, as viewing in isolation will fail to convey a truly representative picture.

Decentralising fiscal responsibilities introduces another opportunity for authorities to experiment, whilst learning from other approaches and sharing best practice and challenges. The current debate^{xxiv} around tourist taxes demonstrates this clearly, highlighting how different fiscal tools can produce both innovation and controversy.

Building on this, there is a growing interest in considering how a wider set of fiscal levers can enable devolved authorities to raise their own funds and strengthen economic resilience. Nevertheless, the associated issues are inherently intergovernmental, with outcomes dependent on the fiscal systems employed so much as the policies themselves.

As England embarks on further tax devolution, there is an opportunity for dedicated policy learning^{xxv} and partnership working on the ‘how’ of devolving fiscal powers^{xxvi}, as well as the ‘what’ in how these levers are used, especially as growth and addressing the cost of living are matters of shared concern across the UK.

From an economic perspective, ‘catch up growth’ is a developmental approach that can enable nations or regions to grow without relying on innovation or new technological progress, but on how it uses (e.g.) existing technology, planning regulations, labour market, and energy. The UK is “*not used to thinking of itself as a developing economy*”^{xxvii} where catch-up growth is more common, but there are multiple marginal improvements that could be considered and shared across our authorities. This may benefit from a constructive space shared between governments where an emphasis on outcomes, rather than processes, is agreed. Moving together away from the “*lawyerly state*”^{xxviii} and collectively identifying the barriers and interests which prevent growth and a focus on outcomes.

With that in mind, a comparison can be drawn with Greater Manchester. In particular, this combined authority is utilising an integrated pipeline^{xxix} for investment alongside strategy, planning and governance reforms to deliver growth and economic returns that exceed both its own historical performance and that seen elsewhere across the UK.

Different approaches to a problem are a positive development in public policy, made possible by devolution, yet they also represent a starting point for valuable discussions around evidence-driven and context-aware policymaking. Preventative health measures, such as those pursued by GMCA^{xxx}, illustrate this further and serve to deliver a more productive economy that is complemented by a reduced demand being placed long-term on the healthcare system.

Preventative and place-based approaches can respond quicker to unexpected events and build more trusted relationships with the public, as seen during the Covid pandemic. Homelessness and social housing are two further areas that would benefit from such a shift, while rapid policymaking^{xxxi} serves as a complimentary tool.

Carnegie UK’s focus on collective wellbeing^{xxxii} similarly emphasises that policies should be gauged not just by economic outcomes but by how they enhance the social, environmental, and democratic wellbeing of communities. But to be effective, this approach requires significant inter-governmental collaboration as the outcome measures cannot be delivered or improved upon alone.

(5b) AI, Data, and the Future of Public Services

As governments look to integrate AI and other emerging technologies into public services, they are having to navigate several interrelated challenges that are both new and pre-existing. By the very nature of its application, these issues are inherently cross-cutting but are further exacerbated by an asymmetry in capability and investment.

Nevertheless, its potential to increase efficiencies and improve outcomes make it an inevitable feature in modern public policy. As a result, concerted efforts must be made to maximise the gains while minimising the risks. Those risks are greater – for each administration, and as a collective – without focused cross-administration policy learning, exchanging best practice and lessons, and co-ordinated action where appropriate.

AI is being widely adopted in everyday life, which means it is expected that public services will do the same. However, the increased complexity and amplified risk that the public domain presents cannot be underestimated. That being said, the technology is already demonstrating its potential in public policy areas.

For example, a recent trial involving Microsoft Copilot and over 30,000 NHS employees has found that more than 400,000 staff hours a month can be saved through administrative support^{xxxiii} – demonstrating its ability to save money while increasing operational efficiencies^{xxxiv}. Additional Copilot trials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs^{xxxv} and Department for Business and Trade^{xxxvi} were reported as delivering a more inclusive working environment for disabled and neurodivergent employees^{xxxvii}.

As similar initiatives are pursued elsewhere, sector-specific challenges that span nations and regions must be approached as a collective. There are civil-service wide challenges on technical and operational capabilities to interrogate and understand in relation to the application of AI within policy development, public services delivery and the social contract with the public.

In education, this might involve considering how AI can support learning without sacrificing core skills; how assessment can remain fair when access to digital resources is uneven, both at home and in the classroom; and how teachers can come to use these tools effectively.

A similar challenge is faced within the healthcare system, with the introduction of technologies risking a greater divergence in clinical outcomes if capabilities are not shared equitably across a nation or region. A further risk to collaboration arises from the 'leaderboard effect', whereby comparisons can prove discouraging to those performing less well when compared to others.

There is, however, a risk that AI is seen to be a stopgap rather than a tool to be embedded in longer-term strategies. Governments and public services will have to balance short-term operational gains with the longer-term implications on service and system design. This raises questions about any government's ability to develop and attract a skilled workforce, to implement a robust assurance framework, and safeguard the public against any issues pertaining to its procurement or operation.

Building on that notion of public trust, we cannot discuss AI without reference to data. This includes the data used in training sets for the models underlying the systems as well as any collected through their use. Specifically, a model's success when translated into real-world use depends heavily on how representative the data was during its development.

When data fails to reflect those it is intended to serve, there is a risk of reinforcing existing inequalities. This is further confounded by the incompatibility of data between policy areas and across the UK. Consequently, there is a need for transparency – in both a system's creation and its implementation – that will allow the public to build trust in any decisions it plays a part in.

This will demand a shared responsibility across governments and a commitment to introduce standardised data structures. A Chief Digital Officers' Council was suggested at the London Roundtable as one way to improve standards while coordinating the rate of development across the UK.

Safeguarding that confidence should be another concern for those in authority – and where cross-administration working and communication will be a necessity – as the public will expect clarity on how automated decisions are made along with who will be held accountable if (when) things go wrong. This is especially important in public services where the judgments made have a tangible, and at times irreversible, impact on quality of life, or appeals are an expected part of the process.

In cases where external providers are relied upon, there will be an increasing need to ensure they comply to the same standards as the UK public expects and governments enforce. Wider questions also arise around the sovereignty of technologies and where the regulatory/ethical frameworks governing these systems ultimately lie (e.g. Palantir-NHS England^{xxxviii}).

Adapted systems can often be deployed more quickly, yet there is a risk of importing assumptions within the data or security vulnerabilities owing to its unintended dual use.

Comparatively, development from the ground up is more resource intensive – demanding sustained investment and technical capabilities that may not be evenly distributed across administrations – but allows for greater alignment and transparency. It would also be more appropriate in services that involve children, owing to their heightened vulnerability and need for greater safeguarding against technologically facilitated harms.

Both choices also carry implications around the sovereignty of data, especially concerning where it is hosted, processed and who has access. In particular, the public's right to control its data, reinforced through regulations such as GDPR, must not be overlooked here.

Right across this societal challenge, we need our governments to share best practice, and to collectively identify the value of AI in our public services – at the intersection of innovation, accountability, efficiency, public trust, and potential improved outcomes.

(5c) International trade and security

Global developments have introduced several geostrategic implications that will play out over the foreseeable future. Notably, there are also issues that will inevitably cut across all policy areas, reserved, concurrent, and devolved.

Recent events have seen energy transition away from being a resource and into the territory of an economic pawn, able to be weaponised and manipulated for greater effect. This reality will therefore increase discussions around the need to be more energy independent, and what this means in reality for the UK with its multi-level governance context for planning, infrastructure, and investment.

However, that does not necessarily exclude non-green solutions owing to questions around the output and security of green technology; drilling in the North Sea is a prominent example here. With energy production spanning areas of shared responsibility, and bearing consequences that touch upon several more, there will be an increased need to work more closely and effectively together if continuity of supply is to be secured – both for now and the future.

Ireland's National Maritime Security Strategy 2026–2030^{xxxix} and its close cooperation with NATO/Europe are politicised consequences of the nation's strategic importance and vulnerability owing to the critical infrastructure sited within the Irish Sea. To further emphasise the risk, Russian ships have been sighted in the area^{xl}. As a result, this is a shared challenge owing to both its proximity and the UK's joint reliance on the hardware concerned. The same is also true of the UK's critical infrastructure more widely, such as smart ports^{xli}, especially as cyber and hybrid warfare attacks increase (including disinformation via digital channels).

These hostile acts will inevitably target frontline services so much as commercial enterprises, placing a greater emphasis on intergovernmental collaboration to raise awareness and technical skill development. Debates around immigration and border security will also be heightened as migration increases through further global unrest, causing increased divisions between political identities.

Defence innovation and development has gained renewed significance given the geopolitical uncertainties. Reversing the weakened perception of the UK's Armed Forces is also of equal importance, particularly as expectations on their contribution to international security continue to grow. This will require deeper reliance on partnerships such as NATO and AUKUS but also sustained investment at home.

The growing presence of defence firms is helping to foster more positive attitudes in communities that were previously sceptical, as high-value jobs and long-term investment in skill development^{xlii} demonstrate the sector's potential to improve job prospects and raise living standards. Strengthening these foundations will therefore allow regions to benefit locally while contributing to national growth, although all opinions must be respected and considered.

International events and shared challenges will have a distinct effect upon the devolved nations, and Ireland, alongside their impact on the UK as a whole. Consequently, economic statecraft will play a more prominent role within intergovernmental strategy.

With supply networks being disrupted and global alliances strained, the UK's ability to compete on the world stage will depend not only on national policy choices but on how well all governments are brought into the thinking, planning, and decisions on these matters. This includes coordinating priorities and industrial capacities, and capitalising on distinct regional expertise, to build greater national resilience against external shocks – a tactic that has proven especially beneficial to Canada in recent times, as outlined in the case study that follows.

In practice, this means strengthening the UK's willingness to work towards a coherent pan-UK stance – shaped by all governments, despite differing policy directions at home – and approaching international opportunities from a strengthened collaborative governance perspective.

(6) Canada: A Case Study

Canada not only has a more established system and culture of intergovernmental relations, but it has also shown a flexibility of practice in how it has collectively sought to address external challenges recently. We have considered the lessons for the UK in a recent journal article^{xii} and discussed this in more detail at the London roundtable.

Below the top-level First Ministers' Conference lies the Council of the Federation and various sectoral conferences focused on specific policy areas, such as tourism, immigration, and internal trade. There are varying degrees of formality and regularity among these forums, an approach that could support more effective practice in the UK.

The Council of the Federation can be described as a horizontal forum, in that it convenes the premiers of the substate governments without the Federal Government. It has also been classified as one of the most institutionalised of the Canadian IGR forums given its permanent secretariat, annual rotating chair, regular biannual meetings, and its founding agreement^{xiii}.

A longstanding Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat (CICS) is involved in the administration of most IGR conferences in Canada. This is a permanent standing agency dedicated to running such forums, being jointly funded by the federal and provincial governments and staffed by officials from across governmental levels. It is intended to relieve client departments of tasks concerning IGR administration, 'thereby enabling participants to concentrate on substantive intergovernmental policy issues'^{xiv}.

In practice, Prime Minister Carney has made extensive use of First Ministers' Conferences to coordinate a 'Team Canada' response to President Trump's tariffs and broader US-Canada tensions. Building on Trudeau's earlier efforts, Carney has convened in-person and virtual summits to brief, and take soundings from, Premiers. The sovereignty of provinces ensures that provincial and federal perspectives jointly shape Canada's negotiating strategy in a complex geostrategic and economic landscape.

Even when political leadership is different at provincial and federal levels, for example Ontario, there is a commitment (and expectation) of working collaboratively on international trade agreements, whilst respecting federal and provincial priorities and strengths. There is much the UK - and its different governments - could learn from this 'strength in diversity'^{xiv} approach.

This enhanced intergovernmental cooperation has supported coordinated economic planning, including accelerating nationally significant infrastructure approvals, reducing internal trade barriers to strengthen a one Canadian economy, and advancing sector specific collaboration on trade and border security.

This momentum has been further encouraged by the Free Trade and Labour Mobility in Canada Act^{xv}, which is designed to remove federally imposed barriers to internal trade and allow regulated workers to be recognised throughout the country.

Within the Health Canada 2026–27 Departmental Plan^{xlvii}, the Federal Government has pledged additional funds via bilateral agreements that are strategically tied to the collection and standardisation of data. This is intended to promote a shared responsibility for the country's wellbeing by establishing an ecosystem for knowledge exchange. Data-driven insights can then inform the delivery of public services on a federal scale.

Prime Minister Carney has also committed to convening a First Ministers meeting specifically dedicated to economic reconciliation, whereby Indigenous leaders will participate as full economic partners for the first time^{xlviii}. The event will finally integrate all three orders of government into 'Team Canada' and allow each to serve as an equity partner in nation-building projects.

This system allows nation-building infrastructure projects to be discussed in a shared forum. Unlike the UK, where officials often report back to their supervisors, Canadian negotiations are instead designed to allow for parties to reach agreements at the table. It is also intended to prevent escalation – if a dispute reaches the top chain of command, it is viewed as a failure of the collaboration process. But that's not to say it never escalates in this way.

Bilateral agreements are used extensively for specific sectors, such as immigration, to address regional needs. Furthermore, while the Federal Government negotiates international treaties, provinces often pass their own legislation to implement them. This clearly demonstrates how the different layers of authority can successfully and effectively share the delivery of more global commitments.

Following trade tensions with the USA, Canada has also extended the reach of its outlook and invested energies into securing bilateral agreements – with the agreement of the provinces – with other nations on matters of trade, innovation, and defence. One has been forged with India^{xlix}, encompassing resources and expertise that span the country, including nuclear energy, critical minerals, emerging technologies, life sciences, and student mobility.

Several other domestic policy changes are similarly demanding renewed intergovernmental engagement. The Federal Government's decision to allow limited imports of Chinese built electric vehicles^l into the Canadian market intersects with provincial responsibilities for consumer protection, industrial strategy, and climate policy. This demonstrates how decisions made centrally can have a distinct knock-on effect at the subnational level.

The most prominent demonstration of cross-policy working on shared challenges is the recently announced Defence Industrial Strategy^{li}. Because national security and defence procurement are federally controlled while responsibilities for natural resources, labour markets, and economic development are highly decentralised, the Federal Government has committed to leveraging new and existing federal-provincial-territorial mechanisms to deliver these plans.

The specific industrial capabilities of provinces and the strategic importance of the territories in Arctic security mean a series of bilateral agreements have been anticipated. In parallel, joint investment in education and skills has been pledged, while efforts to align military requirements with regional needs will accelerate the delivery of dual-use infrastructure projects.

Taken as a whole, this case study demonstrates how pivotal cross-provincial cooperation has been in shaping a modern, resilient Canada. Given the increasingly complex geostrategic environment the country also finds itself in, a reality that is becoming recognisable the world over, these intergovernmental structures have emerged as essential tools for coordinating policy, managing cross jurisdictional responsibilities, and ensuring that several layers of governance can act as one on issues that no single tier can solve on its own.

For the UK, this further illustrates how timely current calls for strengthened intergovernmental relations are while demonstrating the progress that can be achieved through regular, structured, and intentional intergovernmental cooperation.

Five IGR lessons the UK can learn from Canada

1. Make intergovernmental cooperation routine, as regular meetings enable governments to work better together and recognise areas of shared concern.
2. Invest in permanent IGR infrastructure to serve as a neutral standing body that can support officials and promote continuity, irrespective of political change.
3. Promote a collaborative political environment to normalise intergovernmental working while fostering a sense of shared responsibility around decisions and outcomes.
4. Use IGR to deliver a cohesive response to shared challenges or external pressures, as it serves as a means of strengthening national resilience.
5. Enable nations and regions to capitalise on their areas of expertise and experiment in their approaches, whilst contributing to UK-wide long-term strategy and 'big bets'.

(7) Conclusion

Despite the different political perspectives of the various governing authorities across the UK, they are embedded within a wider, interconnected system, and if they are to achieve their core aims, they need to work with others. This is what we mean by collaborative governance to achieve shared policy goals.

This applies as much to the Westminster Government as it does to the Devolved Governments, and to regional authorities in England. Our interconnected system of powers and responsibilities is a strength for the nations and regions of the UK, and that strength must be used to co-operate if we are to address major societal challenges.

Our form of intergovernmental relations must enable practical policy collaboration and cross-administration learning which can effectively address major strategic issues and challenges for the UK. This is not, however, to say that all participants should always seek to align with, or adopt, the same approach on all policy questions.

There are many instances when the different governments and authorities involved will have divergent policy agendas that reflect their accountability to different electorates. But while there are challenges stemming from party competition, a more collaborative framework can co-exist with and even support potential divergence by providing channels through which it can be more effectively managed and understood across authorities.

As identified in this report, there are shared issues of strategic interest across all UK administrations. Each of these issues, such as the Cost of Living, ending violence against women and girls, and AI in our public services, would benefit from a greater sense of shared endeavour, of mutual understanding across governments, and collaborative action where it can be agreed.

There is now a window of opportunity to reinvigorate the UK's system of intergovernmental relations, to focus on practical policy co-operation, so that citizens across our nations and regions are confident in the ability of their governments to work together on the major common challenges facing us all.

(8) References

ⁱ A More Collaborative Way of Governing?

<https://www.policywise.org.uk/sites/www.policywise.org.uk/files/The%20Council%20of%20the%20Nations%20and%20Regions%20Report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ A more collaborative way of governing? Lessons from Australia and Canada for the UK's Council of the Nations and Regions (Knight, D. Kenny. M et al) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00358533.2026.2625296>

ⁱⁱⁱ Memorandum of Conference with President Eisenhower 1960 [Historical Documents - Office of the Historian](#)

^{iv} President Eisenhower, State of the Union Address 1960 [Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union. | The American Presidency Project](#)

^v [Less Confrontation, a Little More Cooperation Please – Public Polling on Intergovernmental Relations Ahead of Scottish and Welsh Elections | Political Quarterly](#)

^{vi} [Do People in Scotland and Wales Want Governments to Work Together? The Answer Is a Resounding Yes. | policyWISE](#)

^{vii} [Permacrisis and the Policy Continuum in the UK: Deepening Inequalities](#)

^{viii} Kenny, M. (2024). Fractured union: Politics, sovereignty and the fight to save the UK. Hurst.

^{ix} Transparency of intergovernmental activity and its implications for parliamentary scrutiny. <https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/Committees/Report/CEEAC/2026/3/17/70658a2e-1fd6-45d5-aa1e-1f4b78a31992#>

^x [Starmer pledges cost-of-living support for households hit by energy price spike | ITV News](#)

^{xi} [Place: Thinking of National Strategy from the Ground Up](#) "End 'closed system fallacy' and focus on synergies between places to capture maximum global value rather than foster artificial competition between places for a narrow set of resources"

^{xii} [Mais Lecture 2026 - GOV.UK](#)

^{xiii} Ending VAWG five jurisdiction working group, facilitated by PolicyWISE

^{xiv} [Interministerial Group for Health and Social Care communiqué, 11 December 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

^{xv} [UofG Centre for Public Policy: The State of Poverty project](#)

^{xvi} [The Treasury exerts control where it can, while HE gets trashed in the process | Wonkhe](#)

^{xvii} [UK Government Resilience Action Plan - GOV.UK](#)

^{xviii} [The Heywood Fellowship: The National Strategy Playbook | Blavatnik School of Government](#)

^{xix} [Impactful Devolution 03: A toolkit for regional growth and industrial strategy - Future Governance Forum](#)

^{xx} [Robert Shrimmsley, Financial Times, March 2026](#)

^{xxi} John Bew, New Statesman, March 2026 [Don't let Britain decline - New Statesman](#)

^{xxii} [The Rycroft Review: Government Prioritisation.](#)

^{xxiii} [Freedom from Violence and Abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls Volume 1 Strategy.](#)

- xxiv [CIOT/IFS debate: Tax devolution – successes, failures and ideas for the future | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)
- xxv [Where should devolution go next?](#)
- xxvi [Future options for income tax devolution in Wales](#)
- xxvii [Britain is a developing country – by Sam Bowman](#)
- xxviii Wang, D 'Breakneck' [Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future | Dan Wang](#)
- xxix [MappingGM – Integrated Pipeline](#)
- xxx [GMCA Part A Report Template](#)
- xxxi [Rapid policy making: How civil servants can make effective policies under pressure | Institute for Government](#)
- xxxii [Life in the UK 2025 – Carnegie UK](#)
- xxxiii [Major NHS AI trial delivers unprecedented time and cost savings – GOV.UK](#)
- xxxiv [Microsoft 365 Copilot Experiment: Cross-Government Findings Report.](#)
- xxxv [Public Services Reform debate, House of Commons, January 2025](#)
- xxxvi [Flying with Co-Pilot' followed by 'New research highlights' \(moves rest down by two\): Flying with Co-Pilot – How AI is helping neurodiverse staff thrive in DBT](#)
- xxxvii [New research highlights benefits of Microsoft 365 Copilot for employees with disability and/or neurodivergence.](#)
- xxxviii [Palantir: Coalition urges NHS organisations to refuse to use controversial tech giant's software. BMJ, March 2026.](#)
- xxxix [National Maritime Security Strategy 2026–2030](#)
- xl [Russian spy ship escorted away from area with critical cables in Irish Sea | Espionage | The Guardian](#)
- xli [Wise in 5: Smart Ports](#)
- xlii [Boosting Scotland's maritime sector – gov.scot](#)
- xliiii [N. McEwen, M. Kenny, J. Sheldon, C.B. Swan, 'Reforming Intergovernmental Relations in the United Kingdom'](#)
- xliv [Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat. \(n.d.\). Organisation overview.](#)
- xlv <https://monocle.com/affairs/politics/mark-carney-interview-canada-strong-davos-2026/>
- xlvi [Free Trade and Labour Mobility in Canada Act – One Canadian Economy – Canada.ca](#)
- xlvii [Health Canada 2026–27 Departmental Plan – Canada.ca](#)
- xlviii [First Ministers meeting involving Indigenous leaders 'pivotal' | First Nations Financial Management Board](#)
- lix [Prime Minister Carney secures ambitious new partnership with India focused on energy, talent, and technology | Prime Minister of Canada](#)
- l [How Canada's embrace of Chinese EVs could scramble the American market – POLITICO](#)
- li [Canada's Defence Industrial Strategy – Canada.ca](#)



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.

Get in Touch:



www.policywise.org.uk



policywise@open.ac.uk

Follow us:



[PolicyWISE](https://www.linkedin.com/company/policywise)

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



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.