

# Delivering Data-Led Local Policy

How to Build Data Capacity and  
Culture in Local Government

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# Foreword

Improving access to and use of local data is critical to the effective operation of local government and delivery of public services in local areas. There is huge potential to make better use of data and digital tools to deliver better outcomes for residents.

This independent report from the International Public Policy Observatory makes an important contribution to improving understanding of these challenges, including grass-root insights on data governance, sharing, training and capabilities; and the importance of maintaining strong community engagement across the whole pipeline from collection, use and archival. The project also demonstrates the value of bringing together academic research and local government expertise to explore some of the complex challenges in driving better **data and capability to support local delivery and public services**. Strengthening **the appreciation and use of data to inform local policy design and services delivery** can offer powerful local benefits in the present and for the future, as well as helping **to inform national policymaking for the benefit of all of the UK**.

MHCLG is committed to working with local government to leverage data and digital technology for service improvements. This includes exploring how to strengthen data capacity and capabilities and to improve analytical tools to support local policy development and delivery, alongside leveraging AI to enhance data collection and analysis and digital service delivery. In the context of increasing availability of local-level data and ongoing reform of local and regional government, there are opportunities to deliver both improved productivity and service quality.

There remain complex challenges to effective local data use, such as those highlighted in this report. These include how to increase local government capacity and capabilities for data analysis and use; how to enhance the accessibility of data, including across different systems and organisations and barriers to data sharing; and how to improve both the integration and comparability of local data across the UK.

**Tom Smith, Director of AI, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

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# Executive Summary

Local and combined authorities across the UK often face challenges using data to inform practical, timely policymaking. At the same time, national governments can also struggle to compare siloed data collected and used locally.

This report addresses these two separate but interconnected problems. It aims to help local and national governments use data more effectively for informed decision-making and better outcomes.

## About this project

The report presents insights from a project investigating local data needs through a grassroots lens, mapping how data is used in practice across the UK to explore how to better **harness the power of local data for more responsive and wiser policymaking**.

The International Public Policy Observatory and UCL's Department of Information Studies partnered with five local and combined authorities across the UK to embed Data Policy Fellows into strategic, live policy projects. We consulted with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and key stakeholders such as ONS Local to scope the work and contextualise findings.

Each Fellow worked on an individual local data project and gained first-hand, on-the-ground insight into what helps (and hinders) data-informed policymaking. Each of these partnerships is presented as a case study written by a Fellow, comprising this report's main body.

Building on our partnerships with authorities on the ground, we draw out actionable and practical insights and scalable policy recommendations to improve local data capacity, capability, and comparability.

## Key themes

While each authority and project is different, four clear common themes emerge, highlighting the need for a joined-up approach to drive more effective, data-driven local governance.

**A. Data Sharing and Standardisation** ensures that authorities can access and utilise consistent, usable data, enabling better coordination across regions.

**B. Data Governance and Policy Development** allows data to be used safely, responsibly, and efficiently in decision-making processes.

**C. Training and Data Literacy** investments empower local teams to confidently interpret and apply data to policy work.

**D. Holistic Development and Community Engagement** means using broad local insights to validate and shape policies that address real regional needs, reduce inequalities, and improve public services.

## Calls to action

We set out key findings under each theme, together with corresponding policy recommendations applicable to local and combined authorities and/or to the national governments of the UK. (See page 6 for the full table of key findings and policy recommendations.) Those directed at the sub-national level are scalable and thus valuable for any local or combined authority in the UK.

We identify three pressing calls to action:

### For the UK and national governments:

- **Develop a centralised data catalogue**, such as the mooted National Data Library, using the new Data Use and Access Act to set one up. This repository should hold key metadata and stewarded sample datasets (in the first instance) from local authorities, central government, and other key partners, including the Government Digital Service and ONS.
- The UK's three national governments should establish similar national data repositories in their respective countries using common standards for interoperability.

### For local and regional governments:

- **Agree on plain-English, data-sharing templates** aligned with Part 5 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 where applicable, to accelerate safe and scalable collaboration. Use a common template to clarify purpose, roles, responsibilities and safeguards, so agreements can be repurposed across partners, maintaining relevance and momentum to implementation.

### For all levels of government:

- Develop and **nurture a culture of collaboration for safe and responsible data sharing** underpinned by a **transparent data governance system** (including named data owners, routine quality assurance and shared standards).



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## Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Below, we set out the overall key findings and policy recommendations from the project. These are intended to be scalable and applicable across different organisations and sit alongside the individual recommendations to each partner in each of the Case Study chapters. We group our observations and recommendations into four themes:

- **Data Sharing and Standardisation:** Risk aversion and data held in different systems create significant barriers. The UK government's proposed National Data Library should create a national repository of existing data (metadata) and data samples, managed by a national body and underpinned by a multi-year data strategy. A similar structure could also be applicable for the governments of the other three UK nations. Create streamlined sharing agreements (using existing powers) that encourage a data culture of transparency and collaboration 'by default'.
- **Data Governance and Policy Development:** Consistent rules for how data is collected, accessed and used (data governance) are key to establish trust in data. Forecasting and predictive modelling can support service planning across local governments. Government should develop a robust and federated data governance system that prepares for the benefits of Artificial Intelligence, working with bodies such as Administrative Data Research (ADR). This should go alongside more general improvements to data collection, evaluation and fostering good data practice.
- **Training and Data Literacy:** Standard public sector approaches to training may not always be appropriate to build *practical* data skills. Authorities should develop initiatives to build a workforce confident in using data (e.g., through practice/experimentation days, partnerships and apprenticeships).
- **Holistic Development and Community Engagement:** For successful service design and delivery, involve local communities and the third sector in shaping what data is collected, how it is checked and used. Non-sensitive data should be shared in citizen-centred, accessible dashboards and visualisations.

## A. Data Sharing and Standardisation

**Addressing risk aversion is essential to enable data sharing.** In particular, data sharing within and between local authorities is often challenging due to inconsistent practices and interpretations of privacy concerns, confidentiality and legal constraints.

**Data is too often ‘invisible’: scattered across different departments or organisations** and rarely ‘share-ready’, making it difficult to know if it is collected at all, let alone be accessed and used effectively. **Data-driven comparison and decision-making are difficult** due to a lack of data standardisation.

**Combined authorities could act as ‘informed customers’ to scale data collection and standardisation efforts**, relieving the burden of procurement coordination and preventing regional duplication and the ‘black box’ risks of disjointed, opaque and proprietary systems.

**Initiatives to enable access to public sector data**, such as the [London Datastore](#), are useful and well-regarded among policymakers, particularly for their role in data discoverability.

**Data sharing templates and agreed data standards are in demand** to replace repetitive negotiations.

**Create a National Data Library\* to provide a centralised repository of metadata and sample datasets from local authorities, central government, and agencies, including the Central Digital & Data Office and ONS.**

- Empower a national body to manage this repository and **co-ordinate overall data strategy** by either establishing a new institution or mandating an existing body, such as ONS to do so. Ensure this covers data strategy and coordination at the regional/devolved level.
- Ensure the **repository is standardised, accessible, and actively contributed to** by all key stakeholders, including small businesses and community organisations. Look at legal mechanisms like public [data trusts](#) or [data institutions](#) for multi-party ownership.
- Make parts of this repository **publicly available** to facilitate knowledge sharing.

\* using the opportunity of the UK Government’s Data Use and Access Act.

**Enable data sharing: Use existing power\* to implement ‘Multi-Party Accession Agreements’ where new partners sign up to pre-vetted terms that facilitate collaboration and transparency.**

- Institute **protocols and templates for data sharing** among stakeholders that facilitate both timely access and compliance with data protection requirements.
- Create **more accessible and transparent** Data Catalogue or Asset Register **routes for combined and local authorities to access data held by central government departments** and equivalent departments in devolved governments, where applicable.

\*see [Part 5 of the Digital Economy Act 2017](#) for how public bodies are to share information across organisational boundaries to improve public services

**Strengthen good data practice: Promote a culture of transparency and collaboration by incentivising data communities of practice.**

- Enforce a “**share-ready**” **standard**, keeping data tidy and documented, such that it remains a usable asset to call upon.
- Improve **infrastructure to facilitate data integration** from diverse sources, minimising the need for manual data entry.
- Work with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), Scotland’s Improvement Service, and the Government Digital Service (GDS) on **principles & guidelines for the anonymisation and standardisation of data, formats, & verifications**, including for data from external sources.

## B. Data Governance and Policy Development

**Trust is critical, but it relies on accountability.** Without robust governance systems that inspire confidence among stakeholders, data sharing efforts are likely to stall or, worse, lead to unintended negative consequences such as data breaches or mismanagement.

**Trust is ensured by consistency at different steps of the data lifecycle.** There is sometimes a perception of inconsistent data governance structures across different government departments and bodies, particularly when sensitive data is involved. Clear **‘Data Owner’ roles** will help to unify disparate standards.

There is a need to prevent isolated *“patchwork”* project practices by **making data sources more interconnected, better documented** and generally easier to find.

There is an **increasing need for forecasting and predictive modelling across local government**, as well as a growing interest in harnessing the capabilities of AI for this purpose. However, these efforts need to be accompanied by robust data governance structures and ethical oversight.

**Develop a strong data governance system:** Collaborate with bodies such as **ADR** to establish a data governance system that assigns specific ‘Data Owner’ roles with clear accountability for data integrity and management.

- **Codify responsibilities** for how data is handled and **mandate collaboration with key stakeholders to monitor and resolve issues.**

**Operationalise data ethics in policies:** Embed ethical standards directly into the evaluation of existing policy initiatives to plan and prepare for the benefits of Artificial Intelligence.

- Use existing initiatives to identify data useful for teaching computers to help tailor services to local needs in the future.

**Improve data collection:** Invest in frequent and comprehensive data literacy and collection efforts in areas where real-time data is essential for tailoring services and making timely policy interventions.

- **Ensure ‘quality at the source’** through simple, but structured collection methods that minimise the burden during collection and data cleaning.
- **Track data expiry to drive strategic decisions** on when to update or retire predictive models.

**Foster ‘Good Data Citizenship’:** Treat *data as a strategic asset* and invest in maintaining partnerships.

- Ensure that collection and analysis **efforts evolve but remain ongoing** for effective and *sustained* policy outcomes, preventing data loss when projects end.

## C. Training and Data Literacy

**Upskilling staff is neither fast nor straightforward.** It involves not only technical training but also systemic changes that ensure newly acquired skills are integrated into existing roles to support core responsibilities rather than added on top of existing duties.

**“Traditional” public sector approaches to training may not equip individuals** with the practical experience they need to master data literacy effectively. While training resources are available, coding proficiency, like learning any new tool (e.g., coding language or library), takes **time and consistent practice**. It also requires **curation and prioritisation of goals**, which can be achieved through communities of practice that foster ‘Good Data Citizenship’.

It is not enough to engage sporadically in training programmes. Individuals need regular opportunities to apply what they have learned but also **allow their work to feed into future training for other colleagues**.

**Increase regular short training sessions:**  
**Support staff in discovering, using and collecting data in local and combined authorities.**

- Require all data users **be trained in the basics of handling data and quality assurance**.
- **Offer a diversity of training options**, including qualitative and experimental research methods.
- **Encourage the use of new skills in day-to-day** roles through dedicated ‘experimentation’ days for low-stakes processes and projects.
- **Prioritise regular knowledge-sharing sessions** (e.g., meetings, workshops), through communities of ‘good data’ practice.

**Build a data-savvy workforce: Align skills development with industry standards through strategic partnerships.**

**Align skills development initiatives with current and future workforce needs** by partnering with public bodies involved in capability-building, educational institutions, industry and other relevant stakeholders.

Combat a data skills shortage in the public sector through **data-centred apprenticeships and placements at different levels**.

Ensure data is **well-documented with simple structures** and aligned with the development and/or implementation of national standards, so external partners can more easily contribute.

## D. Holistic Development and Community Engagement

**Data should play a critical role in multi-agency service design and delivery.** Currently, the community and third sector often lack access to *and involvement in* the collection, usage and maintenance of data.

**Giving local communities a voice in data practices** (e.g., through “on-the-ground” validation and lived-experience insights to local or combined authorities) will have a positive effect on service provision.

### **Co-create information: Increase community engagement in data collection and data-informed policymaking.**

- **Ensure local voices are heard in data collection, policy formulation and implementation.** Foster stakeholder involvement through engagement strategies (e.g., online and in-person meetings) and outreach to the hard-to-reach using “trusted messengers.
- **Empower the third sector** to engage in the creation and interpretation of data with local and combined authorities.

### **Democratise data access: Ensure that some form of data collected is accessible to citizens and communities.**

- Present data in **easy-to-understand visualisations** and **easy-to-use dashboards** that can be updated.
- Promote transparency through **open data initiatives** for non-sensitive information.
- Adopt **citizen-centred design** to ensure data projects are accessible across different levels of digital literacy and access needs.

# Introduction

## Introducing the Case Studies

The five case studies examine individual data-for-policy issues across five combined and local authorities. Case studies are authored by the policy fellow(s) who worked with the partner authority. Chapters open with a stakeholder map and governance diagram to provide institutional context, before concluding with specific recommendations to that authority.

We distil our first-hand and interview-based findings of each chapter into an actionable table with a cause-and-effect framework. **Each case study's table summarises findings into sentences taking the shape of "If we knew .../ if we had....we would be able to....", followed by a narrative turning these statements into recommendations for the authority.**

The first evaluates Local Area Energy Plans/Planning (LAEPs) at the **Greater Manchester Combined Authority** (GMCA). It unpicks the challenges and opportunities for data in the energy planning sector and identifies the essential next steps in Greater Manchester's net zero journey.

The second case study examines the **Greater London Authority** (GLA)'s development of version two of its London Building Stock Model (LBSM). Noting the GLA's strengths as a regional government, it advocates for a cohesive approach to data across the lifecycle to produce usable pan-London insights.

The third case study involves the **West Midlands Combined Authority** (WMCA) and the challenges of data maturity along its devolution journey. Evaluating the WMCA's current capabilities in data management, the chapter discusses how sound data practices enable the authority to deliver tangible benefits for residents.

The fourth case study identifies challenges of multi-agency collaboration and the importance of contextual data in **Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council**. Supporting the Council's Resilient Families Service, the chapter recommends more integrated information strategies and citizen-centric approaches to address health inequalities.

Finally, the fifth case study, a collaboration with **Belfast City Council**, examines the issues and opportunities around the institution of a Labour Market Observatory for Belfast. In the context of the unique challenges of Belfast as a post-conflict city, it makes a clear case for an Observatory to coordinate labour market evidence and action on economic inactivity.

## Background and Policy Context

This report seeks to improve the day-to-day use of data by local and combined authorities for policymaking and to enhance how the UK and national governments' access and compare local data. **The report draws on first-hand reflections from researchers embedded in local government.** It elaborates on underlying challenges [identified](#) by the National Audit Office in 2019 on assessing data use across government - many of which still hold true. These include data not always being seen as a high priority; the quality of data not being well understood; and a culture of tolerating and working around poor-quality data (p. 8).

Our project responds to the UK government's Subnational Data Strategy, which set out the ambition to 'think subnational by default'. Since our project began, national policy has moved towards a stronger emphasis on devolution, economic growth and regional development, increasing the emphasis on authorities to improve their ability to use local data. Therefore, **up-to-date, useable data will be vital in tailoring policy and narrowing regional productivity gaps.**

We note the UK government's continued commitment to the National Data Strategy, and in particular its expansion to a National Data Library (NDL) initiative to centralise the discoverability of public data, and support its stewardship. **This reflects a shift from a simpler 'Open Data' focus to treating data also as a strategic public asset and infrastructure, to be curated and maintained for better services, accountability and development.** We suggest that this NDL be modelled on our top-line recommendation to institute a national data repository that catalogues and indexes local data, including a potential role for an overarching data strategy prioritising foundational skills and avoiding data duplication.

Our recommendations also support the National Data Strategy's emphasis on developing foundation data skills across public services, as well as Smart Data schemes, which support secure, consent-based sharing of data for improved services. **The grass-root case studies in the chapters below are intended to provide a practical resource for policymakers and practitioners in the context of the government's [Data Use and Access Bill](#).** It is also relevant to work ongoing in the devolved UK nations, such as the Scottish government's commissioned [report](#) on open data use.

## Data Maturity Assessment Benchmark

Understanding the link between data maturity, capacity and capabilities is essential for capitalising on opportunities related to data-driven policymaking. To benchmark our case studies, we employed the [Data Maturity Assessment for Government \(DMA\) \(2023\)](#) tool to compare skills and capabilities. The DMA defines **data maturity as an organisation's capability, effectiveness, and readiness to use data to achieve strategic goals.** This framework provides a structured approach to evaluate strengths and weaknesses within an organisation's data ecosystem (HM Government, 2023: 8). Each topic is categorised into five maturity levels, ranging from Level 1 "Beginning", where compliance is limited, to Level 2 "Mastering," where data practices are proactive and comprehensive. This allows organisations to identify areas of low maturity that may hinder their objectives and to prioritise improvements accordingly.

Our assessment indicates **data is not yet widely regarded as a strategic asset in many contexts**, with management opting for *reactive* rather than *proactive* approaches. A continued reliance on external consultants reveals that data practices are not fully integrated into core operations, making these vulnerable to knowledge loss and changing technologies. We observe that data maturity is limited by differences in data fluency, especially between analysts and policymakers, and compounded by a culture of siloed working.

This places stakeholders from our case on average at the "Emerging" or Level 2 stage of data maturity, where they recognise the strategic value of data but encounter substantial barriers to coordinate it: processes are often manual or inconsistent, and usage driven by individual initiative. Although staff may be willing to upskill and interested in data-driven service improvements, leveraging this willingness requires addressing broader issues.

## Capacity vs. Capability

**Capacity** refers to the resources (e.g., people, infrastructure, and tools) needed to manage data effectively, while **capability** reflects the expertise in transforming that data into actionable insights. An organisation might possess advanced systems and a large workforce, but without the capability to analyse and interpret data, those resources may be underused. Conversely, even highly skilled teams can be hampered by limited capacity ([Department for Transport, 2023](#)).

**Our findings show that the relationship between capacity and capability is far more complex than a simple trade-off.** In policymaking, where diverse stakeholders bring varying expertise, perspectives, and influence, this interplay becomes more dynamic and challenging. Acknowledging this complexity is key to unlocking the potential of data-driven policymaking.

## Balancing Internal and External Expertise

Internal capacity and capability sustain a unified vision and strategy, aligning various projects and initiatives with the overall goals of the authorities. To manage relationships across central and local government organisations and engage effectively with external consultants, authorities need internal data capability. Developing internal data capabilities involves investing in training and upskilling existing staff, as well as recruiting and *retaining* new talent with the necessary expertise (a challenge raised by all partners we worked with). **Sustained capability investments foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation**, going beyond simply enhancing the organisation's ability to manage and interpret data.

While external consultants can provide specialised expertise and an outside perspective, their contributions are most valuable when matched by a robust internal data capacity (skilled people, infrastructure, and tools). Over-reliance on external consultants for new projects or initiatives can deplete resources and create misaligned outcomes because consultants may lack a deep understanding of organisational goals and constraints. Additionally, depending solely on external consultants exposes organisations to risks from shifting priorities or funding droughts, potentially leaving them unable to function without external support.

Teams that are well-versed in data analytics and management allow local and combined authorities to better oversee and integrate the work of external consultants, ensuring that projects are completed efficiently and in line with strategic objectives. This requires either developing in-house data capabilities or conducting thorough due diligence on commissioned processes to **avoid a "black box" delivery where authorities cannot (re)use, update or replicate external consultants' work.**

Local and combined authorities must balance external input with robust internal capabilities to ensure effective delivery and accountability. **Effective collaboration is essential for more cohesive and coordinated policymaking.** A strong internal team supports better knowledge transfer between different departments and stakeholders and ensures shared and usable insights across local and central governments.

## Training, Literacy and Culture

Training needs vary among partners in this project. This reflects **a consistent disconnect between policymakers and data analysts, but also a disparity in data maturity across domains**, where sectors like transport are often more data literate than others. Needs, therefore, range from acquiring new technical skills and improving policymakers' data literacy to creating a supportive environment for data sharing and predictive modelling.

Evidence-based policymaking is weakened by a disconnect between data analysts and policymakers, driven by political priorities, data misinterpretation, and operational silos. A gap often exists when advanced digital and data teams produce outputs that are unintelligible to more policy-focused teams who work in a very different context. **All partners observed that parity of *data literacy* – the understanding of its collective value and the capability and confidence to use it – compounded by time and resource constraints, hinders informed policy decisions.** A recurring, symptomatic issue is the reliance on superficial descriptive statistics, which feel insufficient for informed decision-making. Regular feedback loops and timely, open communication would help align analytical outputs with policy needs, ensuring that data-driven insights are both actionable and relevant.

**Training programmes should encompass not only the technical aspects of data analysis but also the *practical* and *social* application of these skills in day-to-day tasks**, including how such skills are retained, transferred and maintained across different employees to ensure the sustainability of training programmes and their integration into the regular workflow. While technical training is often offered by central government, capacity constraints render such training difficult to sustain. The time required for training and the lack of opportunities for immediate application in day-to-day roles contribute to this issue.

Public sector organisations frequently face skill gaps, especially in transitioning from traditional single-purpose tools (like Excel) to more flexible ones (like Python or R). Rapid technological advancements exacerbate these challenges, widening uneven capability gaps between teams and individuals. Furthermore, training and support should involve multiple personnel to ensure continuity if one leaves. Hence, **training must be seen as an organisational task.**

**Training must go beyond methods to address operational processes** to teaching the '*how*' of data management. Many interviewees cited the lack of expertise in knowing where to find data or how to request and share it safely. However, while training can provide guidelines and protocols, only culture can sustain the behaviour. Therefore, operational training must be underpinned by a culture of trust and incentives for collaboration (e.g., recognising the contributions of individuals who lead this area).

# Case Study 1 - GMCA

## The Role of Governance for Local Area Energy Planning

Veronica-Nicolle Hera



Figure 1. GMCA Stakeholder Map.

## LAEP Governance Diagram - GMCA -

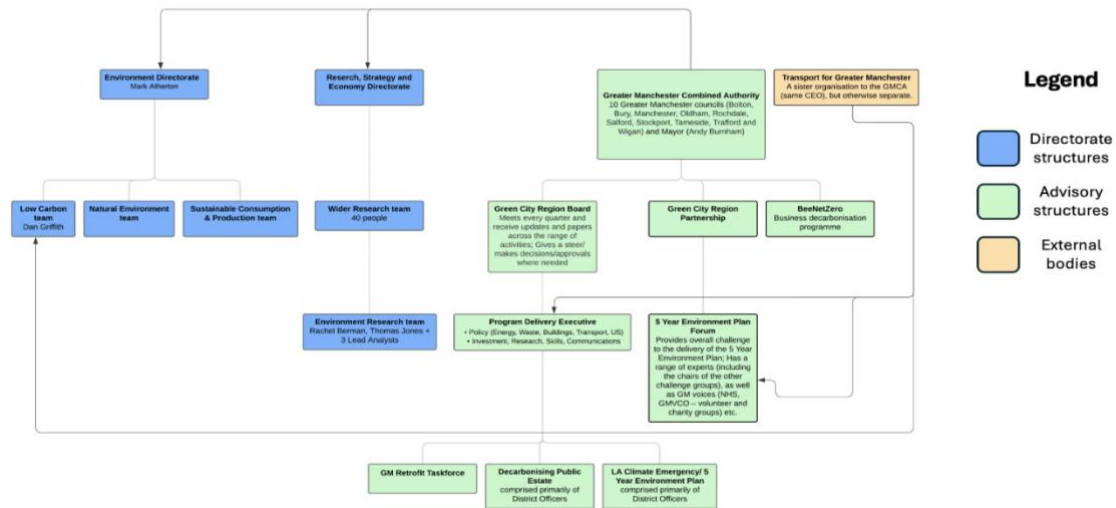


Figure 2. GMCA LAEP Governance Diagram.

The first case study involves an evaluation of the local area energy planning at the **Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)**. Unpicking the challenges and opportunities for data in the energy planning sector, it identifies the essential next steps in Greater Manchester's net zero journey.

### Introduction

My policy fellowship evaluated the Manchester city-region's Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP) data landscape through 16 interviews with both key stakeholders involved in its development and those knowledgeable about regional and national LAEP practices, focusing on relevant data use within and outside Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

This work will enable the GMCA Environment and Low Carbon teams - stakeholders with a high degree of power and interest in delivering the LAEPs - to identify the essential next steps in Greater Manchester's net zero journey. As a collaboration between the public sector (GMCA) and academia (UCL, IPPO), this case study combines in-depth, innovative thinking with practical, solution-oriented recommendations.

The interviews in my project unpacked today's challenges and opportunities in the energy planning sector and presented a review of available LAEP related tools and datasets. Internally, more efficient data sharing and management would foster a more productive collaboration between teams in the Research, Strategy and Economy and the Environment directorate (Figure 2). While the latter is responsible for LAEP delivery, as part of the Low Carbon's team mandate, the former provides support based on intelligence collected by the Environment Research team as well as data analysis and tools produced by the Digital and Information Strategy team. To complement these structures, on the advisory side, relevant decision-making bodies for LAEP development include the Green City Region Board, the 5 Year Environment Plan forum and the Program Delivery Executive, which manages the GM Retrofit Taskforce, Decarbonising Public Estate and the LA Climate Emergency 5 Year Environment Plan. These include several district-level officers working on climate and sustainability, thus reinforcing the idea that the GMCA does not sit above the local authorities (LAs), but rather alongside them. Nevertheless, the Combined Authority (CA) serves important purposes in outlining a common vision and offering tailored support to local authorities based on their needs, as well as in amplifying the voices of district-level stakeholders and ensuring a unified approach in relation to external partners.

Interviewees helped identify national and regional public sector LAEP data holders, such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and other local providers – also identifiable as high power, low interest stakeholders when it comes to LAEP delivery. Other private sector stakeholders that hold relevant data, such as DNOs or energy providers in Greater Manchester, fall into the high interest, low power category (Figure 2). Conversations with GMCA stakeholders in the Digital and Infrastructure team and the Environment directorate revealed knowledge gaps due to inaccessible data from low interest, low power stakeholders, such as residents and local businesses. These data gaps must be addressed by using assumptions to work around missing information, whilst planning future outreach to fill in these gaps.

The GMCA is not the only CA grappling with the challenges and opportunities that LAEPs present, with two other partners in the project – the Greater London Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority – operating similar structures to foster useful information exchanges and potential cross-partner collaborations. This overlap enables the high interest, high power stakeholders in Figure 1 – specifically the GMCA Environment and Low Carbon teams – to take essential next steps in Greater Manchester’s Net Zero journey, while also demonstrating how a public sector and academic collaboration (between the GMCA, UCL and IPPO) can support in-depth, innovative thinking, and the creation of practical, solution-oriented recommendations.

### **A strategic view of the city-region for decision-making**

These GMCA LAEPs have several uses, based on the goals they were initially set out to achieve, but also in line with some of the additional benefits they’ve enabled the GMCA to reap over time. Initially, the LAEPs enabled Greater Manchester to articulate the scale and cost of the decarbonisation challenge they are facing while identifying geographical priority areas. These now also serve as valuable starting inputs for net zero project delivery at the local level.

### **Data providing certainty and a common direction in energy-related policymaking**

When procuring a set of plans that accurately reflects the energy situation 'now', regularly and consistently updated data would be helpful given the long timeframe for the delivery of net zero (i.e. more than 15 years). Because time-lagged delivery implies inevitable changes, it is essential to ensure that any adjustments don’t undermine the strategic aims, which could negatively impact the delivery of LAEPs. As the energy planning sector matures away from fragmented local interventions, it is taking on open science principles. This necessitates consistent benchmark methodologies that can be replicated with clearly stated assumptions, which can be challenged and updated.

More widely, because the LAEPs offered a bird’s eye view of energy, they enabled GMCA to understand how challenges are interconnected and thus guide relevant capacity building across its constituent districts. To address the uneven distribution of capacity across local authorities, one of the most useful initiatives the GMCA has undertaken is the employment of staff centrally, within the CA, for roles assigned to the support or delivery of specific projects at the local authority level. This addresses two simultaneous problems: the development of solutions for challenges that are common between local authorities, and the retention of expertise at the CA level to preserve institutional knowledge in case of staff turnover.

### **Capacity & Skills**

#### **Internal versus external development**

Building internal data capacity within the CA is also important for shaping relationships with consultants or third parties, as commissioning a LAEP requires continuity and the ability of local government to be an “informed customer” when liaising with external providers, either by having in-house capacity for data modelling or conducting a separate due diligence of the commissioned process, to avoid a situation where the energy modelling and its associated assumptions are a black-box. Otherwise, there is no potential for

the model to be updated as assumptions evolve throughout time, nor is there any possibility of performing scenario testing of different alternatives based on changes in funding of feasibility constraints. This limits the use of the analysis to pre-existing outputs and may prevent local authorities with limited data capacity from gaining insights into smaller geographies for more localised net-zero project delivery.

### **Offering tailored support to LAs based on their data needs**

Offering tailored support to local authorities is where the CA's support role becomes increasingly important, given its more substantial amount of resources and ability to develop expertise centrally. One interviewee estimated that most combined authorities may have at most between 5-10 individuals who could dedicate themselves to research and development on local intelligence, with local authorities often having a single individual analyst, who is unlikely to be dedicated to energy planning. The data capacity and analytical maturity for research and development is greatly unequal across local government organisations. This creates bottlenecks for how information is used and shared, as interviewees discussed how different organisations and even different individuals within the same organisation have different risk appetites for data sharing and the accountability this comes with. This is why tailored support, rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach is needed from the CA to ensure local authorities can learn from each other's successes and failures and that no areas in the city-region are left behind.

### **Facilitating knowledge exchanges between LAs**

One example of knowledge sharing, aimed at ensuring LAEPs are developed in a cost-effective but also replicable way, is the Net Zero Go platform developed by the Northwest Net Zero Hub, where local authorities can discuss their experiences and learn from each other. According to an interviewee directly working on the ESC Net Zero Go, another purpose of the platform will be to focus on building a repository of procurement documentation, to ensure a more systematic approach to LAEP procurement. Funding a LAEP is difficult because of the technical literacy needed to commission and use its output; this is what gives value to projects like Net Zero Go that facilitate knowledge sharing through local government with examples of good data-informed practices of policy making, which generalise across LAs.

## **Data Governance**

### **Replication, scalability and integration instead of a siloed approach**

In a similar spirit, interviewees across the GMCA highlighted various instances where the CA has led the way on scaling data collection and standardisation efforts, to ensure they are extensively implemented for the entire city-region from the start, rather than unnecessarily duplicating efforts by letting local authorities take a siloed approach. In this way, the CA also has the opportunity to assess which already-existing initiatives developed by local authorities could be applicable to other areas based on shared goals or challenges.

However, further efforts to address the needs "on the ground" are required, as several interviewees from local authorities across Greater Manchester emphasise the importance of developing a more area-focused, community-based energy planning at the neighbourhood or town level that would also include industrial and commercial data, with less of a focus on hydrogen. While the LAEPs initially had a scenario focused on the extensive use of hydrogen, including for purposes such as domestic heating, the thinking in Greater Manchester has shifted slightly and most stakeholders regard hydrogen only as a realistic option for large scale industrial energy demands. Also, most would prefer a more concrete, step-by-step approach alongside more financial incentives, noting that currently the LAEPs feel "too academic". Alongside more central guidance on delivery from the CA, some local authorities mention the implementation of a knowledge sharing working group for districts to discuss their ideas and progress as a potentially beneficial initiative. This would enable the replication and scalability of projects, such as the Oldham Green New Deal Delivery Partnership – a model to ensure community buy-in of the LAEP implementation process

through focus groups aimed at understanding the best way of securing a delivery partner for net-zero projects in the area.

### **Data Culture**

#### **Engaging external stakeholders (DNOs, consultants)**

One of the most notable uses of LAEPs was in shaping relationships with external stakeholders, such as the regional distribution network operators (Electricity Northwest and Cadent) and securing significant central government funding through the GMCA. This underlines the role of the CA as an external-facing body amplifying the voices of its constituent local authorities and offering a coherent, unified narrative for partners, which signals trust and provides the certainty of a common goal or direction that is pursued. What makes the CA best placed to manage these relationships is its ability to pool resources and ensure a standardised procurement process and consistent outputs across the city region, ultimately feeding into the aim of tackling inequalities between regions and ensuring no one is left behind.

#### **Liaising with regional energy structures (RESPs, NZHs)**

In terms of the relationships with other regional energy structures, such as Regional Energy Strategic Planners (RESPs) or the Net Zero Hubs (NZHs), CAs play a pivotal role in communication and representing the city-region as well as in maintaining and exercising their devolved powers. As one interviewee highlighted, the establishment of RESPs next year will mark an important national-level policy change, and their currently unknown remit of action is likely to vary between regions. Thus, areas with already-existing work on energy planning are more likely to receive a “lighter touch” - which may be desirable in Greater Manchester to ensure the relationship with the RESP is framed in the right way to address some of the gaps in the existing LAEP, rather than deem them obsolete and mandate a different approach.

However, in the development of these new relationships, there are also numerous opportunities for collaboration, as the RESPs could play an important role in ensuring standardised regional data cleaning, management and updating to alleviate some of the existing costs associated with data maintenance that CAs have to incur. Similarly, the continuation of the Net Zero Hubs with associated funding from the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) will contribute to the broader ecosystem in which GMCA operates alongside the North West Net Zero Hub (NW NZH), Ofgem, and local energy providers. This ecosystem can be illustrated through a metaphor: where a CA serves as a venue for the gathering of LAs, the funding sustaining the initiatives is akin to the catering provided by the NZHs. Although NZHs do not directly implement LAEPs, they facilitate the project pipeline, benefiting from economies of scale through such integration.

#### **Trust and parity of esteem between different levels of government**

Using data for delivery means facilitating its access, which is a question of data culture. A perceived challenge for data sharing is in the relationship between the CA and central government, where national data is currently regarded as more important than the local level insight. This shapes the level of information available for planning as well as who has access to it. Several stakeholders within the GMCA flagged that there isn't a “parity of esteem” between the Combined Authority and the national government in terms of data accessibility because the value of local information or its interpretation comes into question and thus is much less likely to be available. One interviewee mentioned that central government - through the Department of Energy - does not have a formal position on LAEPs. Instead, this is largely endorsed by Ofgem as tools to guide Distribution Network Operators' (DNOs) investment plans. This appetite for more specific energy planning fuels a growing recognition that local data, despite its narrower error tolerance, holds intrinsic value and could guide the delivery processes.

## ***Data Sharing***

### **Benefits and risks**

A shared data culture is essential as successful LAEPs are not only a data gathering exercise, but also a target-monitoring task, which inevitably requires the management of noise and uncertainty. One interviewee compared energy planning to creating a database, which can get complex over time. A recognition of different roles thus becomes necessary in addition to policy, research and development, and general IT to include digital roles that modernise existing infrastructure and processes, information governance roles that provide steers on legal compliance and questions of data lifecycle management and some stakeholder outreach to keep policies aligned with local communities and industry.

However, as data sharing also comes with potential associated risks, one interviewee highlighted the need to arrive at a place of seeing the benefits and value of information first, then untangling any dangers that might need to be mitigated. They noted a fear of commercial exploitation of local energy planning, but also a sense that this cannot be avoided; only better managed. One solution to better manage data that emerged during the interviews was to use it not only directly for energy policy, but to inform what skills and training are needed to deliver these policies over time.

## Recommendations

If we knew...	we would be able to...
If we knew what data work is being duplicated across internal GMCA teams...	...we would be able to work more efficiently on data sharing and data management to save time and resources
If we knew how to fill in the gaps between the LAEP goals and their delivery...	...we would be able to offer more tailored support and guidance for actionable district-level net zero projects
If we knew how to foster a more collaborative data culture with central government...	...we would be able to generate insights that might help other local or combined authorities in the future
If we had....	we would be able to...
If we had more internal resources and capacity for data management...	...we would be able to develop an internal GMCA-wide data repository with different layers of accessibility for different stakeholders
If we had a counterpart working on LAEP delivery in each of the local authorities	...we would be able to facilitate more knowledge sharing and replication of successful initiatives through a working group with recurring meetings
If we had more standardised data and information governance practices...	...we would be able to ensure more consistency and transparency in our data sharing relationships with external and internal partners

Reflecting the overall thoughts and suggestions of the interviewees as paraphrased in the table above, the GMCA would benefit from implementing three recommendations:

First, to improve data literacy, increase internal data capacity and ensure standardisation across relevant regional datasets, the CA could create a data repository, similar to the London LAEP Datahub, that both internal teams working with data as well as local authorities can input to as well as access outputs. The repository could have various layers of accessibility based on data protection requirements, with less sensitive data being made public for research purposes. Eventually, it could also be expanded beyond LAEP-related datasets to facilitate collaboration between directorates in other areas where overlaying data with energy data would be beneficial, such as health or skills and education.

Second, to provide policy longevity and certainty while solidifying its role in data governance, the GMCA could establish at least one counterpart for LAEP delivery in each local authority. This would be highly beneficial in providing more clarity on the assignment of responsibilities between teams within local authorities and highlight the gaps in local capacity which need to be addressed to ensure a more efficient LAEP delivery. From a collaboration standpoint, this would also enable better knowledge sharing between local authorities, as a LAEP-related working group which would benefit from continuity in attendance could be put in place to facilitate an ongoing exchange between the CAs and the districts, both in terms of feedback and in terms of guidance or knowledge sharing.

To build a more collaborative data sharing culture, the GMCA would benefit from the implementation of an information governance framework, both internally as well as in relation to external partners. This should specify a set of standardised procedures that need to be undertaken to mitigate the risks associated with data sharing and contribute to building a data culture with parity of esteem between different levels of government. This would be a step forward in ensuring that the CA's devolution of power and responsibilities is better reflected in its access to data from central government, by promoting transparency on the institution's data use and management and providing the necessary assurances to foster a relationship of trust.

# Case Study 2 - GLA

## Holistic Data Practices and Resource Development

Maria Wood

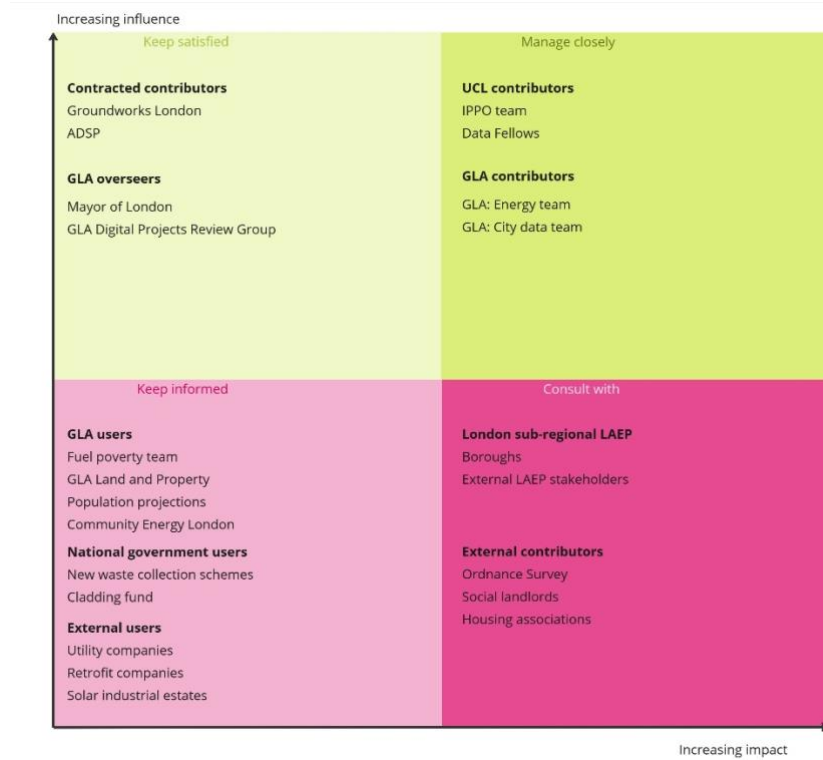


Figure 1: Stakeholder mapping diagram, showing the relative impact and influence of relevant stakeholders

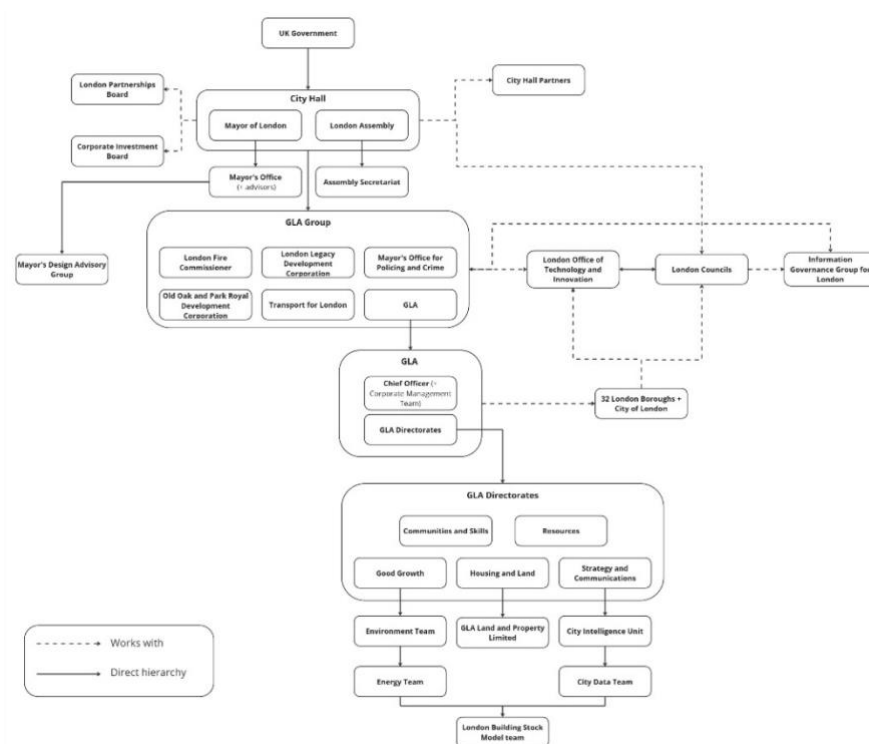


Figure 2: Governance diagram showing a schematic of the Greater London Authority's governance structure

*The second case study examines the **Greater London Authority (GLA)**'s development of a second version of its **London Building Stock Model (LBSM)**, which aims to create a complete and dynamic database of all residential buildings in London, including data on energy consumption and climate impacts. Noting the GLA's strengths as a powerful regional government, it advocates for a cohesive approach to data at every step of the data chain to produce useful pan-London insights.*

## **Introduction**

The Greater London Authority (GLA) is currently developing version 2 of its London Building Stock Model ([LBSM](#)). Building on the original database that UCL helped build in 2017, this new version aims to provide a complete database of all the residential buildings in London alongside their characteristics, energy consumption, and climate impacts. The building model will be dynamic, updating regularly as new data becomes available, including energy performance certificates (EPCs), utility company data, and other data from sources such as Ordnance Survey and the Census. This model will be useful for a wide variety of external stakeholders and customers, such as retrofit programmes (e.g. insulation or heat pump installations), rooftop solar projects, or utility companies. The model will also be useful for national government and internal GLA stakeholders, supporting the work of national waste collection schemes, local population projections, and other internal GLA users. It will also facilitate spatially efficient policies to be developed, ensuring that interventions are placed in areas that need help the most. The LBSM project involves: cleaning, analysing, and joining data from a wide range of providers; modelling buildings with missing or flawed data; and validating these model results via stakeholder engagement and comparison with other reliable aggregated data sources, such as with social landlords or housing associations.

During this fellowship, I interviewed 5 people at the GLA and one from LOTI (the London Office for Technology and Innovation). From these interviews, I was able to learn in detail about how people interacted on a day-to-day basis with data for policy purposes, including how they worked with different stakeholders and how the data governance structures operate within the GLA. The GLA, comprising the Chief Officer and constituent GLA Directorates, is the regional authority which supports the Mayor of London and London Assembly. The GLA works with the 33 individual London boroughs; London Councils, a collective of local governments in London; and is a member of the London Office for Technology and Innovation. In this way, there are many internal stakeholders and governance structures that underpin how data is used across the region.

The GLA also works with a wide array of external data stakeholders. Externally, these stakeholders include charities, start-ups, and local resident organisations. The GLA also works extensively with more prominent external stakeholders, such as utility companies in the development of the Infrastructure Mapping Application. In these projects - where success hinges on the external partner's full buy-in (and potentially sharing their data and models) - clearly demonstrating the shared value of taking part is critical. By showing how the project can bring benefits to all parties, buy-in can be gained. The GLA also works closely with the 33 London boroughs, supporting them with shared digital and data needs and helping them to provide pan-London solutions that transcend borough boundaries.

In terms of data governance, this is a field where London has made strides, though room for improvement remains. Though the Information Governance for London (IGfL) [exists](#), a recurrent theme from the interviews was the need for template data sharing agreements, consistent data schemas, and better data governance.

In this context, LOTI – the London Office for Technology and Innovation – has produced a full methodology for all data projects, which the GLA is encouraging its teams to use wherever possible. Part of this methodology involves the use of the London Datastore for recording and indexing all project details and metadata. This platform, currently being redeveloped, aims to provide a register of all datasets and projects across London. This will facilitate more joined-up collaboration, reduce repeated work, and encourage

sharing of knowledge and learnings between the data providers. A similar platform is being built specifically for the sub-regional Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs): the LAEP Datahub. This contains all the local datasets relevant to the LAEP (those around domestic and commercial electricity, heat, and transport) which will be standardised and can be accessed by all the boroughs for future use.

This work found that, as a well-funded, well-established, and relatively powerful regional government, the GLA has high data maturity in some places, with several examples of good practice to be found. However, the widespread application of these, especially in emerging sectors, remains a challenge. In particular, a cohesive approach to data at every step of the data chain, from collection to policy development, is essential for useful pan-London insights.

## Data Culture

### Working with London boroughs

A critical aspect of the GLA's role is fostering strong partnerships with London's boroughs, which are responsible for delivering many of London's services. Achieving buy-in from these independent organisations throughout projects, especially for data sharing and process.

In order to encourage boroughs to share data and participate in pan-London projects, it is helpful to demonstrate the success of previous pilot projects, for example, successes with other boroughs. For instance, the development of a common Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) and a multi-party accession agreement for the Infrastructure Coordination service between the boroughs and the GLA has facilitated significantly easier data access and sharing; one interviewee summarised this by explaining the logic: *"it's tried and tested and it's worked for this borough and this borough and this borough therefore it should work for you."* This approach has led to 31 out of 33 boroughs signing the agreement, allowing the GLA and other partners to more easily access and use data held by local authorities. Moreover, London Councils can serve as a valuable intermediary between the GLA and the boroughs. By acting as a central point of contact, London Councils can reduce the need for repetitive requests and conversations, thereby streamlining the work. However, while this approach can be efficient, it may also obscure certain local priorities, necessitating a balance between streamlined communication and attention to individual borough needs. Examples of London Councils-led programmes include the delivery of electric vehicle (EV) charging facilities and social housing retrofit. This led in turn to the development of the London Building Stock Model (LBSM) version 2, which brings together a database of information about every domestic building within London including its characteristics, energy performance, and climate impacts ([London Building Stock Model | London City Hall](#)).

It is also important to acknowledge that many boroughs engage in data-sharing and collaborative efforts voluntarily and often with limited capacity. Therefore, building strong personal relationships and understanding the specific expertise and responsibilities within each borough, and where certain data may be held, is vital. Since the GLA does not have the authority to formally mandate participation from the boroughs in pan-London projects, it relies on the willingness and goodwill of boroughs to engage and collaborate. To secure their involvement, it is crucial to articulate and deliver value at every stage of the process and at every level of involvement. Demonstrating that boroughs will receive tangible benefits in return for their input is key to sustaining participation and ensuring the success of city-wide initiatives, as one interviewee described how: *"you really need to structure projects where you can clearly offer something back to the boroughs"*.

### Engaging external stakeholders

When working with external stakeholders or partners, rather than within the London boroughs, unique challenges also arise.

One of the primary challenges faced is obtaining data from data providers, who often have concerns about privacy and anonymity. Another challenge arises from the siloed perspectives that each partner may hold. For instance, utility companies often operate with their own models, assumptions, methodologies, and boundaries, which may not align with those of others. As Paul Hodgson, a data team lead in the Intelligence Unit of the GLA, explained: *“there are something like 40 different utility companies with their own data models, their own priorities, their own understanding of the world”*. Overcoming this requires recognising and addressing these differences early in the collaboration process.

A significant challenge also lies in ensuring research meets the needs of partners or clients, as highlighted by Mr Hodgson: *“otherwise there is a risk that you can spend ages doing a really good piece of work and then nothing actually changes on the ground”*. Overcoming this requires identifying niches where there is real capacity, willingness, and need for change. Without this alignment, policies may fail to be enacted, resulting in wasted time, effort, and resources. Again, here it is important to clearly demonstrate the value of the proposed changes to the partners and, where possible, to co-create solutions with them to ensure that partners are fully invested in the outcomes.

This point was also made by another interviewee who highlighted the need for good data to attract private investment:

*“I think that given the volume of private investment we need in a lot of the net zero transition, they’re not going to respond just to glossy brochures and motherhood statements and so on. It’s actually technical analysis and data [that is needed] to work out business cases for investment into projects, data is absolutely critical for that”*

Finally, one area where improvement could be made is between the GLA and central government in terms of data provision and sharing. As Mr Hodgson described, *“an ongoing challenge that we have is that a lot of useful data about London is locked away in central government departments”*. Currently, many important datasets are collected and held nationally but are unavailable to regional or local policymakers.

## **Capacity & Skills**

### **Data literacy and specific skills**

A challenge experienced by the GLA is an unequal level of data literacy and technical skills within the organisation, as also experienced in the other combined authorities. In addition, there are disparities in levels of data literacy between the London boroughs. This issue manifests in both directions of data sharing as one participant, who wished to remain anonymous highlighted:

*“on one front, [some boroughs] can’t consume the data we’re creating properly because of gaps in their side, but it makes you wonder as well what was the quality of the input data they provided initially upwards if they can’t take it downwards”*

As a result, the GLA cannot be sure that the data provided is accurate or appropriate, and there are barriers to understanding when sharing the outputs of projects back to the boroughs, for instance following cuts to GIS or analyst teams. The GLA has found an effective way to remedy the latter problem by presenting data outputs in visualisations, web-based applications, or other wrappers to ensure it is understood and can be used without the need for specialist tools. Other successful projects have included upskilling and training workshops provided by the GLA and LOTI to assist boroughs to upskill. This is not always taken up, though, as sometimes boroughs have either insufficient time or knowledge to identify their own gaps: an example of this happening is when the GLA offered grants to boroughs to vectorise their data but received only one application. Furthermore, it was reported that sometimes public organisations are being sold technical data management systems or AI products but are not always able to properly evaluate their

value or quality. Another example of good practice in this field is the London Office for Technology and Innovation (LOTI) skills networks which connect people working in specific, technical fields with one another to provide a forum for exchanging ideas and support ([Join LOTI's communities of practice - LOTI](#)) and LOTI's work on responsible use of AI.

### **Internal versus external development**

There is a constant tension between whether to invest time and resources into developing data-driven products and solutions in-house versus outsourcing to an external contractor or partner. This is because there are benefits and drawbacks of each approach that need to be balanced. The primary issue with outsourcing work is that skills and learnings are lost to the external partner, even when a proper handover is completed. As Mr Hodgson explained, *“even if they do a handover, it's not the same as experiencing it through the different stages and learning from that”*. On the other hand, the primary drawback of developing products or analysis in-house is that there is often simply not the time or capacity to do so. Specifically, it was noted that the private sector usually has higher budgets and greater resourcing which is difficult for the public sector to compete with. Partnership with universities and academic institutions was also specifically highlighted as a positive form of external partnership by Mr Hodgson who explained that *“they perhaps have more opportunity to think about things more theoretically and more laterally, they don't have this kind of day to day delivery pressure that we would have so they're able to bring fresher perspectives”*.

### **Data Maturity**

#### **Learning from other sectors**

Within the GLA, there is a large discrepancy in data maturity between sectors. This discrepancy is particularly pronounced when comparing well-established sectors, such as transport and planning, with emergent sectors such as energy and net zero. In London, the transport sector has particularly strong data maturity since Transport for London (TfL) is highly experienced in delivering projects using data-driven insights into passenger needs and behaviours. Indeed, one interviewee said that *“there's lessons to be learned from the transport planning sector and applying them across to the energy and water space as well”*. Likewise, the Planning London Datahub ([The Planning London Datahub | London City Hall](#)) is an example of good practice in an established sector. This database has digitised all planning applications, generating a coherent and open system for the whole planning process.

### **Role of Data in Policy**

#### **Strategic role of data in shaping policy**

Data plays a critical role in shaping policy and developing effective strategies for the GLA; indeed the GLA prides itself on being "evidence-led," meaning that its policies are grounded in data and empirical evidence. However, it is important to ensure this data-driven decision-making is considered alongside other priorities to ensure that policies are holistic and inclusive.

One interviewee identified how three different personas interact with data in various ways within and outside of the GLA. Firstly, there are data publishers who generate and make data available. Secondly, there are data consumers who process this data into more accessible formats, such as reports, dashboards, or visualisations. Finally, decision-makers, innovators, or other Londoners can then use this processed data to enact changes across the city; it is only this third group of people who will develop policy from the data. The impact of data on policy is most significant in identifying the timing and location of interventions, particularly when decisions involve a clear "yes or no" choice. One interviewee from the Data for London team at the GLA summarised this by saying: *“I think that data is most impactful if it's lined up with a decision or an outcome you have the levers to influence”*.

Moreover, data is essential for other strategic purposes, such as connecting policies across borough boundaries. For example, for individuals who live, work, or study in different boroughs, services can often

be fragmented, with local data failing to account for them or their needs. Therefore, comprehensive, pan-London data is vital for creating effective and meaningful policies that address the complexities of a diverse and interconnected city.

### **Monitoring, evaluation, and modelling**

A key concept that emerged throughout the interviews is the critical role that data plays in policy-making, particularly in monitoring and evaluating projects. Data enables policymakers to assess the effectiveness of new schemes, ensuring that interventions are moving in the right direction. One of the most effective ways to introduce new schemes is through piloting with continuous monitoring, allowing for adjustments and improvements based on real-time data. This approach helps ensure that the measures implemented are genuinely beneficial and aligned with their intended goals. The continuous nature of the monitoring ensures that large amounts of resources are not wasted between evaluation periods.

However, a significant challenge in this process is accessing data that is both granular and up-to-date. Data loses its currency quickly, making it difficult to maintain the accuracy needed for effective monitoring. In some fields, such as local area energy planning, the data becomes less relevant after only a couple of years, as illustrated by one interviewee: *“data loses its currency quite quickly; maybe within two years I would say it starts getting a bit shakier”*.

Another element of data currency is how this data weighs up against other forms of data; even if still relevant and accurate, it may become deprioritised when more urgent data is presented. An interviewee in the GLA’s Data for London team explained:

*“the weight of the data used in policy-making needs to be balanced against the weight of someone coming up to you, or knocking on someone’s door, and them telling you that the bins haven’t been collected for 3 weeks”*

Low granularity in data can hinder the ability to target specific homes or locations, leading to wasted resources and less effective interventions. For instance, without detailed data, it becomes challenging to pinpoint which areas need attention, resulting in broader, less focused efforts. An example of good practice in utilising data effectively is the Damp and Mould project (<https://loti.london/projects/pan-london-iot-damp-and-mould-project/>), where sensors were installed in homes across several boroughs to monitor conditions in real-time. This ensured that interventions were timely and resources were directed where they are most needed, preventing issues before they escalate.

Another critical aspect of data management is archiving, particularly when data becomes obsolete but still holds potential value, such as COVID-19 data. Deciding when and how to archive such data is a key consideration, as it may still be useful for future reference or research.

### **Local Area Energy Plans**

Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs) serve as a prime example of how policy, especially energy and climate policy, can and should be led by data. These LAEPs, which have been implemented across the country, are not unique to London but represent a growing trend in sub-regional planning efforts. These are important in the drive towards evidence-led policy in the net zero space, as highlighted by one interviewee: *“I think that’s quite transformative because I think sometimes certain types of policies in the net zero space are not necessarily that well evidence-based and more sort of vision/objective level thinking and so this is where data really kicks in”*.

The development of these sub-regional LAEPs involves collaboration among multiple boroughs, each with varying priorities, capacities, capabilities, and resources. This process also requires the involvement of numerous external stakeholders, such as utilities providers, housing associations, and other local

organisations. Therefore, the challenges encountered in LAEPs reflect the broader issues highlighted in this chapter related to data culture, capacity and skills, data maturity, and data governance within and across boroughs.

The LAEP process heavily relies on modelling and predictions of energy demand, which in turn depend on access to granular and up-to-date data to be effective. Since much of this data is not available or accessible, modellers tend to rely on assumptions made about consumption, growth, and behaviour change. Here, implementing innovative technologies, such as smart meters in homes, would help propel the project further. As one interviewee mentioned: *“smart meter data, energy consumption data would be so transformative in terms of our ability to plan better because it would just throw out the need for all of our assumptions and we would just actually have accurate data to plan against”*.

A notable example of good practice in this context is the LAEP Datahub, a platform designed to store all the local data used in the development of London's sub-regional LAEPs ([Local Area Energy Planning for London | by London Councils' Climate Blog | Aug, 2024 | Medium](#)). This datahub ensures that the data is available for long-term use across the boroughs, enhancing accessibility and discoverability. The data in the Datahub is standardised, and this is helpful for facilitating a cohesive local area energy plan. This was summarised by an interviewee when they said: *“the idea is that we're working from common schemas, common assumptions, common inputs, common outputs, etcetera in order to facilitate coordination in approaches across London rather than everyone taking a slightly different approach”*.

## Recommendations

If we knew...	We would...
<p><b>If we knew</b> the relative value of developing a model or product in-house (versus externally contracted) and how it might be applicable to other areas or projects.</p>	<p>Be able to evaluate whether it is justifiable to invest in skills and resources to build a product in-house or to outsource development to a partner or contractor.</p>
<p><b>If we knew</b> whether London boroughs (or external partners) had the desire, skills, or need for a project, including their capacity and specific data capability.</p>	<p>Know if the project is worth investing in and predict its success or impact levels. Understanding data capabilities will inform how data outputs are presented, e.g., in visualisations, applications, or other wrappers that are appropriate to ensure full understanding of what the data says.</p>
<p><b>If we knew</b> which projects each London borough or relevant stakeholder (e.g., utility company) have completed or have planned</p>	<p>Prevent repeated work, develop a more complete image of London's development and plan in a more streamlined way. This would inform dialogue with the private sector to specify which areas may require further development in partnership with them</p>
<p><b>If we knew</b> the methodology and assumptions behind models and data in the DHLUC building energy estimations</p>	<p>Be able to build the LBSM in a way that is consistent with central government data and validate the model outputs more effectively</p>
If we had...	We would...
<p><b>If we had</b> comprehensive pan-London data</p>	<p>Develop joined-up policies and interventions that transcend arbitrary borough boundaries to have real impact on residents.</p>
<p><b>If we had</b> processes for demonstrating shared value and co-benefits of sharing data or working together</p>	<p>Have more buy-in from stakeholders, resulting in better implementation and more impact on the ground. For example, the Infrastructure Mapping Application was able to save utility companies time and money.</p>
<p><b>If we had</b> open-source data and/or data with high quality and high spatial and temporal granularity</p>	<p>Produce more locally-specific and informed policies which target those who need help most. For example, this would facilitate more accurate models that need fewer assumptions. In the context of the LBSM, this would tell us the energy and climate data of all buildings.</p>
<p><b>If we had</b> consistent schemas for data (with consistent metadata and cross-referenceable columns), data sharing agreement templates, and data ethics protocols.</p>	<p>Be able to share data more quickly and conveniently, saving time and resources. Sharing data across boroughs will enable a more complete view of London's data landscape and therefore identify any shortcomings. Data ethics is important for the development of AI tools.</p>

Based on these findings, it is possible to draw several recommendations for the GLA moving forward.

Firstly, understanding, assessing, and building data capacity within both the GLA and London boroughs is a priority action area. When embarking on a major project or development, an evaluation tool or framework could be developed to assess the benefits versus drawbacks of proceeding internally or employing a contractor. This will prevent applicable and long-term projects from being outsourced, rendering the GLA dependent on external help. Where appropriate, teams within the GLA could implement a hub-and-spoke approach, as demonstrated by the GIS team, to share skills internally without losing area-specific knowledge. A similar, basic, data capability evaluation tool should be developed to understand how London boroughs or external partners will interact and act upon data outputs. This will enable more tailored projects and outputs to ensure effective uptake of recommendations.

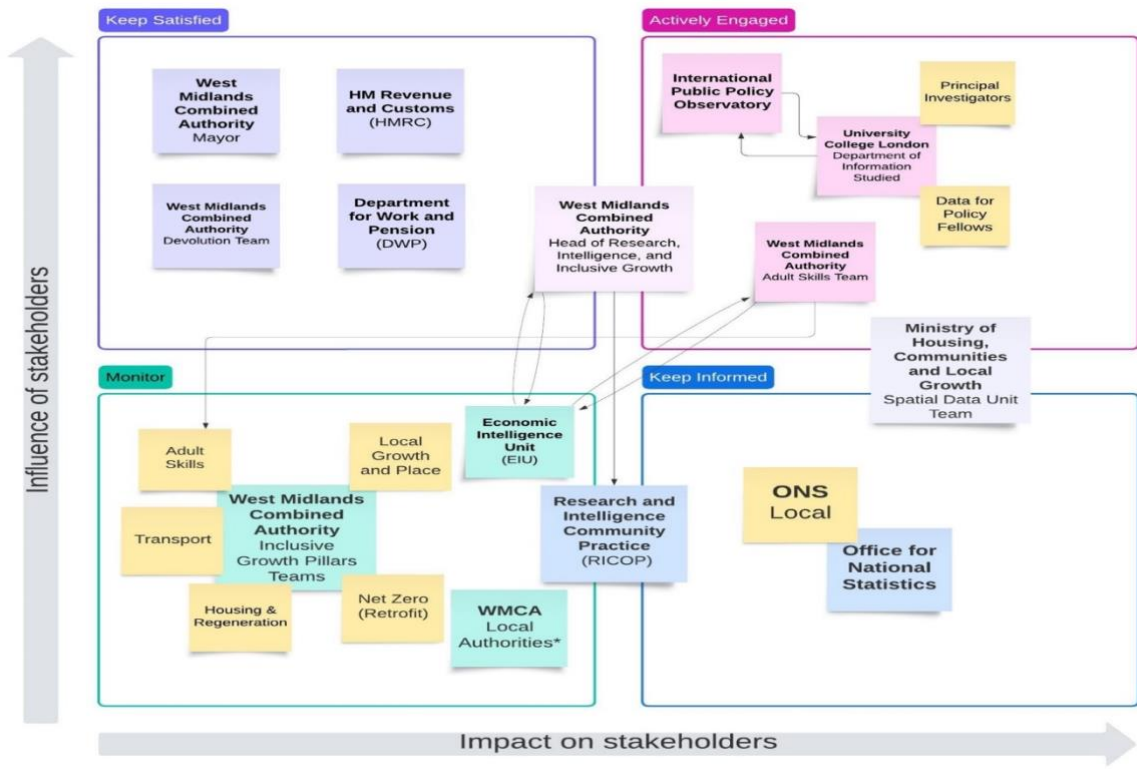
The second key recommendation for the GLA is to improve communication with and between London boroughs and relevant external stakeholders. For example, establishing a standard of co-creating solutions from project kick-off, where appropriate, will demonstrate shared or returned value to all parties involved. Moreover, the GLA should encourage communication between London boroughs to share developments, progress, and lessons learned. This can be achieved by encouraging all teams to use the London Datastore when projects are completed, and supporting London Councils in bringing boroughs together to share lessons and foster cross-borough collaboration.

Finally, the GLA has the opportunity to manage and maintain their data practices to a high standard. Moving forward, all data projects should implement the LOTI methodology outlined above, or similar methodologies to ensure there is a joined-up approach with data standards, data schemas, and time-saving data sharing templates. As the GLA's data capabilities expand into innovation, emerging technologies, and AI, the development of data ethics protocols and frameworks will become essential to ensure that projects are undertaken in ethical and appropriate ways. The GLA should also work towards generating granular pan-London datasets, joining together existing data from individual boroughs or pilot studies, and collecting new data where appropriate, to better inform models, predictions, and policies.

# Case Study 3 - WMCA

## Data Maturity in the Context of Devolution: Challenges and Opportunities

Martin Gozzi



\*WMCA Local Authorities: Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, and Wolverhampton.

Figure 1: Stakeholder Map 1

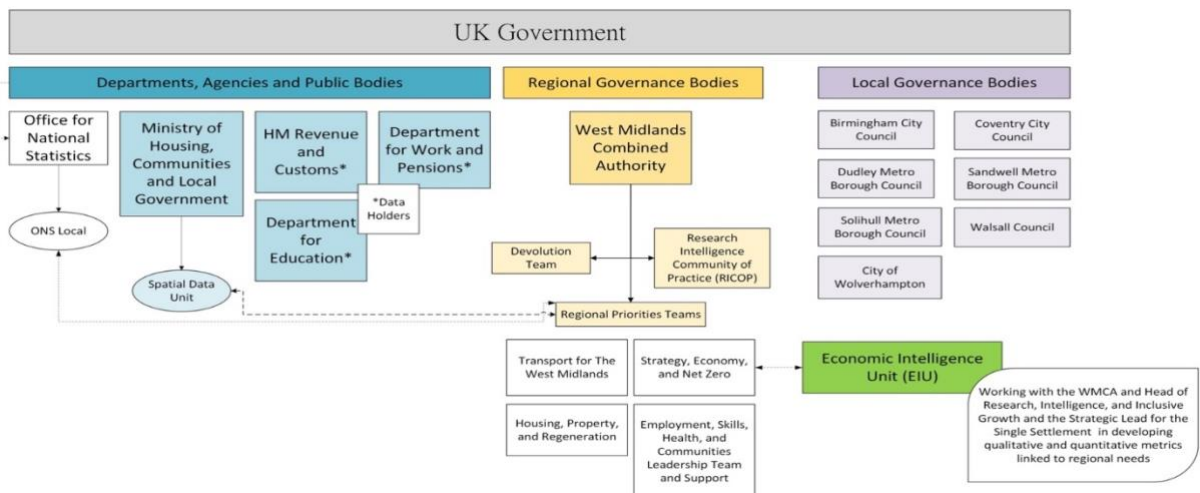


Figure 2: Governance Diagram

1. The stakeholders included in this map are those who have been engaged throughout the Data-for-Policy Fellowship.
2. It is important to note that the diagram does not accurately reflect the *West Midlands Combined Authority* (WMCA) actual governance structure during its day-to-day operations. Nevertheless, it represents the government and local government bodies that were engaged during the fellowship. These entities aim to illustrate the relationships between the WMCA and other government bodies and explore potential ways to enhance the overall data sharing opportunities within the WMCA.

*The third case study involves the **West Midlands Combined Authority** (WMCA) and its challenges in improving data maturity to support its devolution journey. By evaluating the WMCA's current data management capabilities, the chapter identifies opportunities for sound data practices to deliver tangible benefits for the residents of the West Midlands.*

## Introduction

As a Data for Policy Fellow, my role was to gather evidence shedding light on the West Midlands Combined Authority's (WMCA) challenges and opportunities in the use of data for policy. I worked with my hosts who are hands-on with data from both a strategic and operational perspective. These preliminary discussions enabled me to develop a stakeholder analysis to identify those who would be closely working with me on this project (i.e., **actively engaged**) and those who would be useful to **monitor** and **keep informed** during my placement (see figure 1).

During my fellowship, I interviewed 10 individuals across the Combined Authority (CA), central government and other institutions to gather insights on the data challenges and gain an in-depth understanding of the needs of the CA beyond my six-month fellowship. As shown in the governance diagram (see *figure 2*), the WMCA has the potential to collaborate with various institutions and government bodies and make the most out of devolution. However, to do so, the CA must gain recognition as a government body and establish the idea that their position is neither above local authorities nor below central government departments but rather alongside them.

The WMCA is at a crucial moment in its devolution journey, operating within a dynamic and evolving policy environment shaped by the UK's broader devolution agenda. Through the introduction of a single funding settlement (see "[Trailblazer](#)" [Deeper Devolution Deal](#), 2023), the WMCA will gain greater autonomy, allowing for more flexibility in delivering key regional priorities and enhancing its ability to make long-term investments tailored to local needs. Central to this transformation is the role of data in informing policy decisions and fostering collaboration between local and central governments.

While working with the WMCA, I had the incredible opportunity to partake in the Research and Intelligence Community of Practice (RICOP) monthly meetings and delve deeper into their work. Additionally, I supported the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) analytic team in connecting with the WMCA Adult Skills team to collate adult education data that was held within the CA but previously inaccessible. Through this task, I experienced first-hand challenges regarding data sharing and access.

By working with the WMCA, I gained valuable insights and, in a team with other Data Policy fellows, we outlined shared challenges across the five partners. Ultimately, the aim of this report is twofold. Firstly, it will evaluate the WMCA's current capabilities in data management, acknowledging that sound data practices will allow the WMCA to deliver tangible benefits for the residents of the West Midlands. Secondly, this report invites **high-influence stakeholders** to act on the recommendations provided in the conclusion. These have been identified as essential steps to unlock the full potential of the WMCA's devolution journey in alignment with locally set objectives, such as those exemplified by the [West Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework](#).

## Data Sharing

### Lack of Awareness and Data Silos

Barriers associated with a lack of awareness of available data not only hinder the CA's ability to efficiently use data for policymaking, but also affect its capacity to build collaborative partnerships with public and private organisations.

Because the WMCA is often unaware of the data held in different – at times even internal – departments, data is often left unused, and is frequently duplicated. As a result, the already limited resources tend to be invested in unnecessary duplication, leading to inefficiencies in data usage. Additionally, without a clear understanding of existing data, the WMCA struggles to establish effective data-sharing practices and may miss opportunities for more strategic collaboration.

*“Legislation enables data sharing, but this is still rare in practice. The challenge is that in order to establish specific agreements about sharing data, you need to know exactly what data you need and how you want to use it, which is often quite difficult.”*

*- Si Chun Lam (WMCA – Head of Research, Intelligence, and Inclusive Growth)*

### Risk Aversion in Data Sharing

Across the public sector, data sharing is often treated as a compliance or administrative task, rather than a strategic tool for collaboration. When discussions about sharing data arise, it is essential to recognise that different stakeholders must take responsibility for their reluctance—or, as one participant noted, *unwillingness*—to share data: *“There is often an old unwillingness from central government to engage in that conversation. They put the onus on the person requesting the data to come up with a really tight legal argument.”*

This limited sharing of data among stakeholders, coupled with poor communication, indicates that data sharing remains a low priority, affecting the WMCA's ability to use data for strategic purposes. Crucially, the CA cannot overcome these barriers on its own. Local, and especially central, governments should work together to ensure that data is shared, managed, and utilised in a more cohesive and strategic manner. Additionally, as noted by various participants, central government needs to recognise the WMCA as a government body rather than a separate type of organisation. Acknowledging this will enable more effective data-sharing agreements and cross-departmental collaboration. This is especially relevant in the context of the devolution, where the WMCA gains significant accountability in developing their own regional strategy.

### Inconsistent Data Formats and Quality

The inconsistency of data formats poses a significant challenge to data integration, complicating the aggregation and disaggregation of data, as well as its analysis. Participants also noted concerns about the quality of available data, especially at the local level, where issues such as incomplete and inaccurate data affect the reliability of analyses.

The UK statistical system has not kept pace with devolution. The absence of a unified data architecture further complicates data retrieval, as data is often stored in disparate locations, making it difficult to access and integrate data across organisations. This is further complicated by misaligned timelines between local and central governments, making it difficult to produce, share, and analyse data in a timely manner.

*“Often datasets are produced and collected in incompatible formats. For example, to support a thriving*

*nighttime economy in the region, we wanted to collect licensing decisions such as constraints are placed on a venue's opening hours and any noise complaints. While these records are in digital form, it does not mean they are accessible."*

*– Si Chun Lam (WMCA – Head of Research, Intelligence, and Inclusive Growth)*

## **Data Governance**

### **Trust and Communication**

One of the primary barriers to effective data sharing for the WMCA is the legal and privacy frameworks that govern data handling, particularly in the context of sensitive datasets such as those managed by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Legal constraints, while crucial for safeguarding sensitive personal information, present significant challenges for the WMCA when seeking access to timely data that could be transformative in public sector operations ("*HMRC is very reluctant to have this conversation with anybody because they are scared of leaks, and rightly so. They are protective over their bitter privacy arrangements.*", *Anonymous Interviewee*)

The concern here is not merely about breaching confidentiality but also about the political and reputational ramifications that could ensue from potential leaks or data mishandling. HMRC, for instance, deals with highly sensitive financial information, and any compromise in data security could lead to public inquiries, media backlash, and the involvement of political oversight bodies. Thus, while the data exists and could potentially be leveraged for cross-sector collaboration, these privacy and legal constraints create a restrictive environment, inhibiting progress.

Given that departments such as HMRC and DWP handle highly sensitive data, the stakes of sharing information are considerable: "*You know, if there was a data breach of tax data, HMRC would be in very hot water. Ministers would be dragged in front of public account committees, and it would be all over the press.*" (*Anonymous Interviewee*). The fear of exposure to legal and reputational damage explains why many departments choose not to share data unless absolutely necessary. In many cases, these agencies simply do not see the benefits of data sharing, outweighing the potential risks.

This perspective reveals a fundamental misalignment of incentives between departments. HMRC's primary mission is to collect taxes. Sharing data with combined authorities or other organisations is not seen as contributing to that goal. Thus, risk management is prioritised over potential collaborative benefits, leaving data-sharing initiatives stalled. Building trust and developing transparent data governance frameworks are essential steps for encouraging more open and effective data-sharing practices.

### **Data Partnership Challenges**

The 2023 update to the "Trailblazer" deeper devolution deal whitepaper includes a section on data partnerships.

*"In the creation of our deeper devolution deal data asks, we said we wanted an overarching data partnership between the government and the combined authority. Both the combined authority and central government have worked hard towards this, but under current legislation, a data partnership does not replace the need for specific data-sharing agreement for each and every data item to be shared, which meant that it has not been a simple or easy process."*

*– Si Chun Lam (WMCA – Head of Research, Intelligence, and Inclusive Growth)*

A data partnership that creates a different kind of relationship between central government and devolved administrations in combined authorities and local authorities is required, so that devolved administrations have access to the data they need to deliver their responsibilities. This must be done in a way which continues to protect citizens' data. A well-established data-sharing framework would ensure that all parties

understand the legal, technical, and operational responsibilities involved in sharing data, including setting expectations for data formats, quality, and timeliness. An example of this approach is the development of Public Data Trusts (PDTs), which aim to democratise data governance by involving public actors who aggregate data for societal benefit ([Micheli et al., 2020](#)). PDTs can help mitigate issues related to data sharing, such as privacy concerns and unequal power dynamics ([Micheli et al., 2020](#)).

## **Role of Data in Policy**

### **Timeliness and Urgency vs. Data-Driven Decision-Making**

The role of data in policymaking has become increasingly central as governments and regional bodies seek to create effective, evidence-based strategies. For the WMCA, timely and accurate data is crucial for addressing the region's complex and rapidly evolving socioeconomic challenges, as well as responding to their enhanced responsibility brought in by the devolution. While the region's needs demand prompt action, the absence of timely and granular data often hinders fully data informed decisions. This trade-off between acting swiftly and ensuring data accuracy is not just a logistical issue but a strategic one.

As suggested by an interviewee, individuals who work in policymaking often find that by the time relevant data becomes available, the window for action has passed. In the WMCA, while some teams, such as the Adult Skills team, rely on data that is no more than two weeks old. Others experience significant delays in accessing the desired datasets, with some taking up to six months or a year to become available for the CA, obstructing the chance to respond to fast-changing situations.

Additionally, this delay affects the efficient allocation of resources, as the lag in data reporting limits the capacity to evaluate the impact of investments in real time. For example, assessing the success of labour market interventions such as reskilling programmes requires tracking individual outcomes over time. However, economic data, as noted by one interviewee, often lags by 2-3 years, rendering it too late for timely interventions. The current disconnects between promptly available and accessible data and needed data to evaluate interventions highlight a major weakness in the system.

### **Political Agendas and the Tensions in Evidence-Based Policymaking**

In the WMCA, the relationship between politics and policymaking is inherently complex, shaped by competing agendas and a dynamic political landscape. At the core of this relationship lies the tension between data-driven decision-making and political priorities. Local leaders and mayors wield significant influence in shaping policy priorities that are often based on political agendas rather than data-driven insights. This suggests that political goals overshadow the objective evaluation of evidence, skewing decision-making toward short-term gains or election-driven outcomes.

Despite the critical role data plays in policymaking, there remains a persistent disconnect between data analysts, policymakers, and political leaders. According to an interviewee, policymakers often *"misunderstand or oversimplify statistical data,"* (*Anonymous*) leading to decisions that rely on gut instincts or political considerations rather than evidence. In many cases, policies are replicated from previous iterations without a thorough re-examination of the underlying data, as one participant suggested.

Further complicating this relationship is the uncertainty surrounding funding, particularly during periods of political transition. Shifts in government often result in changes to resource allocation and policy focus, undermining long-term strategic planning. However, on a positive note, the Integrated Settlement (formerly called the Single Settlement, following the March 2023 trailblazer deeper devolution deal between WMCA and the government) will provide the WMCA with greater control and flexibility over spending.

## Capacity vs. Capability

### Link Between Skills Gap and Capacity

While public sector organisations frequently face skills gaps, particularly in transitioning to more advanced, general purpose tools such as Python or R, in the WMCA, the issue is less a lack of skills and more closely linked to limited capacity to learn such skills. As a consequence, the WMCA tends to use external bodies on occasion. One example of this is the support given to one authority that publishes monthly economic updates.

*“Part of that [tool] is a dashboard for lots of different metrics, and that is put together for us by a third party. That has just been outsourced historically. There is not a specific reason why we could not do that internally, but we do not. It is not that we do not have the skills, it is just we do not have the capacity at the moment.”*

*- Anonymous*

This capacity shortfall not only hinders day-to-day operations but also impedes staff development. Learning advanced skills like coding requires consistent practice, but time constraints often prevent staff from applying new skills to pressing tasks.

*“To learn something like coding, it has to be ingrained in your everyday job, you need to have opportunities to practice constantly... but how do you apply that new skill when you have tight deadlines?”*

*- Anonymous*

The WMCA is eager to adopt more advanced tools that would streamline work. For instance, there is a strong interest in developing a shared spatial mapping tool to better understand the region’s demographic and economic profile, benefiting both the WMCA and local authorities. However, ongoing time limitations perpetuate the skills gap within the organisation.

### In-House vs. External Data Capacity

A key debate from the interviews is the trade-off between building in-house capacity and relying on external consultants. Firstly, over-reliance on external consultants drains resources and creates a disconnect because consultants often lack the deeper understanding of organisational goals, leading to misaligned outcomes. Secondly, relying solely on external consultants is risky. Without internal capacity, the organisation becomes vulnerable to shifting priorities or funding issues from external partners.

*“I prefer it when people are closer to the business for which they are using the data to make decisions, because they understand what it is they are doing and why they are doing it.”*

*- Stuart Lester (West Midlands Combined Authority – Head of Transport Data).*

Therefore, it is imperative that the WMCA has sustainable in-house capabilities, ensuring that data skills are embedded within the organisation for long-term use, which also guarantees more consistent, contextual, and ethical use of data. Additionally, building internal capacity enables more effective use of external consultants, allowing the authority to strategically engage consultancy services while maintaining continuity on externally developed projects.

### Public Sector Talent Shortages

Another significant challenge to capacity and capability building in the WMCA is the ongoing talent shortage. This gap is largely attributed to highly skilled individuals seeking more competitive employment opportunities outside of the public sector. The perception of local government roles is a contributing factor, with these positions often seen as less prestigious compared to those in higher-level agencies.

Attracting and retaining skilled professionals, particularly data experts, remains a significant hurdle, especially in areas such as the Midlands and the North, where combined authorities are located. They often experience a critical skills gap in research and policymaking, due to public sector remuneration being often unable to match that of the private sector. The result is a high turnover rate, as skilled professionals frequently leave for better-paid roles.

*“I wonder whether our profession is attractive enough to bring in some of the best data scientists and people who are at the cutting edge of their field. I wonder whether the awareness of combined authorities and the largely negative perceptions people have of us are inhibiting people from coming here.”*

Upskilling existing staff needs to be embedded into the CA's strategy. However, this approach is neither swift nor simple. It requires not only the provision of technical training but also the implementation of systemic changes to ensure that these newly acquired skills are effectively utilised within the organisation.

### **Data-aware Policymakers**

Data-related issues in the WMCA are not limited to capacity or skills shortages. Rather, many decision-makers continue to rely on basic descriptive statistics, often presented in a "flat" manner that lacks depth and fails to provide the nuanced insights required for effective decision-making. Furthermore, statistical outputs are sometimes misinterpreted, treated as definitive facts without consideration of their context or limitations.

*“Everyone talks about being data-driven and data-informed, and I feel they sort of understand that, but there is still not that critical capability in a lot of decision-makers across government to understand what currently available data can and cannot be used for.”*

*- Anonymous*

At the senior level, data is not always seen as an essential tool. The use of data in policy development often hinges on whether its value is immediately obvious to decision-makers. This underscores the need for a cultural shift within public administration, where data-driven insights are consistently prioritised across all levels of government. However, this cultural shift is difficult to achieve. While individuals at the operational level may seek to maximise the use of data, political leaders tend to favour approaches that appear less risky.

For the WMCA, the role of data in shaping policy is crucial but still evolving. Success in this area will require not only investment in data infrastructure but also, more importantly, a fundamental shift in mindset. Policymakers, analysts, and the broader public sector must embrace a culture where data-driven insights are seen as integral to decision-making processes.

## Recommendations

If we knew...	We would be able to...
If we knew exactly what data was needed at a local level by local and combined authorities in England and the UK...	Prioritise and push forward the production of that data to ensure that the correct data gaps are filled and create a joined-up approach to data delivery
If we knew exactly what data is held and where...	Request or access the necessary data, minimise duplication, and utilise funding more effectively for better provisions
If we had...	We would be able to...
If local and central government had standardised legal agreements for the sharing of data at the combined and local authority levels	Enhance our capacity to inform policy decisions through the use of timely and relevant evidence
If we had access to data available at combined authority or local authority level more commonly and routinely...	Better support the devolution with usable evidence for policymaking and improve local authority operations
If we had access to DWP data or connected data on employment and earnings, including details on inactive and unemployed individuals...	Better allocate training funding, improve job placement and earnings strategies, and further enhance policy adjustment and delivery planning
If we had data in a consistent format held within a spatial planning system...	Provide valuable insights to regional partners and central government, and better inform local decisions on housing, transportation, skills, and other planning needs

The WMCA is at a crucial stage in its devolution journey, with the potential to strengthen its decision-making processes and regional impact through better use of data. Based on my experience working with the CA and reflecting on the overall findings from the interviews, I have developed the following policy recommendations aimed at addressing existing challenges and unlocking the full potential of data for policy.

As a first step, developing a centralised data catalogue will enable local and central authorities to operate with greater efficiency and clarity. Inspired by concepts such as data trusts or cooperatives ([Micheli et al., 2020](#)), this catalogue would serve as a central repository where data is easily accessible to all relevant stakeholders. The concept of a data space, as outlined by the Data Sharing and Security Council ([DSSC, 2023](#)), complements this recommendation by providing a decentralised, governed, and standardised structure for data transactions, ensuring interoperability and trust. Having a central hub for data would minimise the data silos and enable stakeholders from various sectors and levels of government to have a clear view of available data, reducing the likelihood of data duplication or missed opportunities. This would not only foster greater cooperation but also facilitate the process of data sharing. Furthermore, analysts and decision-makers would have access to timely, comprehensive data, enabling them to be more responsive to policy needs based on accurate and up-to-date information. This approach aligns with the UK National Data Strategy, which emphasises transparency and the optimal use of data for the public good.

Secondly, the next step towards effective data use involves creating standardised data sharing frameworks and agreements. This would transform the current fragmented approach to data management into a

cohesive system. Standardised data formats would simplify the process of combining data from different organisations, reducing the potential for errors that arise from mismatched formats. Additionally, clear legal and operational agreements would address privacy concerns and ensure compliance with regulations such as GDPR. These agreements would define the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved, fostering trust and clarity in data exchanges. Implementing real-time data-sharing mechanisms is another aspect of this recommendation; however, this will only be possible if the timelines of central and local governments can be aligned, bridging the gap between data generation, analysis, and its use in policymaking at all levels.

Finally, to complement these structural improvements, it is important to invest in internal data skills and capacity, ensuring that staff are not only adept at advanced data management tools but also possess a deep understanding of data-driven decision-making. This can be achieved through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives. Upskilling staff in advanced data management tools, such as Python, R, and spatial mapping, would embed sophisticated data skills into daily operations. Investing in human capital would ensure that data handling and analysis are conducted with expertise. Moreover, expanding in-house data capacity would reduce reliance on external consultants, leading to cost savings and greater continuity in data projects, and improve the organisation's ability to manage and use data effectively.

In conclusion, these policy recommendations are not merely about improving data management; they aim to transform how data is used in governance and optimise resource allocation. However, these recommendations will only be effective if a coordinated effort is built between the WMCA, local authorities, and central government to improve data governance and streamline data-sharing practices.

# Case Study 4 - RCT

## Multi-Agency Collaboration and Contextual Data

Selin Zileli

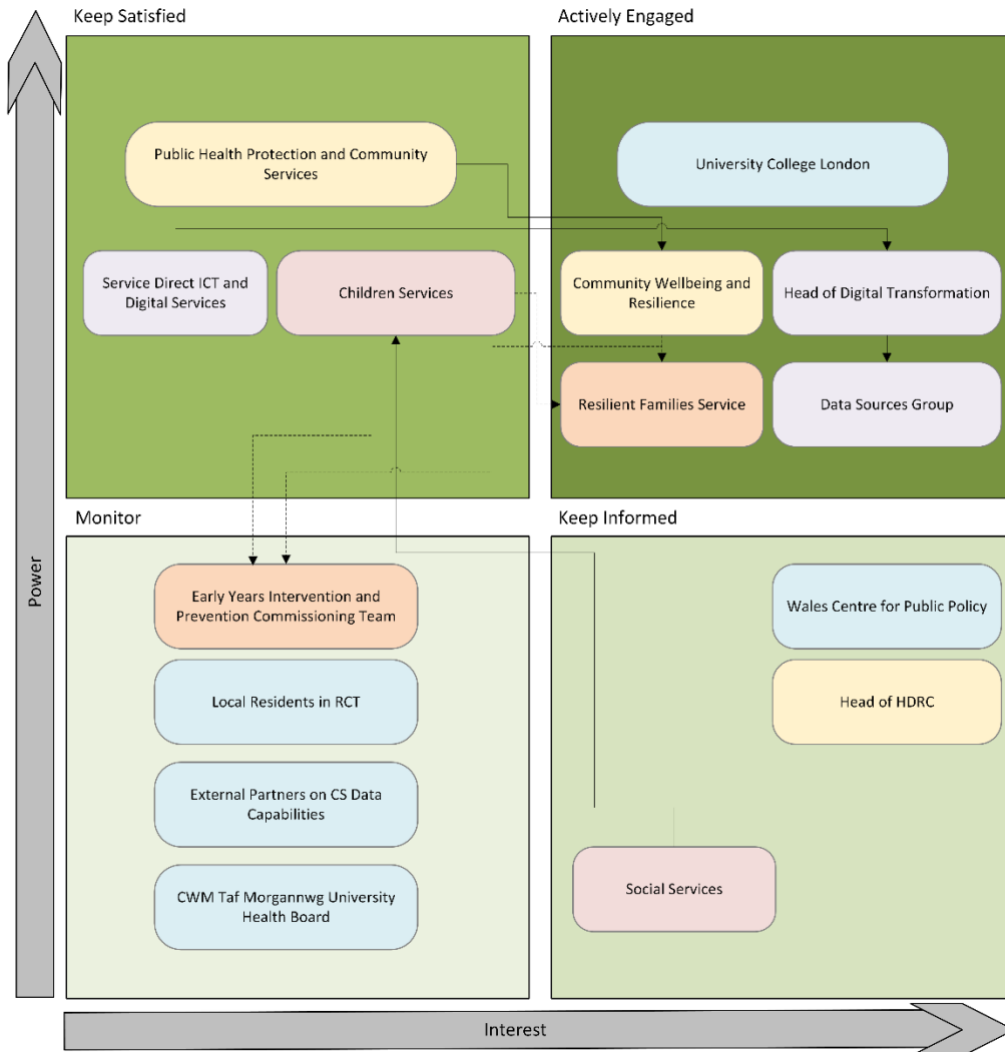


Figure 1: Rhondda Cynon Taff Stakeholder Map

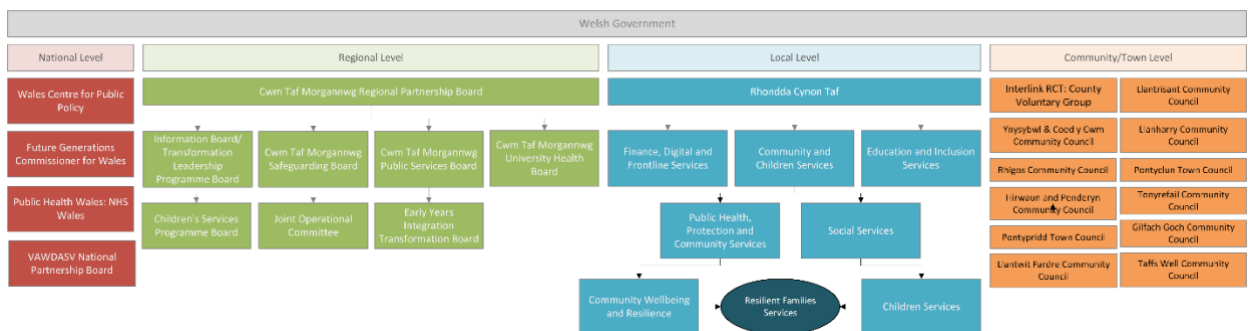


Figure 2: Rhondda Cynon Taff Governance Diagram

*The fourth case study identifies the challenges of integrating multi-agency collaboration and contextual data within the **Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) County Borough Council**. Focusing on early years intervention through the Council's Resilient Families Service, the chapter makes recommendations to address the complexities of data sharing across fragmented systems, inclusive definitions of family and resilience, and developing citizen-centric approaches to address health inequalities.*

## **Introduction**

Addressing long-standing issues like poverty, health inequalities, and climate change requires more than short-term, isolated measures. [The Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) was introduced to break these patterns by encouraging public bodies to adopt an integrated, long-term approach that considers the social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors influencing wellbeing.

Last year, the Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Council was awarded £5 million in funding by the [National Institute for Health and Care Research \(NIHR\)](#) to become part of a Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC). This collaboration aims to apply data-driven research to address health inequalities by considering the broader factors affecting public health. A key focus of the [HDRC RCT](#) is on early years intervention and prevention, mainly through the [Resilient Families Service \(RFS\)](#), which provides tailored support to help families build resilience, overcome challenges, and create spaces for healthy child development and long-term wellbeing.

As part of the preliminary work for HDRC RCT, I focused on understanding the challenges and opportunities within the RFS. Specifically, I explored how to improve local data capabilities to inform evidence-based decision-making and service delivery.

During the research stage, I engaged with different services, such as public health and community wellbeing, digital transformation, social services, and HDRC representatives, to understand their needs and constraints. I began by co-producing a stakeholder map (Figure 1) with RCT to identify people, their roles and links with and within the RFS. The RFS is an intersecting service delivered by Children's Services yet managed by Public Health, Protection and Community Services. Therefore, mapping out the power and interest within the stakeholder map was very useful in understanding how these services interact and how their varying levels of influence and responsibility impact decision-making, resource allocation, and the coordination of RFS. Then, through 8 interviews, I explored how data is collected, used and shared across various services. These dialogues included stakeholders from Public Health, Protection and Community Services, the Resilient Families Service, Information, Transformation and Digital Services, Head of Health Determinants Research Collaboration, and Children's Services. I was also tasked with framing these challenges and developing policy recommendations to help address the complexities within the system.

One of the tasks during the research stage was to determine how many departments, agencies, and public bodies play a role in children's services in Wales. The aim was to create a governance diagram (Figure 2) that would illustrate the key actors within the system. However, children's services in Wales is a complex landscape to navigate, requiring engagement with a suite of national legislation, strategies and legal frameworks including [Social Services and Well Being Act \(2014\)](#), [Children's Act \(2004\)](#), [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act \(2015\)](#), [Early Years Integration and Transformation Programme](#), [Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence \(Wales\) Act \(2015\)](#), [Together for Mental Health Strategy and Substance Misuse Delivery Plan \(2019-22\)](#). With guidance from Amy Lloyd in [Wales Centre for Public Policy \(WCPP\)](#), I could partially illustrate this complex system comprising various departments, agencies and public bodies involved in Children's Services and, therefore, Resilient Families Service.

## **Data Sharing: Advocacy/Stakeholders buy-in: Managing Unstructured Data**

One challenge in achieving a timely view of family is the presence of unstructured data formats, such as PDFs, scans, and Word Documents, from various data sources (i.e. health, education). These formats present barriers to data integration and usability.

Unlike structured data, which is organised to allow for interoperability, unstructured data formats lack standardisation, complicating data integration into information systems. For instance, when a child moves from one school to another, their educational records, often in formats like PDFs or scans, are sent along. However, these records aren't compatible with information systems, making it challenging to keep a complete and ongoing record of the child's educational history. One participant illustrates this as 'nightmare' workflow: 'Information comes in a variety of ways. We do have information-sharing agreements where we get information directly from the Health Board, and it goes directly into Capita One, that's the gold standard, that's great. We do have information then that comes in other forms. As they need to be uploaded into Capita One, that's kind of silver standard. And then we have information that just comes in on spreadsheets. They need to be maintained by somebody in the team, and that's an absolute nightmare. We never get the same information from them as we get out of our reports.'

## **Data Sharing**

### **Collaboration pre- and post-pandemic**

The transition from pre- to post-pandemic collaboration has highlighted changes in data sharing and networking practices. Pre-pandemic knowledge-sharing processes and data benchmarking were common, facilitating an exchange of insights among authorities and enabling learning from each other. However, there has been a noticeable decline in such collaborative activities since the pandemic, affecting the depth of engagement and the quality of exchanges.

One interviewee noted that while virtual platforms like Teams have enabled continued communication, they fall short of replicating the effectiveness of face-to-face interactions. Virtual meetings with larger groups often lack dynamism and connection and do not support the spontaneous nature of collaborative work. Another described how data-sharing practices have changed post-pandemic. In-person meetings allowed more open and frequent exchanges of information, whereas now, data-sharing has become more ad-hoc and less integrated into daily practices.

*'I'm part of the national team around the family forum. We share information and things....I had to do a presentation last month and shared some of our referral data, etc. But it's not a standard sharing practice to share that. We used to have regular meetings pre-pandemic, where everyone would kind of go, and there was a lot more networking and sharing. Now, everything is on screen, and unless you're asked to share something, you're not readily doing it like you used to.... We do everything on screen, but there isn't that same working relationship, so to speak, where everything is shared quite freely because we could all learn from each other.'*

**– Lisa Lewis, Resilient Families Service Manager, RCT.**

## **Data Culture**

### **Providing data with service needs in mind**

A key aspect of developing a data-driven culture within local authorities is ensuring that the data collected addresses specific service needs and gaps. Sometimes, data might be represented simply because it is easily accessible rather than because of its relevance or depth of insight. This highlights the need to ask the right questions to ensure the collected data aligns with service objectives. Collecting data should not be a checkbox exercise; it should be a deliberate process that considers the information's capability to answer questions that drive service improvements.

*'I think we just need to stand back from the information that we collect and just ask ourselves if it's the right information to answer the question we have...We collect a lot of information because it's easy to*

*collect, but it doesn't mean it's the right information to collect. So, I think there's something in there...'.  
– Louise Davies, Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Services, RCT.*

Focusing on transforming data into actionable intelligence aims to enhance service quality and inform decisions that benefit the community. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on feedback loops between data systems and users, as noted by the following quote: *And it's all about classification, isn't it? The system is only going to churn out the classifications that we put into it if we don't have a system that's intuitive enough'* (Head of Early Help, RCT)

Currently, the needed data (specifically related to key topics discussed within interviews, such as engagement, demand and refusal) is reported on an ad-hoc basis, placing pressure on internal data capacity. Collaborating to enhance the existing information systems, guided by dialogues between services like RFS and the Service Planning and Transformation Team, can ensure data is collected and analysed with clear objectives, avoiding redundancies and maximising resources for data management in the long run.

### **Providing data with citizens' needs in mind**

A citizen-focused data culture can shift how organisations collect, analyse and use data by prioritising the needs and experiences of those they serve. This approach aligns with the Resilient Families Service's bottom-up approach, focusing on citizens' and families' needs to tailor their resilience-building journey.

Expanding on this, we will understand the interactions between professionals, families and support services by exploring when, how and why families or children interact with non-statutory services like Resilient Families Services. For example, one interviewee noted that some referrals address immediate needs, such as accessing food coupons for food poverty. This indicates that families might need to resolve urgent issues before voluntarily committing to longer-term resilience planning. As the Head of Early Help emphasised, *“So, if we knew the details about what professionals and families are making contact about when we signpost them, we would be able to deliver better public-facing information to support self-directed access to family support services differently.”*

An informed signposting approach could address immediate concerns, reduce demand, and empower citizens to independently access relevant information and services.

### **Overcoming Barriers through Ethical and Purposeful Data Use**

Data sharing in the context of family support and children's services presents considerable ethical and legal challenges. One of the central issues is the justification and purpose of data collection.

In RCT, progress has been made in developing shared data infrastructures between health and local authorities. For example, they have successfully integrated large datasets, such as birth data from Health Wales management information, directly into their systems:

*‘We're quite advanced in our discussions about sharing big data sets between health and local authorities. We've already got a number of those in. We get all the birth data straight from the Health Wales management information system straight into the authority. We've made some really good progress there about trying to overcome the challenges of creating a shared data infrastructure.’ –(Zoe Lancelott, Head of Health Determinants Research Collaboration, RCT)*

However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the legal and practical aspects of data sharing. One interviewee described the complexities in negotiating the legal basis for sharing NHS numbers, citing reluctance from health colleagues. They receive monthly data from health services for newborns, which includes 4 characteristics: name/surname, date of birth, phone number, and address. Monthly birth data received from health services includes names, dates of birth, phone numbers, and addresses, but changes

in three of these details can make a child untraceable. Despite challenges, they created a legal framework for sharing NHS numbers, representing a step forward.

Accessing data that does not identify individuals is another challenge, particularly in health. One interviewee explained that while they had previously established relationships and agreements to regularly receive data from health services, sustaining this data flow became a constant battle once specific funding streams ended. They noted that despite an initial agreement to share data quarterly, resistance grew as time passed, with health colleagues expressing workload concerns and hesitations about continuing to provide the necessary information.

These complexities reflect broader discussions around Real-World Data (RWD) and Real-World Evidence (RWE), as described by the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#). Real-World Data refers to patient health information collected outside controlled clinical trials, while Real-World Evidence involves using this data to generate insights. While RWD has the potential to inform government bodies and guide policy decisions ([Jones et al., 2023](#)), its use is often limited by data protection, governance, and risk aversion ([Byrne, 2023](#)). These issues highlight the need for an inter-organisational understanding and encouragement to use responsible data frameworks such as the Real-World Evidence (RWE) Framework that balance legal compliance ([UK's Data Protection Act 2018](#), [UK General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR](#), [National Health Service Act 2006](#), [Control of Patient Information Regulations 2002](#), [Health and Care Act 2022](#)) with the public benefit of resolving gaps in knowledge and improve access to innovations.

## **Capacity & Skills**

### **Improving Data Insights and Practices**

Interviewees expressed a strong desire to expand their understanding of families, particularly regarding the reasons for family disengagement, the needs of both families and professionals, and the factors driving increased service demand. This deeper understanding is seen as very important for tailoring interventions to meet families' needs. As one interviewee remarked:

*'If we knew at a glance the reasons for disengagement or refusal before intervention, or, you know, before action plan or after action plan, we'd be able to deliver more services to those who want it. That's because we would redirect that resource, we'd be able to stop those.'*  
– Head of Early Help, RCT

Currently, while extensive data is collected to meet external (i.e. Welsh Government) reporting requirements, gaps remain in using data to inform service management. Despite a systematic approach to data collection, challenges related to accessing specific information—i.e., understanding family disengagement and increased demand—highlight issues of data accessibility, location, and quality.

All interviewees highlighted the importance of in-house data capacity. One suggested expanding their dedicated information system team to include staff knowledgeable about data processes and the needs of children's services. Another noted the challenges in recruiting and retaining individuals with the necessary expertise. To address these challenges, fostering collaboration across departments – such as children's services, education, ICT, and data management – was recommended to unify internal capabilities.

Participants also discussed the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI). To integrate emerging tools such as AI, local authorities need to strengthen their internal capacity by developing knowledge and specialisation in these technologies. Developing such capacity goes beyond improving existing systems, requiring further skills and resources. [Campion et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that partnerships with research organisations, such as universities, could provide access to needed expertise and resources. However,

such collaborations would demand a well-established organisational understanding of data sharing, privacy, and security.

### **Exploring Values from Other Types of (Contextual/Qualitative) Data**

Traditionally, within RCT, there has been a strong emphasis on evaluative data, often prioritising quantitative metrics such as statistical analyses. However, this approach may limit the scope of understanding by failing to capture the full context of the issues. Embracing new types of evidence, including community insights and qualitative information, could improve understanding of contextual issues related to families and children. As one interviewee shared: 'I think as a Council, if we could understand the evidence in its widest form, we would see that academic evaluative evidence is only one part of a massive array of different sources. We're also a bit obsessed with numbers... But those numbers don't always mean a lot, do they? If you haven't got the context behind them and can't triangulate them with what people have said.'

– Zoe Lancelott, Head of Health Determinants Research Collaboration, RCT.

Triangulating data with qualitative sources can provide a more robust understanding of the issues. Qualitative data, such as personal accounts and professional observations, adds depth to numbers and offers a fuller picture of the situation. For instance, understanding the reasons behind families' disengagement from services may require capturing detailed narratives and experiences directly from the families themselves. To support this effort, there is a need to educate staff on what constitutes valid data, with a particular focus on the value of community knowledge and qualitative data. Training programs could focus on broadening the staff's understanding of different evidence types, how to collect and structure qualitative data, and how to integrate them.

### **Data Governance**

#### **Relying on Multiple Sources of Data**

A complete understanding of a family's situation requires gathering data from various sources, including education, health services, community organisations, and social services. For example, assessing a family's financial stability involves obtaining data from the Citizens Advice Bureau, while addressing attendance concerns might require schools' input. Together, these data points illustrate the factors behind a family's situation. As one interviewee noted: 'If we knew more about the family dynamics and knew more about families as a whole, which means the needs of adults as well, we could have a better picture of exactly what is going on in order to shape our services.' Therefore, understanding a family requires more than evaluating each service in isolation. The multi-agency nature of a family requires multiple services supplementing each other, including education, early years, public health, adult social services, and, in some cases, elderly care and disability services. One interviewee highlighted the challenge of disconnect between these services, noting, for example, how social care for older adults and social care for children often remains separate. Defining family members and their interactions with various services can help identify vulnerabilities and needs.

Overcoming the separation of services is also complicated by the evolving definition of family. Over recent decades, changes such as later marriages, higher divorce rates, rise in lone-parenthood, and cohabiting families have changed what constitutes a family ([Kiernan et al., 2024](#)). Data systems need to adapt as family compositions become more diverse, from extended families to varied living arrangements. Traditional and singular definitions no longer suffice, and to address modern family needs effectively, services and systems need to reflect these changing dynamics.

#### **Addressing Fragmented Data Structures (A variety of Systems)**

In RCT, the information management structure of the RFS presents an ongoing challenge in aligning data management across departments. The RFS operates at the intersection of Children's Services and

Community Wellbeing and Resilience, with both playing separate roles. Historically, RFS was part of the Community Wellbeing and Resilience department. Recently, the RFS service delivery moved to Children's Services. However, Community Wellbeing and Resilience manage much of the data collecting, sorting, and providing business support.

Children's Services primarily rely on the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS), a system for managing data for social services. However, the Resilient Families Service (RFS) operates on a separate system, Capita One, which is primarily focused on education-related functions. Although some changes are planned for WCCIS, the current reliance on these two separate systems creates challenges: 'It's really difficult where we (Resilient Families Service) are because we're not children services, we're not education. We're not in the core statutory functions, so we don't have access to this information readily. So, education is obviously really important in intervention prevention. As children's services data, we're kind of in the middle.' (Anonymous).

The reliance on two systems means that information must be manually coordinated and transferred between platforms, leading to a time-consuming process and an increased risk of errors. This approach to data management not only creates barriers to effective decision-making but also creates challenges in obtaining necessary information because it's scattered. Addressing this issue requires a data management strategy that integrates data from multiple sources, facilitating a more complete view of families' needs and circumstances. Although participants advocate for centralised data management, they also emphasise the importance of controlled access, balancing integration with privacy and security. The primary barriers to achieving integrated systems include the lack of suitable suppliers and the difficulty tailoring systems to meet Wales' specific needs. However, there is hope that this may be changing.

## ***Role of Data in Policy***

### **Proactive Data Measures**

One key aspect of proactive data measures is using historical data to anticipate future demands. By tracking data over time, local authorities can identify recurring patterns. For example, monitoring contact centre inquiries can show regular spikes in referrals from schools at the end of each term.

Another example is understanding the causes of dissatisfaction among service users. By collecting and analysing user feedback, authorities can identify recurring issues within the services. If complaints repeatedly point to delays in service response, this may indicate a systemic problem. On the other hand, if concerns are isolated to specific processes, targeted changes can be implemented. As one interviewee pointed out, forecasting extends beyond predicting immediate next steps but is about recognising broader trends: 'So, it's never as simple as predicting what might happen next week. However, if you look at the trends over a period of time and your data sets are large enough, you'll find patterns. For example, you say, well, look, every year we have a large intake into the contact centre around council tax bills because you know... So, we need to remodel our service delivery to cope with that demand. I'm very interested and becoming much more passionate about demand management, which is something we probably didn't look at too much in the past.'

However, adapting services proactively relies heavily on having robust data on service demand and its underlying drivers. By establishing a central evidence base, authorities can consistently identify trends and make informed decisions to adapt services: 'If we had a sound and agreed evidence base, we would be able to make informed decisions... But it's about developing that central evidence base where everybody is using the same information to deliver or plan their services.' – Zoe Lancelott, Head of Health Determinants Research Collaboration, RCT.

## Recommendations

If we knew.../if we had...	We would be able to...
<b>If we had</b> a clearer understanding of why families and professionals reach out for support...	... we would be able to enhance our public-facing information for self-directed access to family services and direct families to more appropriate, less resource-intensive support, ultimately preventing the cycle of repeated service access and unresolved issues.
<b>If we knew</b> what communities and families need from us...	...we would be able to adapt our services to close the gap between early intervention, prevention, and statutory services, ensuring a more seamless and proactive support system.
<b>If we had</b> a better understanding of why families disengage or refuse services...	...we would be able to tailor our engagement strategies, offer more suitable options, reduce unnecessary referrals, redirect resource allocation, and redesign services to better meet their needs, ultimately preventing escalation to statutory services.
<b>If we knew</b> the factors driving the increasing demand and had access to comprehensive service data (covering volumes, timing, and types of requests) ...	... we would be able to intervene earlier, reshape our prevention strategies, realign our delivery models to better meet residents' needs, and reduce reliance on statutory services by addressing underlying issues.
<b>If we knew</b> more about family dynamics...	... we would be able to have a clearer understanding of the overall situation (i.e. adult and child needs) and would be able to coordinate support more effectively and tailor interventions based on this understanding.
<b>If we had</b> a centralised system integrating information from various services—such as adult and children’s services, education, early intervention, and health—along with personal service histories and family connections...	... we could overcome silos caused by data fragmentation and gain a comprehensive understanding of family needs.
<b>If we had</b> additional skilled staff, particularly data experts...	... we would be able to manage growing demand and referrals, ensure timely support, and improve data processes (extraction, manipulation, sharing) to build advanced tools like Power BI and explore forecasting.
<b>If we knew</b> the relationship between our communities and the Council more clearly...	...we would be able to deliver more balanced and responsive services, avoiding the extremes of over-supporting some areas while neglecting others.

The table above presents a summary of the key insights and themes identified from stakeholder interviews. Based on these findings, I have made the following key recommendations to address these challenges:

## Recommendation 1 on the Development of Integrated Strategies for Information Systems

Different information systems, such as Capita One for the Resilient Families Service and WCCIS for the Children's Services, create challenges in data sharing and understanding the delivered services. Interviewees have stressed the need for a centralised information system to increase clarity in understanding and assessing family needs to improve and support service delivery.

An integrated or centralised data system is a more efficient process ([Redden, Dencik and Warne, 2020](#)) that combines and stores information collected across departments, including health, education, social care (adult, elderly, children). This approach aims to reduce the need for additional personnel and spending within the Council, facilitating operations and improving service delivery. However, evidence from councils such as Manchester, Bristol, and Hackney reveal mixed results regarding the effectiveness of centralised systems within the Supporting Families Programme ([Redden, Dencik and Warne, 2020](#)). Critics caution that overemphasising technological solutions and their improvement can change how people and issues are understood and addressed.

Therefore, the objective of managing the needs of citizens and creating resilient families should not be overshadowed by the emphasis on establishing sophisticated data practices and indicative metrics. As digital-centred governance becomes more prevalent, there is a risk of leading to a reductionist view of the nuanced needs of families ([Gillies and Edwards, 2024](#)). Thus, developing such data systems must prioritise the needs and well-being of families and children rather than focusing on operational efficiencies and identifying and pre-empting future risks.

## Recommendation 2 on Adopting Citizen-Centric Approaches

In considering what data is needed to understand and address the needs of families and communities, it is important to evaluate how definitions evolve over time. For example, as highlighted in the Data Governance section of this case study, the traditional family structure has evolved, encompassing diverse individuals - such as second-degree relatives and various parental figures within the same household - who form part of the family environment. Therefore, current datasets need to reflect these inclusive definitions. Doing so increases the understanding of family dynamics and ensures that diverse family forms are represented in data collection and service delivery.

Promoting citizen-centric initiatives could involve creating a shared understanding and framework across departments like health and social care to ensure consistency in interpreting key concepts. For instance, health workers may interpret the concept of resilience differently than social workers. These varied interpretations could be aligned by engaging with different types of families and workers through participatory and deliberative approaches. By aligning definitions and concepts from the outset, service providers could have a better view of families, which can inform the development of a centralised system is developed, specifically regarding how to define a family and its resilience.

In Bristol, for example, a manager highlights the challenge of overwhelming demand for services and the need for better decision-making ([Redden, Dencik and Warne, 2020](#)). By clearly defining family units, they can better allocate resources and provide appropriate services. It also allows data scientists and caseworkers to understand how to group individuals and their needs, ensuring that no one is overlooked and that interventions are better suited to the realities of modern family structures.

## Recommendation 3 on Data Sharing and Privacy

Interview findings identified several key challenges regarding data and knowledge sharing among local authorities, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. A noticeable decline in in-person knowledge-

sharing activities has affected collaboration and engagement between local councils. Pre-pandemic sessions facilitated benchmarking, knowledge exchange, and the development of best practices; the absence of these has created a gap in collaborative efforts. Addressing the need to enhance knowledge exchange between authorities is needed to enable mutual learning.

To address these challenges, one recommendation would be launching Knowledge-Exchange Partnerships to encourage productive engagement between local authorities and research communities within the UK. This could help use a research base to support local governments and scale the benefits of existing research, knowledge, and evidence.

Regarding data-sharing practices and integration across departments, training programs focused on these practices can reduce the anxieties surrounding compliance and privacy concerns, empowering staff to share information responsibly. This awareness has gained further importance following the discussion on integrated information systems.

#### **Recommendation 4 on Expanding the Definition of ‘Useful’ Data**

Traditionally, there has been a strong emphasis on quantitative metrics in RCT, which can obfuscate the full context of the issues at hand by overlooking the qualitative insights needed to understand the community’s needs. Achieving this involves recognising and embracing the diverse data types, including community insights, qualitative information, and feedback. By integrating these, the Council can triangulate data more effectively, leading to a more robust understanding of the complexities, situations, and needs surrounding families and children. For instance, understanding family disengagement from services requires not only statistical trends but also narratives that reflect the lived experiences of families.

To support this shift, it is essential to implement clear guidelines that establish criteria for data relevance, ensuring that the collected data serves specific, actionable purposes. Regular assessments of data usefulness help refine data collection strategies and enhance the quality of insights generated. Furthermore, training programs should educate staff on what constitutes valid data, particularly emphasising the importance of community knowledge and qualitative data.

# Case Study 5 - BCC

## The Case for a Labour Market Observatory in Belfast

Selin Zileli, Jeremy Williams and Ayden McKeating, with supporting research by Thomas Murat



Figure 1: Belfast City Council Governance Diagram

The fifth case study, a collaboration with **Belfast City Council (BCC)**, examines the issues and opportunities around the institution of a Labour Market Observatory for Belfast. In the context of the unique challenges of Belfast as a post-conflict city, it makes the clear case for developing an intervention to coordinate the efforts to combat economic inactivity, thus helping the city's residents reach their full potential.

### Introduction

This case study examines the development of the Belfast Labour Market Observatory (LMO), an initiative including Belfast City Council. Establishing and implementing an LMO to help Belfast confront economic data and planning challenges remains a priority.

Planned as a leading source for jobseekers, employers, policymakers and training providers, the LMO aims to bring together and analyse data on employment demand, workforce supply, education and policy interventions. The LMO is intended to be modular in structure, guided by user-centric design principles and phased implementation, and includes components such as labour market analysis, provision mapping, applied research on effective interventions, and digital dissemination. By using data insights, the LMO aims to inform effective decision-making and create equitable pathways for employment in alignment with Belfast's broader socio-economic objectives. How the LMO is to be delivered continues to be an ongoing challenge for the authority and its stakeholders.

During the research phase, we engaged with key players and stakeholders to understand the priorities in labour market intelligence. This involved interviews with participants to explore their needs, challenges, experiences, and expectations for the LMO. Our interviewees ranged from civil servants in the Northern Ireland Executive to key players in the voluntary and community sector, as well as officers from Belfast City Council and expert academics. Through these conversations, we discussed how existing data is collected, analysed, and shared. We also discussed the important role the LMO could play – if implemented correctly – in addressing gaps where they existed, promoting and improving data culture, and supporting more informed decision-making. We make the case that delivering an empowered Labour Market Observatory, supported by the right data culture and capacity, can have a transformative effect, leading to data-informed policymaking and ultimately to better social outcomes that Belfast seeks.

Our topline steers to Belfast City Council and its partners, therefore, are to:

- **Examine how to create a Labour Market Observatory** to improve data accessibility and usability for stakeholders, leading to more informed decision-making and ultimately better outcomes. By collating and providing up-to-date data in a user-friendly format, an LMO should empower stakeholders to make informed decisions to drive local employment growth and promote community resilience.
- **Guarantee the sustainability of the LMO by providing stable long-term funding.** A key issue we identified throughout our work was funding “cliff edges” leading to short-termism and other unintended consequences. We believe committing long-term funding for the LMO will allow partnerships to be maintained and data to be continuously collected and analysed, ultimately leading to better outcomes.
- **Use the creation of the LMO to promote a culture of transparency and collaboration.** This includes both instituting standardised data-sharing frameworks and agreements between stakeholders. It should also include not only instituting open data practices but also promoting a cultural step-change in the way in which data is exchanged, managed and shared. We recommend using existing powers under the UK government’s Digital Economy Act 2017 allowing public bodies to share data across boundaries to improve public services to encourage and compel stakeholders to be active players in the LMO.
- **Allocate resources for training policymakers in data analysis** across Belfast City Council and its partners. This training should not just be for staff who analyse data on a day-to-day basis; instead, it should give a broad cross-section of staff the interpretation skills they need to use, contribute to, and champion the LMO.
- **Invest in real-time data collection for the LMO** to ensure the most up-to-date information informs labour and skills policy. The best decisions are those taken with the most accurate data. We recommend investing in the LMO to ensure data is collected in real time.
- **Use the LMO to engage the community,** including collecting data and insights from the ground and using a publicly available dashboard (or dashboards) and other data-supported transparency for policy decisions, initiatives, and targets.

## Key Stakeholders

One of the challenges Belfast faces as a post-conflict city is overcoming the history of economic inactivity and the uneven distribution of skills across sectors. This made mapping out stakeholders, their roles, and relationships particularly important, as it provided a clearer understanding of how the LMO could address divides between sectors and where to improve data access. We also illustrated the key actors in the Northern Ireland Assembly and, more specifically, in Belfast City Council to produce a governance diagram (Figure 2), which helped identify the connections between stakeholders and their relation with labour market outcomes.

### *Data sharing: Using the LMO to Enhance Cross-Sector Collaboration*

When analysing the discussions with participants, a common theme is the need for cross-sector collaboration. One participant highlights the role of community and voluntary sectors in delivering the Council’s employment programs and notes how their involvement plays an important role in data-driven initiatives and shaping policy and services. Similarly, another participant discussed the importance of collaboration between government, businesses and community organisations. Improving data sharing among different groups requires addressing structural challenges and finding solutions to break down barriers and build trust.

One example is the collaboration with the General Medical Council and the British Medical Association, which shows how cross-sector partnerships can provide resources and knowledge sharing. Moreover, the

importance of networks, such as the Reach Network, is highlighted as a way to increase collaboration through shared data analysis and best practices.

Another perspective comes from a participant who highlighted the importance of trust in the bodies responsible for data management. They pointed out that while the Labour Market Observatory (LMO) should ideally serve as a trusted source of labour market data, its effectiveness heavily relies on its consistency, as one noted:

*'I think the LMO should be a trusted source around the labour market. The difficulty, even as a body, also goes back to that point about relationships... because I know sometimes you can operate behind an abbreviation, but it is more than the personal relationship as opposed to the LMO or a bigger body.'*

**- Gareth Downey, Belfast City Council**

This quote highlights that even in formal, data-centric bodies, successful data-sharing initiatives often depend on the strength of personal relationships rather than on structured institutional frameworks. The participant further elaborated on the need for fluidity within the organisation, suggesting regular and active participation with organisations and individuals is needed to maintain trust. More importantly, this trust should extend beyond personal relationships to create an environment where different organisations can use each other's processes and data, increasing the success of cross-sector initiatives. Furthermore forward-looking data is needed to adapt policies and programs, requiring ongoing collaboration and engagement between sectors.

To support the success of LMO and promote meaningful cross-sector collaboration, it is important to establish a standard data-sharing approach built on trust. As highlighted, when agencies have confidence in sharing data without repeatedly navigating barriers, the collaborative process becomes more resilient. This trust, coupled with a commitment to transparent data-sharing practices, will increase the coordination between sectors and support stakeholders in making data-driven decisions that benefit the community.

### **Transparency and Accountability**

Participants expressed challenges related to data sharing, particularly concerning transparency and accountability in the use of data. One participant highlighted difficulty in accessing specific data within the health and social care sector, where information on job vacancies and growth expectations are not readily available. This lack of transparency limits the ability to respond effectively to workforce needs and creates a barrier for proactive planning.

*'I know that the different departments and councils - in my personal view - and that some of the others in the team, (even though data protection is important) often use data protection as a bit of an excuse as to why they maybe don't want to share data'*

**- Anonymous**

Another participant further illustrated that data protection regulations, such as GDPR, are frequently cited as barriers to sharing data. They also discussed their experiences encountering bureaucratic obstacles and resistance from councils and departments, with blanket data protection claims used as an excuse to limit collaboration. These issues show how a lack of transparency and accountability in data sharing can affect service delivery and policy development, emphasising the need for clearer frameworks that facilitate responsible data sharing while maintaining compliance with regulations.

In addition to these concerns, one participant addressed the need for transparency not only in data access but also in how data is communicated. They pointed out that academic reports and data analyses are often inaccessible to wider audiences, especially those who are not trained in data science. This highlights the need for data to be presented in a way that is more understandable, perhaps through summary documents or data visualisations. The participant also noted that the LMO could play an important role in moving

forward initiatives that make data more transparent and widely accessible, mentioning that many organisations fail to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders due to complex reports. They argued for multiple levels of data outputs – ranging from detailed reports to simplified summaries – to ensure that decisions are informed by data and that stakeholders at various levels of data science expertise can engage with the information presented.

Standardised data-sharing frameworks for LMO, as discussed in the cross-sector collaboration section, can also promote transparency and accountability by ensuring data exchange and communication in an accessible format that serves various stakeholders.

## **Data Governance**

### **Data Integration and Bridging the Gap between Belfast City Council and other Layers of Government**

Currently, data remains siloed across departments and between bodies, preventing a holistic understanding of an area or a citizen's needs and reducing opportunities for collaborative policymaking. For example, a citizen seeking benefits and training may need to interact with the Department for Economy. A Labour Market Observatory for Belfast should therefore integrate data across the different layers of government, and within their internal departments. Without an integrated data system, different layers of governments and departments all lack a full picture of the citizens' needs, leading to disintegrated support. One participant's perception was that: *'There's the problem with the government side of things, the Commissioner side, I mean the Department for Communities has responsibility. It's one of the largest departments in NI and covers from housing, benefits to welfare and employability and disability all that... but I've seen very little signs of the use of labour market data to inform what they're doing or how they're providing services.'*

This lack of integration also affects employability and skills development programmes, which often suffer from disconnected initiatives despite shared objectives. For instance, a disability benefit claimant may also need upskilling to re-enter the workforce, but these services are not coordinated. One of the interviewees mentioned that while the Department for Communities might initiate labour market initiatives, the success of such initiatives is dependent on the collaboration with the Department for Economy and the Department for Health. Political complexities, where ministers are primarily concerned with their own departmental budgets and objectives, mean resources are not integrated, resulting in initiatives with limited impact.

Addressing these inefficiencies through centralisation and integration could improve service delivery and enable more coordinated responses to local needs. Building on initiatives such as the Labour Market Partnership (LMP)—which has demonstrated the value of improved coordination, stakeholder engagement, and addressing system inefficiencies—the LMO is intended to be modular in structure, guided by user-centric design principles and phased implementation. As one participant observed, initiatives like the Labour Market Observatory (LMO) have the potential to bridge the gap between local and central government, which is often fragmented, even within central government departments themselves.

Another participant suggested that better coordination of existing resources and services, rather than simply generating additional data, could significantly improve outcomes. To bridge the gap between government departments and coordinate existing resources, encouraging data sharing among departments, businesses and community organisations through LMO can ensure clear roles for stakeholders in data governance.

## Data Timeliness and Quality

The participants' responses highlight challenges regarding the need for more timely and relevant data to help improve the decision-making process and ultimately lead to better decisions being taken. In Belfast, many organisations struggle to access up-to-date labour market data, which affects their ability to develop services and policies that are optimally aligned with community needs. This lag in data availability – which one participant mentioned was as much as three to six months, creates a gap between the data being used and the changing socio-economic landscape within the community.

One example that illustrates the challenges of data timeliness comes from the Department for Economy's apprenticeship programme that is a major initiative for skill development. However, it has not released updated figures for this programme for several years. As one participant observed: 'There isn't good data integration; departments publish only their own... I think COVID was the initial thing, but it's really, really difficult to know what's happening out there in terms of apprenticeships, traineeships, skills for life and work and some of the key programmes that they deliver.'

This lack of data timeliness and integration makes it difficult for employers and policymakers to assess the effectiveness of the programme or adapt it to the current labour market needs. Delays in data, particularly post-COVID, have created a gap in understanding whether participation rates have recovered or remain plateaued, creating a barrier to making informed, timely decisions that align with the current landscape.

However, another participant expressed an alternative perspective about dated data, noting that it can still hold value even when it is not real-time. They suggested that the real issue lies not in the age of the data but in how it is used. Until organisations fully utilise the data they already have, concerns about its timeliness may be less relevant. This perspective suggests that improving data practices is more urgent than seeking real-time data.

Despite having access to data, organisations also face barriers in terms of time and resources for thorough analysis. One participant noted that this lack of capacity impacts the quality of insights derived from available data, limiting its potential to drive meaningful change. Furthermore, concerns about the misuse of statistics, such as the multiple deprivation indices, highlight the need for stronger governance structures to ensure data is used responsibly.

To address these challenges, enhancing the timeliness and quality of data through better integration and real-time data collection could be one way. Real-time data can enable tailored services and timely interventions, ensuring that policies remain responsive to the challenges and changing socio-economic landscape. Implementing real-time analytics can help policymakers and service providers make data-driven decision-making that reflects current conditions.

## Data Granularity and Precision

One participant highlighted a concern about the limited use of local data, noting that available data is often too general and lacks the necessary detail for effective service provision. They also highlighted the need for more granular local data better to tailor services to the specific needs of the community. The lack of precision and granularity affects organisations' ability to design targeted interventions, emphasising the importance of improving the level of data granularity to increase the relevance and impact of services.

*"The data we use at the minute, the Employer Skills Survey, I think it's segmented into, North, East, South West, but even then, you start filtering down too much it becomes insignificant and is there really that much of a difference between North and East around skill shortages for administrators, probably not. It could be useful for us/ Realistically are you going to go and get a dataset that you can really go down to their particular locations? I don't know. Maybe you can, and that's what we need through this LMO.*

*But it's just gathering that data"*

*- Anonymous*

Another participant echoed this concern, stressing the value of creating outputs that are not generic but rather focused on Belfast's specific needs. They suggested that more granular and localised data outputs, rather than monthly standard economic profiles that lack the depth needed, could offer more meaningful insights for local policymakers. For example, these outputs could focus on answering questions such as what are the emerging job sectors in Belfast, and how do they compare to those in local authorities; what specific skills are in demand and which training programs could be aligned with these needs; how socio-economic factors impact employment opportunities for different demographics within the cities.

Adding to this challenge, another participant highlighted an inconsistency in the type of data being collected by different organisations. Notably, while some organisations can conduct a detailed review of barriers to employment, such as Belfast Work Connects, which uses this information to deliver employability training, many other organisations, including some government bodies, can only rely on basic demographic information, often limited to age, gender, and specific health conditions. This lack of depth means that some programmes cannot be tailored to address specific challenges, such as the need for childcare support among single parents seeking employment or the prevalence of digital skills gaps in rural areas.

To address the gaps in data granularity and precision, we recommend creating an LMO that prioritises the collection and dissemination of localised data. Through this, LMO could provide tailored data outputs specific to Belfast's emerging job sectors, skill demands, and socio-economic factors rather than relying on generic economic profiles. For example, by focusing on employment challenges faced by specific demographics or the availability of sector-specific programs, the LMO can enable targeted interventions.

## **Data Culture**

### **How Organisations Approach the Use and Sharing of Data**

Participants mentioned the bureaucratic challenges associated with data sharing, citing GDPR and resource limitations as key challenges. One participant elaborated on these issues, describing how their team is navigating the complexities of data sharing agreements with various councils in Northern Ireland as part of the Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub (LPIP) initiative which involves both the Department for Communities in the Skills and Employability Division and the Department for Economy. The participant noted that, while some councils are more open with the data they have, others are more restrictive, citing GDPR concerns and data protection as a bit of an excuse as to why maybe they don't want to share data. This inconsistency in data access and the varying willingness of councils to share data contributed to data gaps and inconsistencies across the 11 council areas. Moreover, even as new data is being collected to fill these gaps, the lack of alignment in the data captured across different regions creates barriers to building a coherent understanding of local labour market needs.

In addition to these barriers, participants highlighted the gap between generating high-quality data and translating it into actionable outcomes. One participant noted the value of data from Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA), which has been used to identify areas in need of employability initiatives and assess the impact of anchor institutions on local employment. However, they expressed concern about a gap between data generation and actionable delivery. While a good amount of data is available, the amount of funding allocated to pilot programmes or implementation is not enough, leaving many insights underutilised.

Participants also mentioned the general distrust among departments which contributed to the challenges of data sharing and collaboration. One participant noted the importance of better cooperation when using intelligence for economic development, which current processes do not allow for. Another participant echoed these concerns about the current approach to data use, describing it as 'not great' and marked by

'ad hoc' processes. According to them, the relationships between policymakers and the use of data are not effectively established, resulting in an inconsistent process that is influenced more by political considerations rather than a systematic and data-driven strategy.

The lack of a culture of cooperation between departments also emerged as a key challenge. One participant highlighted how they perceived neighbourhood renewal efforts failed due to a lack of buy-in from various sectors, stating: "The primary issue with neighborhood renewal is that it has been heavily reliant on the Department for Communities, with other departments like Health, Economy, and Education failing to participate. This was a missed opportunity, as it was intended to be a cross-departmental strategy. This exact problem was identified as early as a 2006 review."

Despite these challenges, one of the participants identified untapped data resources – such as environmental data or renewable energy data – that, with better governance and cooperation between councils and central government, could potentially be used to improve labour market observatories and service provision. More integrated data use across different sectors is seen as a potential for more cross-sectoral approaches and integration in data sharing.

To overcome bureaucratic barriers to data sharing, we recommend establishing a centralised platform for inter-agency data sharing that simplifies the data-sharing process and ensures consistency. This platform, while addressing GDPR concerns through clear guidelines and protocols for data access, should also promote transparency and cooperation between different departments and authorities. The LMO, in that sense, should be a platform where data use is seen as a shared resource for economic development rather than an isolated asset for departments.

### **Procedure for Data-Driven Decision-Making**

Implementing data-driven decision-making was another challenge that was frequently discussed. One participant, reflecting on their project focused on economic inactivity and employability, highlighted the importance of involving both public and community sector organisations as equal partners in the process. The difficulty, however, is that while there is considerable expertise and local knowledge in the community and voluntary sector, there is often a lack of capacity to use data effectively in decision-making. For instance, community organisations must frequently report on activities such as shared prosperity funding yet may not have the skills or resources to fully utilise the data they collect.

The situation is further complicated by the difficulty of balancing data sharing with privacy regulations, such as GDPR, and the administrative burdens that come with ensuring data is accessible to all stakeholders. This lack of trust and clarity around data sharing, particularly when it involves multiple parties with different interests, prevents effective collaboration. One participant expressed frustration over the challenge of getting everyone on board for data-driven initiatives, stating the main problem: while many local organisations are eager to use data to inform decision-making, the absence of a unified approach means that efforts often remain limited in their impact in relation to the broader strategic goals. They reflected this by stating:

*"I think it's the mindset and if I was to summarise it: people in a region seeing beyond their own little piece and wanting to drive a bigger collective action because you can't for this type of topic you can't do it -, without everyone being on board."*

**- Anonymous**

Moreover, another participant expressed how, in some cases, local authorities in Northern Ireland are reluctant to push back against established or pre-existing decision-making processes, even when there may be a potentially better way to achieve outcomes. They highlighted a perceived tendency to fall back

on familiar methods because they are seen as easier, even though they may not be the most effective. This reluctance to challenge the status quo often leads to decisions being made in isolation, without incorporating the data collected, which ultimately limits the potential for these initiatives to drive broader, more impactful change.

Despite recognising that the processes for collecting and using data may not always align with traditional pathways, participants felt that institutional and resource constraints, including restrictions from higher levels of government, may impact the ability of local organisations to implement data-driven approaches effectively. For example, they noted that connecting data on environmental initiatives to tackle deprivation could have wider benefits for communities through addressing pressing issues such as poverty and energy costs. They also advocated for creating tools that would allow businesses to easily identify and communicate policy challenges, thus making it simpler to drive local policy changes. However, they also recognised that institutional barriers, legalities, and resource limitations still pose significant challenges to fully embracing such data-driven approaches.

To support data-driven decision-making, we recommend providing data training and resources to help organisations use data more effectively. This, coupled with the centralised data-sharing platform and clear data governance guidelines, would simplify access, address privacy concerns and help overcome institutional barriers.

### **Capacity and Skills**

#### **Concerns about the Future of Data-Driven Initiatives**

The recognition of a long-term vision, where data processes evolve to inform future strategies (such as the proposed role of the LMO as a bellwether), highlights the need for a dynamic approach to data management. This includes the adoption of multi-methodological approaches to improve decision-making and encourage an environment where stakeholders advocate for more informed and flexible processes. However, the long-term capacity of organisations to use data effectively remains a significant concern. Short-term funding cycles pose a major barrier to the sustainability of data-driven initiatives. One participant mentioned this by stating:

*"I think part of Northern Ireland's problem is that we suffer from such short-termism with regards to funding projects, and I don't know whether this is something that other people have mentioned within your research, but usually projects here are 18 months, two years or three years. They're usually done in a pilot phase. They do an evaluation of it, and then the evaluation seems to be forgotten about.*

*Unfortunately, that is just the nature of our political setup in Northern Ireland."*

**- Stephen Atkinson, Director of Operations, GEMS Northern Ireland**

As the participant emphasised, securing extended funding is essential for organisations to engage in meaningful long-term planning and capacity-building efforts. Without this stability, the full potential of initiatives like the LMO may remain unrealised.

Addressing these challenges also requires investment in relationship-building and institutional engagement. Strengthening skills in these areas will be crucial for developing the networks and partnerships necessary to support long-term, sustainable data practices. By improving these capabilities, organisations can overcome structural barriers and embed data-driven approaches more effectively into their strategic frameworks.

The long-term success of data-driven initiatives is connected to securing stable, long-term funding that supports ongoing capacity-building and relationship development. By focusing on skills development and fostering stronger institutional engagement, organisations can build the networks and partnerships

necessary to overcome short-term funding limitations and integrate data-driven approaches into their long-term strategies.

### **Organisational Capacity for Data Adaptation, Integration, and Access**

The organisation's overall capability to respond to data challenges and improve its data infrastructure is needed to support better data-driven decision-making processes. One participant noted that the potential to use local data capabilities to address cost savings and community welfare, which would require an organisation's ability to integrate, access, and adapt data insights into practical, impactful solutions (e.g., installing solar panels in areas of deprivation): *"Wouldn't it be great if you had data sets on the environment, like one on solar panels? And if we can tie in the environment to deal with poverty. I think not only will it become more successful, but people will also see the benefits, and people will buy in. For example, solar panels in areas of deprivation put solar panels on all the roofs. It'll lower their bills, help deal with the cost of living crisis, and help deal with poverty."*

The participant also identified inefficiencies in data access, particularly when navigating fragmented data sources across multiple platforms. They suggested that organisational capacity could be improved with a more centralised and user-friendly data system. The current disjointed approach – where job data, for example, is spread across different websites with varying degrees of navigability – mirrored what was perceived as larger issues within the organisation's data management infrastructure. A streamlined system would not only improve operational efficiency but also enhance the organisation's ability to adapt to evolving data needs.

### **Role of Data in Policy**

#### **Strategic Use of Data**

The strategic use of data within service design and policymaking also emerged as a theme in the interviews. One participant highlighted that data should not be viewed as a collection of statistics but as a tool for tackling skills shortages and improving employment opportunities. They argued that effective collaboration among employers, facilitated by data, is needed to address challenges in the labour market.

One participant noted the potential role of the LMO as a tool that bridges the gap between local and central government. By representing the needs of smaller organisations and communities, the LMO could serve as a policy voice, ensuring the local perspectives are integrated into broader government strategies.

Despite this potential, there are significant barriers to fully utilising data. One participant expressed concern over the ad hoc and limited nature of local data collection, noting that, while the potential for data use exists, it is often not fully realised due to structural and cultural challenges within organisations. They specifically pointed to the LMO's potential to play a more localised role in delivering services and supporting market programmes but acknowledged that these opportunities are not being fully explored. As they explained:

*'In terms of the local data, I think, it's very limited and ad hoc in terms of how that's done. I'll begin by thinking around the LMO should be that function to set that a very localised approach in terms of how to deliver services or a different market programmes... I think there's a scope, especially in Belfast, that we would have a lot of permission there, especially with other departments and central government being over here. We just really haven't asked for help properly. I don't think we have really used the data there to support programme authority and service delivery properly.'*

**- Gareth Downey, Belfast City Council**

Moreover, the limitations imposed by the structure of government and decision-making in Northern Ireland further complicates the strategic use of data. One participant pointed out that these structural

barriers could stifle the potential impact of data-driven initiatives on policy, raising concerns about how these constraints might limit their ultimate impact.

To improve the strategic use of data in policymaking, local data can be better integrated into government strategies, facilitating stronger collaboration between local and central governments. The LMO could help to integrate local perspectives into policy discussions, especially in areas such as service design and employment initiatives. Moreover, addressing structural and cultural barriers within organisations will help to make better use of available data.

## Recommendations

If we knew.../If we had...	We would be able to...
<b>If we knew</b> we had the trust of the agency to follow a standard data-sharing approach...	...we wouldn't need to repeatedly ask for data, especially at the privacy level, and could avoid many of the obstacles.
<b>If we had</b> asked the right questions, especially regarding economic inactivity, and engaged more with data suppliers like the Department of Health...	...we would be able to make better use of existing datasets – such as census data and family structures – that we haven't fully explored to address employment challenges in Belfast.
<b>If we had</b> better coordination between services and employers...	...we would be able to improve success rates as the key gap seems to be in aligning incentives and ensuring employers understand the available support.
<b>If we had</b> a clearer understanding of the services available and which programmes are most effective for different cohorts of economically inactive individual...	...we would be able to better target interventions. For example, knowing that older, economically inactive clients with long-term health issues may benefit from part-time work or volunteering would allow us to tailor support to their specific needs, leading to long-term benefits for both the individuals' health and well-being, as well as societal outcomes.
<b>If we knew</b> that we had access to the right skills and resources...	...we would be able to bridge the knowledge gap and make more effective decisions.
<b>If we knew</b> why more young people were becoming economically inactive...	...we would be able to develop more targeted programmes and explore additional support measures, including engaging key stakeholders like the Department of Health to address unmet needs in a more coordinated way.
<b>If we knew</b> the extent to which mental health challenges contribute to economic inactivity...	...we would be able to design better-targeted mental health services and integrate them into existing programmes to support individuals in returning to work or other productive activities.
<b>If we had</b> better collaboration between departments, such as Health, Communities, and Economy...	...we would be able to create integrated programmes that address the link between health and employability, ensuring resources are more effectively allocated to support those facing barriers to employment.

As our work across the partners has shown, local government stands at an important moment where the better and more effective use of data has the potential to significantly improve community development and policy outcomes. Drawing insights from different stakeholders across Belfast and reflecting on broader

challenges and supporting the policy steers outlined at the beginning of this case study, we make the following recommendations to maximise the potential impact of data-informed policymaking in Belfast.

Firstly, improving data accessibility and usability through creating a Labour Market Observatory for Belfast will increase the ability of the City Council, its partners, businesses and community organisations to drive forward economic and community development. Platforms such as these, by providing data in user-friendly formats, can empower stakeholders to make informed decisions that can drive local employment growth and community resilience.

Secondly, promoting transparency and collaboration in data sharing requires the development of standardised data-sharing frameworks and agreements. The creation of the LMO should be accompanied by the encouragement of data sharing among departments, businesses, and community organisations while addressing privacy and security concerns. Adopting open data practices can improve policy effectiveness, enabling all stakeholders to contribute to and benefit from shared resources.

Sustainability is another concern, and the LMO requires dedicated long-term funding for it to be a success. The sustainability of data-driven initiatives like the LMO depends on long-term funding. We therefore urge the implementation of stable funding models to maintain partnerships and ensure continuous data collection and analysis. Allocating resources for training analysts and policymakers in data interpretation further supports evidence-based decision-making and maximises the impact of these initiatives.

Our work also showed that outdated and incomplete data poses significant barriers to effective policymaking. We therefore suggest that the implementation of the LMO is accompanied by investment in more frequent and comprehensive data collection efforts, especially in critical areas like health, social care, and employment. Real-time data enables tailored services and timely interventions, ensuring that policies remain responsive to changing conditions.

Lastly, active stakeholder engagement will strengthen policy outcomes by incorporating diverse perspectives. We support the use of data-supported explanations such as dashboards to both help take and justify policy decisions to foster transparency and trust, thus ensuring stronger community buy-in and effective implementation. We also suggest Belfast City Council hosts regular town hall-style meetings where community members, businesses, and organisations can share insights and provide feedback on the operation of the LMO.

The creation of a Labour Market Observatory for Belfast can be the catalyst for a step-change in the way in which data is used across the city. We believe that in doing so in accordance with the above steers and recommendations gives the Council, its partners and the wider community the best chance of harnessing the power of data to improve policymaking, leading ultimately to better outcomes for the city's residents.

## Conclusion

**Our substantive conclusions are outlined in the overall key findings and policy recommendations of this project, starting from page 6 of this report.**

These, together with the wealth of information contained within the five case studies, are formulated with the intention of being helpful towards a single goal: embedding more robust, data-informed approaches in policy and decision-making.

From energy planning to the labour market, and devolution to combating health inequalities, our case studies demonstrate how building the right *capacity* and *capability* to create, use and maintain data at the local level can lead to better and more responsive policy, as well as its ultimate corollary – better social outcomes.

As we have outlined, our recommendations dovetail with the UK national government's retention of the National Data Strategy. We welcome the proposed National Data Library initiative to centralise public data discovery and suggest that it be used to implement our top-line recommendation to institute a national data repository, including a potential role for an overarching data strategy to facilitate local governance and encourage investments in maintaining local **data cultures**.

We also scoped the majority of our overarching key findings and policy recommendations to be applicable to regional or local authority across the country. We suggest our topline steer of using existing powers to implement data-sharing agreements can have a potentially transformative effect in removing data silos and allowing more collaborative, data-led decision making.

Finally, in light of the new UK government's devolution agenda – including the imminent publication of the English Devolution White Paper – we believe the implementation of these steers at the local and regional level will also help deliver more comparable national data.

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Belfast  
City Council

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