

DEVOLUTION AS A POLICY LABORATORY

Evidence sharing and learning
between the UK's four governments

Akash Paun, Jill Rutter and Anna Nicholl

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Any views or errors in the report are the authors' own. We welcome comments on this report which should be emailed to: jonathan.breckon@nesta.org.uk and akash.paun@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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FOREWORD

Devolution provides us with a wonderful opportunity to develop and share innovative and creative approaches to social policy, yet the UK has failed to live up to this promise of becoming a 'living laboratory' for policy exchange and development. Instead, learning across the UK, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales governments remains ad hoc and there appear to be few formal structures in place to support evidence exchange amongst civil servants across these jurisdictions. Systems to encourage comparable public service performance data are relatively underdeveloped and the cultural differences in political control and policy style between the four governments may also limit the appetite for learning and sharing.

These concerns are not new and have been examined in a number of reports such as a study commissioned by Carnegie UK Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2013 which found that 41 per cent of policymakers have a 'great deal' of interest in drawing upon more evidence from peers in the rest of the UK but, worryingly, very few know what is going on in other jurisdictions. In addition, only 20 per cent report they know a great deal about their sector elsewhere in the UK.¹

As a result of this lack of evidence exchange, all parts of the UK may be missing out on social innovations that could result in more effective, and cost-effective, approaches to tackling shared policy challenges.

In October 2015, the Alliance for Useful Evidence and Institute for Government held a joint roundtable in Cardiff, exploring opportunities for evidence exchange and policy learning between the UK and devolved governments. In a highly participative format, we brought together senior civil servants and other experts from Whitehall and the devolved administrations to develop thinking on what can be done to increase UK-wide evidence exchange and policy learning.

We focused on a number of questions which included:

- Why has policy learning across the four nations remained ad hoc to date?
- What are the main barriers to evidence exchange between governments?
- What examples of good practice exist and what can be learnt from these?
- What are the opportunities for increased evidence exchange across the UK?
- In which particular policy areas could increased exchange deliver the greatest benefits?
- What can be done to improve the flow of evidence and ideas between governments?
- What mechanisms or structures could support better evidence exchange amongst civil servants in the UK?

We were so impressed by the quality of this discussion that we decided to publish a report of the seminar. We also incorporated previous work carried out separately by our organisations on devolution and intergovernmental relations, the policymaking process, and the use of evidence in government.

You can read about the fruit of our labours in this timely report and consider our conclusions which we would welcome your feedback on.

We know there are no easy answers to sharing evidence across the UK and we certainly don't underestimate the challenge of finding a more deliberate and sustained process to exchange evidence for developing smarter policymaking and improved public services. However, we hope you will find the report of interest and join us in this mission to make the UK an effective policy lab.

Jonathan Breckon, Head of the Alliance for Useful Evidence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Devolution has radically changed the nature of the British state. The creation of new governments and legislatures in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland in 1999 unleashed powerful forces that continue to reshape the UK constitution to this day. Over the coming years devolution to city-regions and counties will transform the governance of England in similar ways.

Devolution reflects the desire for policy decisions to be taken closer to home and in greater alignment with local preferences, needs and values. Devolution is therefore designed to allow policy differentiation and divergence between the parts of the country.

In so doing, devolution also creates the potential for a 'policy laboratory' in which different approaches to tackling similar problems operate in parallel, with all able to learn from each other about what works best.

Since 1999 all parts of the country have introduced policy innovations. These range from major public service reform initiatives (like public service agreements) introduced by the UK Government, to smaller emblematic policies like free university tuition in Scotland and the 'opt out' system for organ donation in Wales.

Recent initiatives like the creation of What Works Centres in England, Scotland and Wales also send a strong signal that the governments are committed to improving the use of evidence in the policy process, which ought to include openness to learning from the other parts of the UK.

But is the potential of the UK policy laboratory being realised? To what extent do the four governments exchange evidence and adapt practice in line with experience elsewhere? What factors help or hinder this sharing of evidence and lessons?

These are the questions addressed in this report, which is based on a private seminar held in October 2015. We found that there is a significant flow of policy evidence and lessons through various civil service, ministerial and non-governmental channels. However, we also encountered evidence of a number of structural and cultural barriers that limit evidence exchange between the governments.

POLITICS COMPLICATES EVERYTHING

An inescapable piece of context is the political difference between the governments – since 2010 no party has been in power in more than one UK nation. This seems to have reduced the appetite for learning from other governments. This may be because governments disagree about fundamental objectives as well as the choice of policy tools. Political difference can also weaken trust, and generate a reluctance to share data or lessons that another government might use as political ammunition.

Political differences are unlikely to disappear so one key challenge is to *“create a space politically for sharing good practice, which does not compromise people’s political desire to differentiate”*. However, existing bodies like the Joint Ministerial Committee and British-Irish Council are not generally seen as providing particularly useful forums for evidence exchange.

These bodies do at least create a regular cycle of interaction between governments, around which officials can build useful networks that enhance mutual understanding. The current review of intergovernmental relations offers a chance to reinvigorate these bodies and refocus them around relevant current challenges shared by the different governments.

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS OF SHARING AND LEARNING

At civil service level, relationships across the Home Civil Service are widely perceived to have changed significantly since devolution, since officials in each government now work to their own set of ministers, with separate mandates and accountability to different legislatures.

Interchange of staff has also declined, and as a result officials may simply be unaware of their counterparts in other governments, or where to look for evidence from the rest of the UK. Variable understanding in Whitehall of the different devolution settlements can also weaken communication.

Cultural differences between the four political systems also seem to have increased, including in terms of how policy is made, how evidence is used, and even how certain concepts (such as wellbeing) are understood.

There are data limitations as well – the governments collect public service performance and other data in different ways. This may reflect their distinct policy priorities, but it can also make it harder to draw useful comparisons between territories. Cultural and policy divergence can also reduce the (real or perceived) applicability of data and lessons from other parts of the UK.

All this raises the transaction costs for evidence exchange between governments. But there are countervailing drivers too. The strengthening of civil service professional networks that span the different administrations is one – although the policy profession has further to go in becoming a single professional community than specialised groups such as economists and social researchers.

Also to be welcomed is the Cabinet Office-led initiative to increase staff interchange between governments and to improve Whitehall's devolution capability. This should improve relationships between governments, but it is not clear whether enhancing evidence exchange is a central goal.

There are also some potentially useful departmental initiatives, such as an agreement between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government on data sharing, and a Home Office-Welsh Government working group that discusses policing issues in Wales.

IMPROVING THE SUPPLY OF AND DEMAND FOR EVIDENCE

A broader issue is whether officials have the necessary skills and capacity to use different types of policy evidence (including from elsewhere in the UK) effectively in the policy process. The policy and other civil service professions should continue to focus on upskilling across the system. The What Works Network and UK Trials Advice Panel, which advises officials on using experimental methods, also have an important role in improving both the supply of and demand for high-quality evidence.

The What Works Network itself reflects certain cultural and political differences between the four governments. There are seven UK Government-sponsored What Works Centres which have a largely English focus and a preference for experimental data. Then there are affiliated centres in Scotland and Wales which have a broader view of evidence. However, there is no centre in Northern Ireland.

Outside Northern Ireland, these arrangements seem to be working relatively well, but there is scope for the What Works Network to be more explicit on how its work is informed by devolution, and the potential to benefit from evidence of the effectiveness of divergent policies in the UK.

Government arm's-length bodies can also play a role in building and disseminating a UK-wide evidence base. For instance, the Committee for Climate Change carries out analysis and provides advice to all four governments. But as devolution and policy divergence continues, UK or GB-wide bodies may be replaced with separate bodies for each nation.

The research councils are also important players. They fund research across the UK including in the devolved higher education systems, but they are established as ALBs of the UK Government. The government is now restructuring the research council framework, to create a more integrated research strategy across the councils and including other government-funded research. At this point it is not clear how the devolved governments will be involved as UK research priorities are set.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, to strengthen the enablers of evidence exchange between governments we recommend that:

- Governments and departments should commit to early consultation with each other (and with the Office for National Statistics) when designing or amending datasets, to ensure that there is greater comparability of data between territories.
- There should be greater readiness to commission joint research into policy options, from outside government or from joint teams of officials working with a shared evidence base.
- The UK Government should clarify how the devolved governments will be involved in setting the UK's strategic research priorities as the Nurse Review is implemented.
- As new What Works Centres are commissioned, the different governments should engage earlier and more extensively about how the devolved governments wish to be involved.
- The Northern Ireland Executive, along with the What Works Network, potential funders and key stakeholders in Belfast, should explore the possibility of establishing a What Works Northern Ireland centre.
- There should be continued emphasis on raising skills in the civil service around the use of different kinds of evidence (including lessons from elsewhere in the UK). Ministers should also be supported to become more intelligent consumers of policy evidence.

Second, to improve the environment for evidence exchange, we recommend that:

- The current review of intergovernmental relations should seek to embed policy learning and lesson sharing as a core function of how the four governments interact.
- Ministers should encourage officials to develop close relationships with counterparts in other governments, and to better embed the principle of information sharing into practice.
- This could be supported by the establishment of cross-government policy networks in particular areas and department-level data-sharing agreements.
- There should be public recognition of good practice in cross-government working, perhaps via the Civil Service Awards.
- The governments should work together to encourage interchange of staff between the governments, with the Civil Service Board continuing to show leadership on this issue.
- Devolution capability plans, which all departments are now required to produce, should set out how each Whitehall department is seeking to draw on lessons from across the UK and to develop a shared evidence base with the devolved governments.

INTRODUCTION – DEVOLUTION AND THE POTENTIAL FOR POLICY LEARNING

The process of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is now over 15 years old, and continues to evolve, with further powers currently being devolved to all parts of the UK. In the period since 1999 there has been significant policy innovation and divergence between the four nations of the UK, including approaches to public service delivery. For instance, the UK Government has gone furthest in using centrally-set policy targets (until 2010) and in harnessing the power of market competition as routes to improve policy outcomes. Scotland and Wales have focused more on facilitating collaboration across sectors, for instance through the single outcome agreements between the Scottish Government and local authorities.

The Scottish and Welsh governments have also tended to favour universal free provision of public services such as NHS prescriptions, social care and university tuition, while in England the UK Government has been readier to use means-testing and the targeting of resources. Recently, in Northern Ireland as well as Scotland, there has been an attempt to mitigate the effects of welfare reforms implemented by the UK Government, resulting in a new area of policy divergence.

The devolved governments have also used their autonomy to introduce smaller innovative reforms that have offered proof of concept for the rest of the country. The ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces was first introduced in Scotland in 2006 (following the Republic of Ireland) and the plastic bag charge in Wales in 2011 (again following Ireland). Both these innovations, after initial scepticism about enforceability and acceptability, were later adopted elsewhere in the UK, including England.

More recently, Wales became the first part of the UK to institute an 'opt out' or 'deemed consent' organ donation system, while since 2011 the UK Government has required people in England, Scotland and Wales to either opt in or out to the donation register when they apply for a driver's licence.² The Scottish and Welsh Governments are both seeking to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol, which the UK Government has so far resisted. Different approaches to regulation of public use of e-cigarettes have also been adopted in England and Wales.

In all these cases, there is broad agreement about the ultimate policy objective – an increase in organ donation, a reduction in problem drinking, a reduction in plastic bag use, a reduction in death and disease from smoking – and therefore, there is clear potential to learn about the efficacy of different approaches. This may be more difficult in more contested policy spheres such as welfare reform, where governments are often divided about ends as well as means.

Devolution has thus increased the potential for divergence in social policy approaches between the different parts of the country, turning the UK into a 'policy laboratory', in which different solutions to common problems can be put into practice simultaneously.³

This offers the opportunity for evidence exchange and policy learning across the UK. By evidence exchange we mean the act of measuring and evaluating the outcomes of an intervention, and sharing the data and analysis in a useful form with other governments.

Policy learning is something broader, and can also encompass a situation where one government implementing a particular policy can persuade others that the intervention is technically feasible, acceptable to the public and effective in achieving the desired policy outcomes.

All the governments have a strong declared commitment to learning and improving the use of evidence in the policy process. For its part, the UK Government has created a network of 'What Works Centres' to build up an evidence base in particular policy areas. The network includes seven centres primarily focused on England, and two affiliated centres in Scotland and Wales, which work in slightly different ways. The UK Government also created the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to test how behavioural science could improve policy outcomes in various areas. BIT has since been spun out from Whitehall and, as well as continuing to work with UK Government departments, it has since been commissioned by the Welsh Government to carry out studies of issues such as voter registration.

The recent acceleration of decentralisation within England also creates the potential for a greater diversity of policy at the city and county level, which could over time generate a rich evidence base about different approaches to local public service delivery. This can benefit other English authorities and also offer useful insights for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This overview illustrates the potential that exists within the devolved United Kingdom for the exchange of evidence and policy lessons between the different territories and governments. But how much learning and sharing actually takes place? Do we have the necessary institutions and culture to facilitate the development of a shared evidence base? What are the barriers to and enablers of learning between governments?

To shed light on these issues, the Institute for Government, the Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK Trust have come together to produce this short report. Its conclusions are based in large part on a seminar we hosted in October 2015, which brought together over 20 government, academic and third sector representatives from all four parts of the UK. We also draw upon previous work carried out separately by our respective organisations focusing on devolution and intergovernmental relations,⁴ the policymaking process,⁵ evidence exchange,⁶ and the use of evidence in government,⁷ and on additional conversations with officials in different parts of the country.

The report first discusses the four governments' appetite for learning from each other and some of the ways through which such learning takes place. We then discuss a range of political, cultural and institutional factors that can act as barriers or enablers of cross-government learning and evidence exchange. In a brief concluding section, we set out some proposals for how the potential of devolution's policy laboratory might be better capitalised upon.

OPENNESS TO LEARNING – BUT FROM WHERE?

At our seminar, we were told that while all the governments had (at least a rhetorical) commitment to learning and evidence-based policy, they did not automatically look elsewhere in the UK as their first port of call for lessons about 'what works'. One participant described some ministers as “*extremely open to policy learning, but perhaps not necessarily [from] within the UK*”.

This is partly about scale: lessons from comparably sized places may be more relevant or easier to apply. Consequently, the Welsh Government has looked to English local authorities for lessons on issues such as public service reform and digital government, as well as looking at reform initiatives at the national level led by the Cabinet Office.⁸ The Scottish government, it was suggested, is interested in “*looking at other small countries, looking at other similar countries or countries that we aspire to be similar to.*”

The different governments may also use the outputs of international organisations. It is notable that in her recent speech on education, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon cited an OECD study as the basis for proposals to improve the effectiveness of the Scottish education system.⁹ The Northern Ireland Executive has also commissioned the OECD to conduct a major review of governance in Northern Ireland, which is due to report soon. And for ministers in the UK Government, the much smaller devolved governments may look like less likely sources of inspiration compared to other medium-large sized countries with a reputation for innovation, such as the USA, Australia and Scandinavian governments.

Participants also emphasised that governments ought to be open to learning from anywhere that offers relevant lessons. It is indeed common sense to learn from wherever best practice can be found, whether that is the English Department of Education bringing maths teaching methods from Shanghai,¹⁰ or Northern Ireland working to improve its further education system in partnership with North Carolina.¹¹

However, there are at least three reasons why evidence exchange between the UK's four governments should be particularly fruitful:

- First, because successful policy transfer depends on understanding the context in which a policy has previously worked. The four parts of the UK are much more similar to each other in terms of the wider cultural and institutional context than they are to any other country, so lessons are more likely to be applicable.
- Second, because existing networks and research institutions can facilitate the spread of knowledge with lower transaction costs than with other countries.
- And third, because the four nations are highly interconnected so that, for instance, improved health or education outcomes in one part of the UK have positive spillover effects for the rest of the country – via improved economic performance, or a reduced welfare bill. There is, therefore, a positive logic for the governments to work together to improve performance all round.

The Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service emphasised his own commitment to this agenda after a recent visit to Edinburgh, arguing that: “*there is much that civil servants supporting the UK and Scottish governments can learn from each other. We need to support this through more interchange, closer collaboration on areas of joint interest...and learning about where we do things differently on policy. We are one Civil Service and much the better for it. This isn't just about the UK and Scotland governments, though – I encourage all civil servants to take up opportunities to work with those outside their team or locality to share ideas and best practice*”.¹²

EVIDENCE EXCHANGE AND CROSS-GOVERNMENT LEARNING HAPPENS, BUT LESS THAN IT COULD

The UK and devolved governments already share policy evidence and learn from each other through various existing channels and structures. At ministerial level, there is interaction through intergovernmental forums such as the Joint Ministerial Committee (which includes the UK and three devolved governments) and the British-Irish Council (which also includes Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man). As we discuss below, these bodies were not seen by seminar participants as playing a major role in facilitating direct policy learning between governments.

At civil service level, there are all manner of networks and channels through which evidence is shared. For instance, there are the networks of officials that support and form the secretariat for the inter-ministerial forums mentioned. Further, outside of the legally-separate Northern Ireland Civil Service, officials across Great Britain remain part of a unified civil service, with professional networks that bring officials together for development and other purposes. There are also department level contacts and working groups in different policy areas that can be used to share evidence and lessons, as well as to build relationships between governments in a broader sense.

One speaker made the point that *“there’s actually quite a lot [of cooperation and sharing between governments] but it’s certainly not brought together anywhere in some sensible place where the public or whoever is interested can say, well actually administrations are working together relatively well.”* Another commented that where exchange does take place it is too often on both an ‘ad hoc’ and an ‘ad hominem’ basis, dependent on personal connections that can easily be lost as a result of staff turnover.

It is difficult to make an overall assessment of how much evidence exchange and policy learning takes place at present. There are undoubtedly areas of good practice, some of which we comment upon below. But the overall view of our participants was that the potential for learning from the UK’s policy laboratory was not being fully captured as a result of various ‘structural and cultural barriers’ to sharing between governments.

EVIDENCE SHARING IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL DIFFERENCE

One central point is that this must all be understood in the context of politics. Devolution can be described as a policy laboratory, but at the same time it is often advocated in terms of enabling each part of the country to take its own path in response to distinct needs and values, real or perceived.

In this view, particularly when governments are formed of different parties, policy differentiation can reflect different objectives or can even be seen as an objective in itself, rather than a means by which we learn about what works best.

Since 2010, political incongruence between the UK's four governments has been absolute: there is no party in government in more than one of the four capitals. The May 2015 general election further illustrated the extent of political differentiation as a different party won an absolute majority of seats in each of England, Scotland and Wales, while Northern Ireland has an entirely distinct party system.

This political context may have reduced the appetite for learning between the governments. One participant asked: *“ultimately policy is a very political process and as the politics of the constituent parts of the UK have diverged so much, is that becoming more of a key issue?”*

Another speaker reflected that even when there were positive lessons to be learnt from one jurisdiction, other administrations may not want to admit this in public. In Northern Ireland, the main political divide means that the nationalist and unionist parts of the government tend to look in different directions to learn lessons. With regard to learning from the Republic of Ireland: *“some of our ministers are very keen to do that and another set of our ministers are very keen to block that.”*

More generally, because the parties of government in Westminster, Scotland and Wales are in electoral competition, they may not trust each other to share information and have an open dialogue about policy. There may be particular reluctance to share information about unsuccessful policy experiments since this could easily become used as political ammunition. After all, differences in policy outcomes have previously been used for political purposes, as when David Cameron repeatedly attacked the performance of the (Labour-run) Welsh NHS in 2014 and 2015.¹³ This all means, as one participant pointed out, that for a minister *“it's much easier to go and speak to your Swedish counterpart who you are not in competition with”* than to have an open conversation with UK colleagues.

In addition, the constitutional design of the devolution arrangements may itself weaken the incentives for sharing and open dialogue about policy. The model (particularly for Scotland and Northern Ireland, but increasingly for Wales too) has tended to be to either devolve or reserve policy areas wholesale. Even though reserved and devolved areas often interact in practice (for instance there are complex interdependencies between welfare and housing policy), this has meant that there are fewer areas of shared competence, where governments are required to work together to achieve policy objectives.

Particularly when the political context is challenging, this can make it easier to avoid the deeper intergovernmental interaction found in some federal systems and which can create the conditions for learning and sharing. For instance, in Australia, central and state governments have negotiated national partnership agreements to tackle issues such as poor health and educational outcomes for indigenous Australians, with specific targets and data collected to enable performance comparison and learning between the different parts of the country.¹⁴ Such institutions do not exist in the UK.

Political differences between Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont are unlikely to disappear. So the key question is what can be done to encourage governments to cooperate and share evidence and lessons about their respective policies within the context of political competition. At ministerial level, the challenge, as one participant put it, is to *“create a space politically for sharing good practice, which does not compromise people’s political desire to differentiate”*.

DOES THE FORMAL INTERGOVERNMENTAL MACHINERY FACILITATE CROSS-GOVERNMENT LEARNING?

There are two main official forums in which ministers from the different governments meet, providing a possible response to this challenge: the Joint Ministerial Committee and the British-Irish Council.

The Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) is the main four-nation forum established to oversee relations between the UK and the three devolved governments. Its remit includes consideration of overlaps between devolved and non-devolved policy, keeping under review the overall operation of intergovernmental relations, and resolving disputes. There is also a weaker commitment to discuss devolved policy areas like health and education if all governments agree that *“it is beneficial to discuss their respective treatment in the different parts of the UK”*. In practice, this is not thought to happen to a significant extent. The JMC usually meets just once per year in plenary form (involving heads of government), and there are currently no active JMC sub-committees bringing together ministers in particular areas of domestic policy as there previously have been, indicating that these forums were not seen by ministers as adding sufficient value.¹⁵ The JMC was described at our seminar as a *“combination of either whinging or fighting or a beauty parade”*.

The British-Irish Council (BIC) has a mission that comes closer to policy learning and evidence exchange. It was established as part of the Northern Ireland peace process and its official objective is *“to exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant administrations”*. There are annual summits of BIC, along with occasional meetings of ministers and officials with responsibility for particular policy areas. Participants at our seminar questioned how much value BIC delivered to ministers. One official felt that *“for ministers I don’t think it [BIC] has worked in any deep sense because it gives them nothing more than some useful bilateral exchanges and connections”*.

One problem with formal machinery, it was argued, is that it can be difficult to reform or abolish structures that may have once served a useful purpose but no longer do so. This particularly seems to be the case for BIC, whose work is structured around policy ‘work sectors’ created over the years in response to priorities of the member governments at different points in time. However, it has found it much harder to close down old ones since there is always at least one administration that has invested in taking forward the agenda (each work sector has one or more nominated lead administrations), and may therefore be reluctant to see the programme of work end. There are currently 12 work sectors including housing, social inclusion, early years policy and the protection of minority languages.

On the other hand, the existence of formal structures with regular patterns of meetings at least ensures that interaction between the governments will take place. As one participant argued: *“what BIC shows is that if you try to systemise this, you know, there are some advantages with that because it does mean that people have a network which is organised but it can also ossify”*. And even when ministers perceive limited value in BIC meetings, it can work differently at official level: *“the preparation of ministers to attend the British-Irish Council actually engages their civil servants with things that are happening in other parts of the UK and increases the knowledge base at that level.”* Interaction between the different governments also takes place outside the context of the ministerial meetings, with officials in work sectors meeting or corresponding to share best practice and policy lessons.

The purpose and function of these bodies is currently being reviewed by the UK Cabinet Office in partnership with devolved colleagues, as part of an overall review of intergovernmental relations set up after the Scottish independence referendum. Officials are seeking to use the review *“to chip away at some of that ossification to make sure that the working groups that sit within it are actually coming up with the kind of products that we hope then incentivise ministers to become more engaged.”* Another participant argued for *“a balance between something that is organic and solves a problem that people are trying to solve and something which is more formalised”*.

One suggestion was to explore whether models designed for sharing evidence and policy lessons internationally could provide a template for supporting better intra-UK exchange. As a senior participant asked: *“what is it that one can learn from the successful practice of policy learning, where the source of learning is outside the UK that would inform ways of improving the policy learning process inside the UK?”* The OECD, which collates and analyses a wide range of government performance data across its member states, was cited as a model that could be learned from.

A final point made in this discussion is that while it is important to have well-functioning intergovernmental machinery that serves a clear purpose, if the objective is to foster open dialogue and sharing between governments it is the quality of relationships rather than structures that matter most.

TRUST AND STRONG RELATIONSHIPS AS A PRECONDITION FOR SHARING AND LEARNING

Despite the continued existence of a unified civil service serving the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments, relationships have changed significantly since devolution, as officials in each administration work to their own set of ministers, who are accountable to separate legislatures. In this context, networks between Whitehall and the devolved capitals have declined, according to many observers, reducing the transfer of policy lessons. As one seminar participant argued: *“In the days of a unitary state, it was easy to see perhaps how some of that learning [from policy innovations in one part of the country] passed into common usage across the United Kingdom but in the days of ... an increasingly looser union, sometimes I think we fail to share that learning and fail to acknowledge what is being done.”*

Another pointed out that the Memorandum of Understanding on relations between the four governments already sets *“a gold standard for how we should all be working together”* including in terms of openness and evidence sharing. However, *“the principles which support it are perhaps not embedded in the way that we work, and therefore, something needs to be done about it.”*

Formal interchange of staff between the governments is also widely believed to have declined compared to the scale of transfers between the Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland Offices and other government departments prior to devolution (though there is an absence of data charting this). This has led to the creation of a new programme coordinated by the Cabinet Office to facilitate at least 100 exchanges of staff per year, including shorter-term visits as well as longer-term secondments and transfers. This initiative is part of a broader attempt to strengthen intergovernmental working and to enhance mutual understanding and networks between the different governments.

At our seminar, the point was made that even though civil servants in each administration must work to their own ministers, that does not (or should not) make them competitors. Rather, they are members of a common profession (or set of professions, as discussed below) bound by the same set of civil service values – integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. Consequently, they should aspire to work together with a shared evidence base even when supporting the delivery of competing policies.

Several participants pointed to the role of civil service professional networks in connecting officials from the different administrations, and thereby facilitating the exchange of ideas and evidence. In recent years there has been an active agenda of trying to formalise and strengthen the civil service professions as communities of people doing similar jobs across different departments and also including the Scottish and Welsh Governments. These networks are relatively strong and well-developed in the analytical professions such as economics, social research, science and statistics (as well as managerial professions such as finance and HR), where there are more widely accepted professional qualifications and standards, and where individuals may be quite mobile between different departments and governments.

However, these networks are not as well developed for the newer 'professions' of policy and operational delivery. As a result, participants in our seminar supported the view that open dialogue and evidence exchange were easier to attain between members of the analytical professions. The policy and operational delivery professions are also much bigger than the analytical professions: there are about 17,000 officials who identify as policy professionals¹⁶ and many more from other professions who work on policy. This makes it a correspondingly greater challenge to create the sense of a single professional community for policy officials than it is for the much smaller professions such as economics or social research.

Policy officials were also seen as more likely to be 'hamstrung' in their interaction with counterparts elsewhere due to their proximity to ministers and more directly political considerations. One official suggested that even with *"all the great intention"* civil servants might have to work in an open way and to share information *"there are certain things that our ministers will find very, very difficult for us to have the sorts of conversations that we would all perhaps aspire to"*.

We were told of plans for a policy profession symposium in the spring of 2016 that would look at how civil servants within the different UK administrations can learn from each other's experience of different ways of working. This is a positive sign that the agenda of strengthening the policy profession continues to have momentum.

OPEN DIALOGUE BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS – BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

It is inevitably more difficult for officials to interact in an open way, sharing data and so on, when ministers are in direct competition, and so the challenge is greatest in domains close to political fault lines. In some politically contentious areas, we were told, governments are less willing to share evidence and data (though Whitehall departments can be reluctant to share data with each other too). This problem is more keenly felt by the devolved governments, who are more likely to depend upon Whitehall expertise and data, particularly in areas such as welfare where the devolved governments have hitherto had little power but must now build their capacity.

Clearer rules around publication and sharing of evidence and policy evaluations can be useful, according to participants. Government social researchers all work to the GSR Publications Protocol, where there is a presumption to publish all externally commissioned research – though this does not appear to apply automatically to internally conducted research.

In less contentious areas, where there are shared policy objectives between governments, officials have greater cover to work in genuine partnership with counterparts from other administrations. For instance, the UK and Scottish Governments were seen to have worked very well together on the implementation of the fiscal powers in the Scotland Bill 2012, with a joint programme board set up to operate on the basis of a shared evidence base. Another official spoke positively of *“the joint production of data for our greenhouse gas inventorying that is done across administrations”*.

We also heard of ways by which departments can take steps to build relationships and trust in the context of political difference. For instance, we were told that the Department for Work and Pensions had recently agreed a Memorandum of Understanding for sharing management data with the Scottish Government as the latter builds its welfare functions, and that this had made it easier for officials to share without needing to gain ministerial clearance on a case-by-case basis.

Another example relates to policing. There have been some tensions in the relationship between the Home Office and the Welsh Government over recent years. For instance, the Welsh Government opposed the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners in Wales in 2011, and more recently there has been concern at the scope of home affairs powers being reserved to Westminster under the current Wales Bill. To improve relationships and communication between UK and Welsh officials working in this area, the Home Office has an official permanently based in Cardiff and has established an advisory group with representation from the Welsh Government, local government and police, which meets regularly to discuss criminal justice issues. This group does not have an explicit evidence-sharing remit, but may facilitate such sharing by creating regular dialogue between officials and stakeholders working in this area.

Where such groups do not exist, a barrier to effective dialogue about policy may be the simple lack of awareness of who is the relevant point of contact in the other administrations. One participant reflected that: *"There's a lot of fear that people have within government departments and within devolved administrations, about phoning up these scary people in different organisations"*. To counteract this problem, all departments have a dedicated 'devolution contact', whose responsibilities include helping to link up departmental colleagues with counterparts in the other administrations to ensure that proper intergovernmental dialogue takes place. Names and contact details of all devolution contacts are listed on the Cabinet Office's new Devolution and You website, which has been created as part of a wider attempt to increase devolution capability across the system.

At our seminar, one devolved official confirmed that having a single named contact to go to in the first instance was indeed useful. A policy initiative they had been involved in had required some form of agreement with a Whitehall department, but the lead officials were being unresponsive: *"they weren't responding to policy requests, [so we] raised that with the devolution contact in the department...and the problem connected within hours."*

Evidence exchange may be hampered not just by ignorance of who to speak to, but by ignorance of what research or policy evaluations have been carried out elsewhere in the country. One participant reported a conversation with an official who had carried out some policy evaluations but did not know where this could be published on the revamped gov.uk platform, which is designed to simplify citizen-government interactions but does not necessarily provide a well-ordered archive of government publications and data. Their reported conclusion was that *"I can blog about it but then it, sort of, disappears virtually instantly if it doesn't get loads of page hits or it doesn't get the bandwidth."* Another argued that *"there's almost too much information to process nowadays"*. Some participants suggested that the relevant information could be found by officials at the time it was needed, even if just via google searches of government websites, but others felt that this would not help if people didn't know that a particular study or policy evaluation even existed.

There were also a number of references to the role of third parties in facilitating evidence exchange where they conducted UK-wide projects which would look at policy across government responsibilities. This in turn could provide a politically easier vehicle for evidence exchange than direct government to government transfer: *"we also engage in UK-wide projects which are led by other organisations, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and so on. So, you know, there are regular interactions between Scottish officials and other UK institutions and organisations that are carrying out UK-wide projects"*. Another speaker, representing a large charity, described how *"one of the roles that we play is as a relationship building, brokering role between stakeholders that we know, it's very, sort of, under the radar work but it has quite a good track record in terms of building those relationships and outputs."*

Sometimes, more mundane issues can limit the effectiveness of intergovernmental dialogue about policy. Seminar participants spoke of challenges they had faced in holding video conferencing sessions involving participants from different parts of the UK, due to the lack of appropriate technology. For instance, one recalled a recent session in which colleagues in another location were unable to view remotely the PowerPoint slides being presented. In the end, this person reflected, *"We, kind of, gave up ... [but] there must be something we can do."*

IS THE DATA OUT THERE?

Another more practical type of barrier to evidence exchange stems from problems with the underlying data.

One technical challenge identified was about ‘comparison geographies’. For instance, data is often collected at the level of the four component nations of the UK. The problem this can run into relates to the fact that London is an outlier in terms of many economic and other indicators. Consequently *“no-one wants to be compared to England, because London is in England and it’s a massive problem for statisticians to make a comparison.”* This has led to *“an increasing drive to have more regional data [so that] then you do get more sensible comparison points”*. As more powers are decentralised within England, this will create a further rationale for collecting data at the regional, city or local level.

Where official statistics do not include sufficient data to permit meaningful comparisons between parts of the country, according to one participant, the gap can sometimes be filled by lower quality research. This can lend itself to misleading headlines, for example when organisations carry out UK-wide polls and highlight differences between the four nations, even when these are based on small sub-samples for Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland that render the comparisons statistically insignificant.

A second, bigger, challenge is around what was measured – if different things are measured, the scope for useable comparisons is reduced. *“Administrations have understandably wanted to develop their own outcome measures in health, local government and so on, but that makes the kind of performance comparisons that we were doing a decade ago virtually impossible”*, we were told. It was also noted that more attention is paid to harmonising inputs, such as survey questions, than to measuring the same outcomes. As one person put it: *“perhaps [we harmonise] at the wrong level... there’s been some criticism in the press around things like health and education, definitions of waiting times and all those sorts of things. But perhaps what we’re not looking at is what’s actually coming out; what are the outcomes and are they comparable, have we got comparable data at that level?”*

Potential ways of addressing some of these issues were mentioned. There is already *“an equivalent to the MOU ... between the chief statisticians and the national statisticians. We’re working on reviewing that at the moment, to sort of strengthen the working arrangements”*. An important part of that would be to ensure that the devolved governments were engaged in the development of new datasets.

Those we consulted agreed that in principle greater comparability would be a benefit, but also cautioned that each government’s priority is to collect data that relates to their own priorities and systems, meaning that as policy diverges so too will their respective data needs. For instance, changes to the GCSE grading system in England are not expected to be replicated in Wales and Northern Ireland, which will limit direct comparability of school performance (and increase the utility of independent comparative research such as the OECD’s PISA study).¹⁷

Health outcomes and NHS performance are often monitored differently as well. Even if similar data is collected, there may be no institution through which the data is brought together and compared, leaving the task to external bodies (as in a 2015 study of ambulance response rates across the UK, compiled via freedom of information requests to every ambulance trust).¹⁸ One interesting counterexample relates to organ donation and transplantation, where there is a UK-wide strategy and single lead agency backed by the four governments, and data is collected and published to assess performance across the country.¹⁹ But this appears to be a rare exception.

BUILDING SKILLS AND CAPACITY ACROSS THE 'EVIDENCE ECOSYSTEM'

Participants in our seminar argued that, in order to strengthen the exchange of evidence between governments, investment needs to be made in skills and capacity across the system. One argued that *“we need upskilling right across that spectrum”* and that this applies *“on both the evidence generation side, and the evidence receiving side, if that makes sense, but crucially, as well, in the evidence transmitting part of...the evidence ecosystem”*.

The Policy Profession – and its emphasis on policymaking skills – was seen as a route into increasing demand for and use of evidence, as well as a way to build connections between policymakers in different jurisdictions. The Alliance for Useful Evidence has itself developed an Evidence Masterclass aimed at supporting civil servants, and others, to use evidence in policymaking. At present, one participant argued, there is *“a skill set issue in policymakers”* who have to work with evidence on a spectrum of certainty, ranging from things that are *“irrefutably proven... that drug either kills you or it doesn't kill you”* through to areas of far greater uncertainty. *“That range of understanding evidence, and approaching that, is not fully embedded in the policy profession and the way people think.”*

Someone else pointed out that the civil service policy profession skills framework makes reference to learning from international experience, but not to learning from elsewhere in the UK.²⁰ Another point was that *“outside the UK, the various national schools for government would be an obvious institutional vehicle for the process that we're talking about, and it's only because we were so enlightened as to get rid of ours, that we can't go directly to that sort of thing, but we'll have to think about its nearest substitute”*. It was not clear whether Civil Service Learning was yet playing that role.

A further point made was that this is not just about skills, but also about scarce resources. The smaller administrations in particular have limited capacity to devote to outward-looking evidence gathering. In one administration, we were told, there were attempts to free up analysts from some of the burdens of project management to give them space to engage more with the evidence.

The newly launched Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel, which brings together experts from across the civil service and academia, is aimed at addressing the skills and resource gap around capacity for policy experimentation. It advises public servants across the country on how to use experimental and quasi-experimental methods in the policy process. Having a single centre of expertise for the whole UK makes more sense than each administration seeking to develop its own advisory service. The panel draws upon academic experts from all four parts of the UK, although there is government representation only from Whitehall and the Welsh Government.

IS THERE SUFFICIENT JOINT RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE?

Where there are barriers to direct government-to-government evidence exchange for ideological or political reasons, another potentially productive route is through arm's-length bodies and research organisations that can develop parallel relationships with several governments.

There are a number of arm's length bodies whose jurisdiction crosses the UK. The Committee on Climate Change, for instance, describes its role as *"advising the UK and Devolved Administrations on emissions targets"*. Since Scotland has chosen to have annual targets, it produces separate assessments of Scotland's progress. Alongside its monitoring and advice roles, its focus is to: *"Conduct independent analysis into climate change science, economics and policy [and] engage with a wide range of organisations and individuals to share evidence and analysis"*.²¹

There are also arm's length bodies established to coordinate across the UK and devolved governments, even where there are separate bodies tasked with delivery. One example is the Joint Nature Conservation Committee which offers a forum to bring together members from the nature conservation bodies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and independent members appointed by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs under an independent Chair to *"advise the UK Government and devolved administrations on UK-wide and international nature conservation"*.²² The committee is staffed by around 130 people based in both England and Scotland.

These sorts of organisational models offer the opportunity for evidence sharing without going through formal government channels – but are clearly more feasible where there is a UK-wide policy goal (as on emissions reduction) and where issues are less politically contentious. As policies diverge, the ability of arm's-length bodies to effectively serve different governments will reduce and they are increasingly likely to become devolved – as, for instance, is happening to the Forestry Commission which has gone from being an England, Wales and Scotland body, to an England and Scotland body (Forestry Commission Wales having become part of Natural Resources Wales). The Scottish Government has now given notice that it wants a separate body too. The interesting question is whether the Commission's research agency – Forest Research – will continue to serve all three bodies going forward and thus provide ready-made evidence exchange or whether each devolved agency develops its own separate research capacity.

A second way of providing opportunities for evidence sharing is through research commissioned by the research councils. The research council landscape is currently in flux following the Nurse Review, which proposes combining the existing research councils into one body, Research UK, while maintaining separate funding streams.²³ The research budget is not devolved – so research council funding will continue to cover all UK universities.

The Nurse Review also seeks to move towards a more joined-up and strategic approach to research funding by different parts of government, to facilitate *“better co-ordination of the different parts of the research landscape”*, including research funded directly by UK Government departments and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

The Review spells out the cross-government institutional arrangements that will be needed to oversee the new research funding system. These include an oversight board with *“representation from [UK] Government Departments, HEFCE, and Innovate UK, better linking the various strands of government funded research”*. The review also recommends a ministerial committee *“to enable the discussion of strategic research priorities and funding of research, to provide a place for engagement between policymakers and research funders, and to put science at the heart of Government.”*

There is a short section on engaging with devolved governments, but this suggests only that there should be *“regular dialogue between relevant UK and devolved government departments”* to ensure responsiveness to research priorities identified at the devolved level.

The impression is that the devolved governments are outside the inner circle of governance – offered dialogue but no seat at the table when priorities are set. This is less a UK research strategy than a UK Government research strategy. This seems a missed opportunity to use research funding as a way of sharing across boundaries, and ministers may want to consider whether they would prefer to give the devolved governments' specific representation on these boards. Notwithstanding that, individual research councils should be devolution-aware, and when they are funding research proposals, should encourage bidders to consider the potential for cross-jurisdictional learning and evidence transfer.

IMPROVING SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR EVIDENCE – THE WHAT WORKS INITIATIVE

Perhaps the most significant recent attempt to improve the supply of useful policy evidence has been the creation by the UK Government of 'What Works Centres' in various areas of social policy. In principle this initiative could provide a hub for the creation of a shared evidence base used by all the governments. There are now seven such centres. These include two pre-existing bodies retrospectively rebranded to become part of the network (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, and the Educational Endowment Foundation), and new centres in five areas: wellbeing, crime reduction, ageing, early intervention and local economic growth.²⁴ These bodies synthesise research and carry out policy trials to build up an evidence base of 'what works' in tackling various social policy problems.

The What Works Centres have a variable territorial coverage largely reflecting the geographical responsibilities of their parent Whitehall departments (which also provide funding to the centres). Thus the early intervention centre has carried out trials only in England²⁵ while the crime reduction centre is focused on England and Wales, though with some partnerships with universities and academics elsewhere in the UK.²⁶ The network is supported by a team based in the Cabinet Office.

At our seminar, participants argued that the devolved governments had not been significantly involved in the establishment of the What Works Network. One speaker recalled discovering that *"by and large policymakers here [in Wales] weren't very aware of this emerging network of What Works Centres, [and] that the ESRC hadn't really thought about its relationship with Wales"*. A Scottish participant told a similar story. In response, it was pointed out that the level of awareness of the What Works initiative is not necessarily that high among all UK Government officials either.

Speakers from the devolved governments also emphasised that they have been able to build relationships with What Works Centres subsequently on a bilateral basis where they see relevance and usefulness for their own priorities. As a result *"Perhaps the use isn't always very visible but in terms of the feed into policy development and policy delivery, it does happen"*.

It was suggested that the devolved governments might also have preferred not to be direct partners in a Cabinet Office-led initiative. Classification as a full member of the What Works Network requires clear adherence to a set of principles guiding the use and dissemination of evidence. For instance, there is a requirement to *"use consistent metrics for assessing the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions, which enable direct comparison between the utility of different interventions."*²⁷ As we discuss below, the Scottish and Welsh Governments are perceived as having a more expansive take on evidence - so even with more extensive initial engagement, a detached relationship may have been the result.

The Scottish and Welsh governments have instead set up their own centres: the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW) and What Works Scotland. Both these centres have affiliate rather than full member status within the What Works Network. This enables them to take part in the quarterly meetings of the What Works Council and other events with the England-focused centres, without being bound by the criteria for full membership of the network. There is at present no equivalent body in Northern Ireland.

In comparison with the UK What Works Centres, PPIW has a much closer relationship with Welsh Government ministers. It has regular meetings with ministers and sees itself as having an important role in stimulating demand for evidence. Indeed one reason that capacity was created outside the civil service was to fill a need perceived by ministers to access external ideas. PPIW wants to make government a more intelligent consumer of evidence as well as encouraging academics to produce useable inputs (so it also addresses supply-side weaknesses). PPIW therefore seeks to *“add value at that beginning stage, through the process of dialogue with ministers and officials, shaping the question, and then going and finding existing evidence, where that is already there, or where it isn't, bringing in expertise that can help to provide advice and evidence on that”*.

PPIW will also model options for Welsh ministers – which the UK What Works Centres do not do. And it has seen part of its role as building bridges between the Welsh government and the UK What Works Centres. Facilitating the What Works Council to meet in Cardiff was seen as a successful way of raising the profile in Wales and building links to policymakers.

What Works Scotland is a partnership of Scottish universities funded by the ESRC and the Scottish Government.²⁸ It describes itself as: *“an initiative to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform”*. This different focus was confirmed at the roundtable: *“What Works Scotland is more about public service reform and it's more about actually delivering reform on the ground, so it's very much focused on lessons that one can learn from working with local government and actually trying to increase the speed of change at local government level rather than any one particular theme”*.

As is clear from its website, it has a wider construction of 'evidence' than the UK What Works Centres with a strong focus on experiential and shared learning to underpin the approach to service improvement laid out by the Scottish Government's Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services.²⁹

With the exception of Northern Ireland, the arrangements that have evolved seem to be working relatively well – with scope for sharing where there is appetite, and for taking different approaches to the use of evidence where that is the preference of the respective governments. Nonetheless, there does seem to be scope for the What Works Network to be more explicit on how its work is informed by devolution, and how to benefit from evidence of the effectiveness of divergent policies in the UK. As and when new What Works Centres are commissioned by the UK Government, there should therefore be deliberate engagement with the devolved governments (including Northern Ireland) from the start about how they would like to relate to the centres. There should also be active consideration of whether and how a What Works Centre should be established in Northern Ireland.

The What Works Centres have the potential to play an important role in making devolution an effective policy laboratory. Divergent policy and practice is an essential part of devolution. As set out above, it allows different nations and regions to respond to distinct needs and values. Focusing on evidence, What Works Centres should be well-placed to explore the extent to which divergent policies are in practice effective, where successes and failures are context-specific and where there might be potential to scale-up or across the UK.

WHAT IS GOOD EVIDENCE? POLICY COMMUNITIES DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE

The starting point for evidence exchange has to be a common understanding about what constitutes evidence worth exchanging. We heard from several officials that a divergent approach to evidence itself was emerging in the different governments. In particular it was felt that the 'what works' approach being pursued by the UK Government preferred experimentation and viewed Randomised Control Trials (RCT) as the 'gold standard' of evidence, with correspondingly less weight to other forms of evidence.

Indeed, some of the English What Works Centres, notably the Education Endowment Foundation, have an explicit hierarchy of standards of evidence with the top ranking reserved for *"Consistent high quality evidence from at least five robust and recent meta-analyses ... where the outcome measures include curriculum measures or standardised tests in school subject areas"*.³⁰

Participants saw the devolved governments as having a more 'catholic' approach to evidence with more value attached to both user experience and expert opinion. This differentiation was described as *"almost an ideological difference relating to approach to research"*. This did not mean the devolved governments were uninterested in the outputs of the What Works Centres, where they felt they could be useful. However, as one participant said, *"we think expert advice and analysis is a valuable thing to bring to the party, alongside policy trials."*

There are other potential barriers. One is that although the same term might be used to frame an objective in more than one territory, governments might invest it with different meaning. This can lead to researchers and policymakers in different parts of the UK being *"divided by a common language"* where *"we sound a lot of the time that we're talking about the same issues but when you dig down we're not really."*

A specific example given was the concept of 'wellbeing', in which all four administrations have an interest. However, one participant had found when they started to communicate with counterparts from the other governments, *"while we [all] use the word wellbeing, our concepts are incredibly different"*. Specifically, it was argued that in Scotland and Wales the approach to the issue is *"based on wellbeing as a very broad and holistic concept"* whereas in England (including the What Works Centre for Wellbeing) there is a narrower focus on 'subjective wellbeing' as measured in standardised questions in the Labour Force Survey. Apparently this meant that initial conversations were less fruitful than expected, though over time mutual understanding had increased.

There is also another practical barrier. As systems diverge, the context changes and that can limit replicability. An assumption behind evidence exchange is that there is transferable learning – i.e. what worked there, might work here.³¹ But as the context changes, replicability is likely to reduce and it becomes increasingly important that policymakers understand that contextual divergence.

For example, in July 2015, the Educational Endowment Foundation reported that two RCTs had failed to replicate in England the positive results established in Scotland and internationally on the efficacy of 'peer tutoring' in improving results in schools.³² The Foundation suggested three possible explanations. Two related to experimental differences between the English and Scottish trials (for instance the English experiments looked at secondary schools, the Scottish one at primaries). But the third possible explanation posited was that there might already be more peer tutoring in England than Scotland due to existing differences between the school systems.

Another example given at our event concerned the implementation of a scheme imported from the US – the Family Nurse Partnerships that provide targeted support to young mothers to improve health and developmental outcomes. This scheme has been operating separately in both England and Scotland, and a recent independent evaluation of the English scheme found no evidence of an additional benefit to mothers taking part in the scheme and therefore concluded the cost could not be justified.³³ This negative result was not seen as automatically applicable in Scotland, however, where there was a view that there could be implementation differences between the trials in the different nations, or other existing differences in the wider policy context, which could limit the transferability of the findings. In both Scotland and England further research is planned.

This is a useful reminder that evidence exchange increasingly will offer a starting hypothesis which needs to be looked at and assessed in current national environments – rather than simply an assumption that policy A can be transplanted successfully into area B. It also points to the importance of understanding what exactly is being transferred. Of course this replicability issue does not only bedevil evidence exchange just between jurisdictions – implementation differences can also mean that replication does not deliver the expected results in the same jurisdiction over time. But it is likely to be an increasing challenge as systems diverge.

CONCLUSIONS

The UK and devolved governments share a stated desire to improve the use of evidence in the policy process and to learn lessons from policy experiments and trials elsewhere. Recent developments such as the creation of the What Works Network with the inclusion of the Scottish and Welsh devolved affiliates on the What Works Council, and the cross-jurisdiction remit of the Trials Advice Panel are positive indications that this is more than just a rhetorical commitment.

However, it also appears that for a number of reasons the potential for policy learning and evidence exchange between the four territories of the UK is not being fully captured. We believe that there are actions that could be taken to address that and we look in turn at:

- The enablers of evidence exchange.
- The environment for evidence exchange.

Both are important for making better evidence exchange and policy learning happen.

ENABLERS OF EVIDENCE EXCHANGE

At the most basic level, **comparable data** is a prerequisite for useful evidence exchange. It is important that data on policy outcomes is collected in a comparable way across the UK and at the right spatial level to enable useful comparisons. **All departments and governments should commit to early consultation with each other (and with the Office for National Statistics) when designing or amending datasets, and where possible governments should build shared systems for collecting data**, though we recognise that governments' data needs will differ according to the local policy context. Lessons could be learnt from international bodies like the OECD about how to build cross-government datasets that all stakeholders can contribute to and learn from.

The second key element is that **departments and the devolved governments should make research and evaluations they commission readily accessible to others**, unless there are specific commercial or other reasons to maintain confidentiality. If possible this should extend to internally as well as externally commissioned studies. Further, simply publishing research may not be enough if others are unaware of its existence – governments should actively seek to disseminate relevant data and findings to each other.

Where governments share similar overarching policy objectives, **there should be greater readiness to commission joint research into policy options, whether from outside government or from joint teams comprising officials from different governments**.

The Research Councils need to take account of the impact of devolution in regard to the research that they fund. This will only happen if the devolved governments are properly involved in the development of strategic research priorities. As reforms to research councils and government research are implemented (following the Nurse Review), **the UK Government should clarify how the devolved governments are to be involved in achieving this**. Research councils should also encourage researchers they fund to look at comparative data from the four nations, and also to be clear in their research outputs about the geographical extent of their evidence base.

The What Works Network marks a positive move towards the greater use of evidence in the policy process and recent developments show a willingness to establish effective relationships between the UK Government What Works Network and the affiliates in the devolved governments. **As new What Works Centres are commissioned, it would be sensible to engage earlier and more extensively with the devolved governments about how they wish to be involved.**

Northern Ireland does not yet have such a centre. The Northern Ireland Executive, **What Works Network and potential funders like the ESRC should explore the possibility of establishing a What Works Northern Ireland centre, perhaps along the lines of PPIW.**

The final critical enabler of better evidence exchange is the skills and capacity of policymakers to use evidence effectively in the policy process. This is not a specific devolution point – but **civil servants may benefit from specific training on how to use different kinds of evidence** and experimental methods, including how to find, sift and interpret relevant data and experience from other parts of the UK.

Ministers should also be supported to become more intelligent consumers of policy evidence (as the Public Policy Institute for Wales is attempting to achieve). Suppliers of evidence both inside and outside government should also be encouraged to make the most of the opportunity to learn from the policy laboratory that devolution has created.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EVIDENCE EXCHANGE

The enablers are the building blocks for better evidence exchange and policy learning. But there has to be appetite too. Politicians need to create an environment that is open to learning from what has gone on elsewhere (including other parts of the UK) but as we have discussed, the imperative to differentiate and allow for political competition may limit their support for overt policy learning on politically contested issues. There are, however, actions that can be taken to foster a more positive environment.

First, the review of intergovernmental relations that is due to report early in 2016 should seek to **embed policy learning and lesson sharing as a core function of how the UK and devolved governments interact.** There may be value in creating new cross-government ministerial groups in policy areas with shared goals (such as tackling climate change) or shared competence (such as welfare reform) with an expanded secretariat that can pull together a cross-UK evidence base to inform ministerial discussions.

Second, political leaders from all the governments should **encourage civil servants to develop close working relationships with counterparts in other administrations.** The Memorandum of Understanding on intergovernmental relations commits all governments to information sharing, but the four governments should re-emphasise their commitment to embedding this principle in day-to-day practice to help ensure that other governments can learn from errors as well as success stories. **There can also be value in specific memoranda of understanding between particular Whitehall departments and devolved governments setting out principles for data sharing, and processes through which disagreements about such sharing can be resolved.**

These should be **complemented by more informal networks** – both of professions but also officials working on specific topics – which will help the governments stay in touch on new and emerging initiatives. Departments should work with the devolved governments to set these up, where they do not currently exist. These can be largely

virtual but face-to-face meetings can help build trust and deeper relationships. And there should be a **celebration of good practice** – with public recognition for officials working effectively with counterparts from other governments.

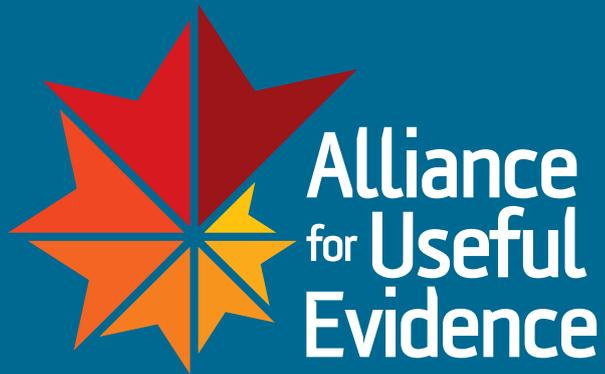
Third, the four governments should continue to work together to **encourage the interchange of staff between the UK and devolved governments** in order to strengthen cross-government networks through which ideas and evidence can flow. The Civil Service Board (on which the heads of the Scottish and Welsh Governments sit) should continue to show leadership on this issue and send a signal to officials that it is advantageous to their careers to spend some time (whether on secondment or short-term placement) in other governments around the UK. This should be complemented by improved training in devolution awareness for Whitehall officials.

Devolution capability plans, which all departments are now required to produce, should bring together these initiatives and **set out how each Whitehall department is seeking to draw on lessons from across the UK and to develop a shared evidence base with the devolved governments** about what works in their areas of policy responsibility.

The final requirement for effective evidence exchange and policy learning is what one participant at our seminar identified simply as ‘curiosity’. The policy tests being developed by many UK departments set expectations that officials know the topic well before they can advise (the Department for Education policy test asks “who made you the expert?”) – and that has to mean the policy adviser is aware of and informed of the ways in which the different governments in the UK are tackling a problem.

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