

Devolved and place- based academic-policy engagement: **2024 Reflections**

Opportunities, challenges and
next steps

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UPEN Devolved and Regional Sub-
Committee

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Additional thanks to:

UPEN Devolved and Regional Sub-Committee
Members

Attendees of the UPEN Annual Conferences and the
Devolved & Regional Conference

Panelists across all UPEN events on devolved and
place-based academic-policy engagement

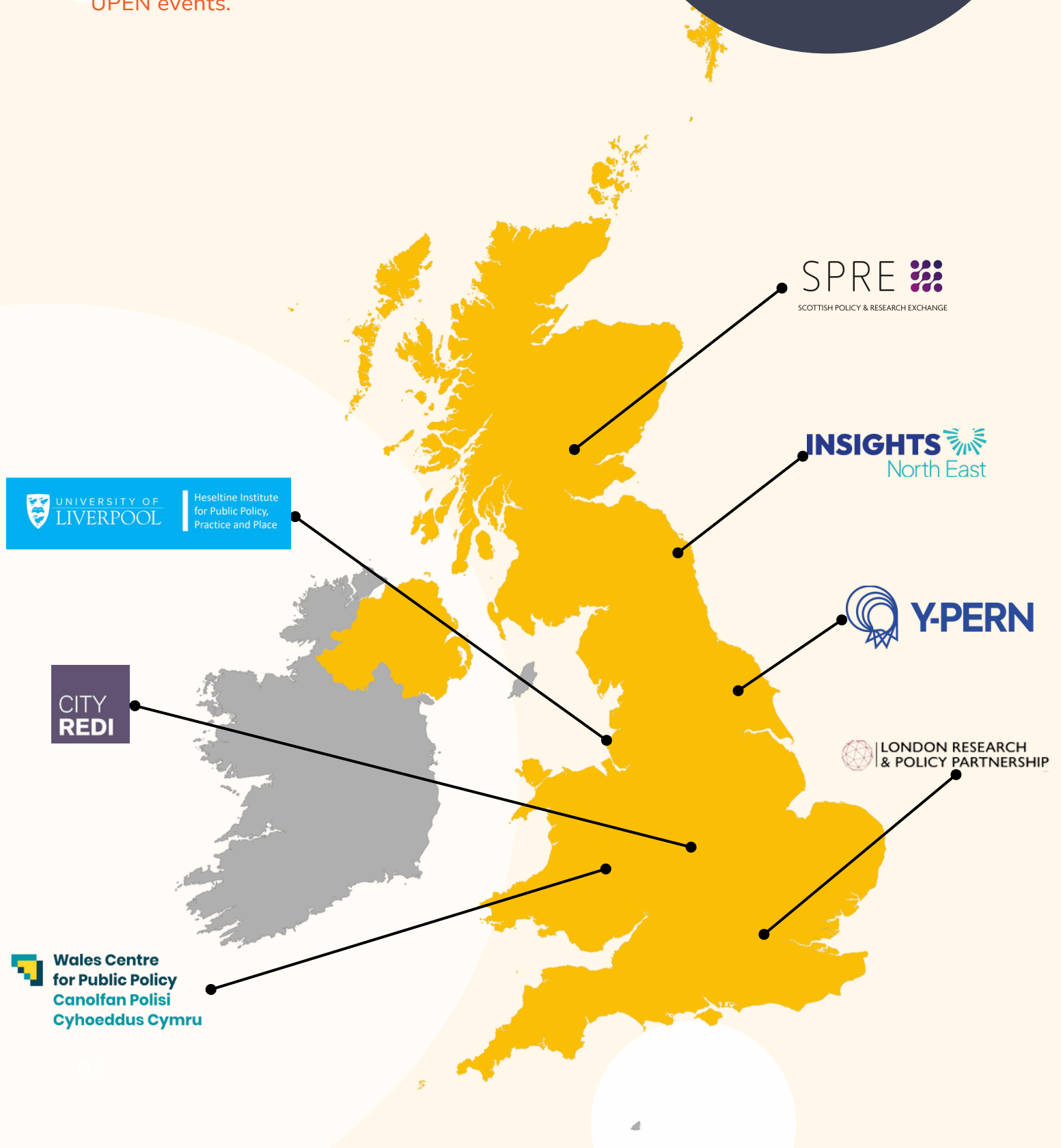




Overview

Figure 1 provides a brief overview of some of the devolved & place-based initiatives represented at UPEN events.

Further reading
For further information on the below initiatives, we recommend reading [Building a National Agenda for Regional Academic Policy Engagement \(CAPE, 2024\)](#), & [The Devolved & Place-based Landscape \(UPEN, 2024\)](#)





Introduction

With the new government announcing the establishment of a Council for the Nations and Regions, we reflect on the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN)'s recent events on devolution, evidence informed policymaking, and academic policy engagement. By reflecting on our members' learnings so far on the opportunities and challenges for supporting place-based policy making, we identify next steps for devolved and place-based academic policy engagement. We hope to provide a sense of where we – universities, funders, place-based and devolved authorities – can go next.

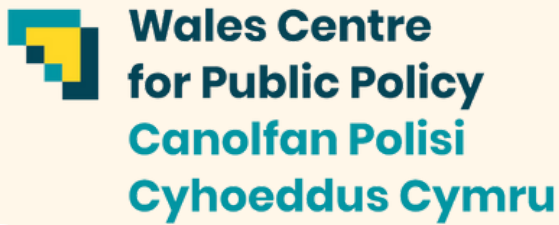
UPEN brings UK University knowledge mobilisers, academics, research funders and policymakers together to exchange experiences of academic-policy engagement practice to help solve the multifaceted and interdependent social, economic and environmental challenges we face. At UPEN conferences, fringe events or online meetings, there is always a clear and present focus on the opportunities and challenges presented by devolution and decentralisation of policymaking within the UK.

The 2023 UPEN annual conference at the University of Birmingham on the future of knowledge mobilisation brought together a panel of UPEN members representing four, more established, place-based and devolved academic policy engagement initiatives to share their approaches, surface the common opportunities, key considerations and challenges for knowledge mobilisation, and outline some next steps for innovating and sustaining evidence-informed policymaking infrastructure.

This year's 2024 annual conference at the University of York focused on connecting and collaborating across the UK academic-policy engagement landscape, included an inspiring keynote address from Kersten England (Co-Director of YPIP and Y-PERN and Chair of The Young Foundation) and an enlightening panel on place-based policymaking. Kersten spoke of the tremendous challenges facing local government across the UK as it directly responds to the big issues we face. But, she also spoke with hope about the opportunities afforded by closer academic-policy engagement to inform the solutions.

UPEN's Devolved & Regional Fringe Conference at Leeds Beckett University in July this year brought together seven initiatives from across the UK to reflect on their models, impacts and key learnings. We also heard from funders, including Research England and ESRC, and local policy makers on the future of devolution, the need to understand what's working well, what's challenging, and where we need to go next, together.

These UPEN events on place-based policymaking fuelled our imagination of what is possible by offering examples of what is working in a range of place-based academic-policy-community collaborations. **This mini-report reflects on the discussion at these events.**



The Wales Centre for Public Policy is an evidence centre based at Cardiff University. It is co-funded by Welsh Government and the ESRC to support Welsh Government and public services across Wales to access and apply independent evidence in decision-making. The Centre works with research experts from across the UK and internationally to understand the economic, social, and environmental challenges that Wales faces, and supports policy makers identify the best ways to solve them. It is a member of the UK's What Works Network.

**UPEN contact: [Dr Hannah Durrant](#),
Programme Director**



Insights North East is a collaboration, launched in 2023, between Newcastle and Northumbria Universities, North of Tyne Combined Authority, Newcastle City Council, and the NHS, to harness the investment in research and regional assets for the long-term benefit of the North East region. The team works to produce accessible and actionable insights to inform policy and develop the capacity and capability of policymakers and academics for regional policy evidence engagement. It is funded and supported by Research England.

UPEN contact: [Liz Shutt](#), Programme Director



The Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network aims to enhance and deepen collaboration across the 18 Yorkshire & Humber local authorities and the 12 Yorkshire Universities. Established in 2022, the objective is to develop a step-change in how policy and place-based research collaborate to develop place-based policies. This is achieved through a team of 11 policy fellows spread across the region working between the universities and policy organisations.

UPEN contact: [Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett](#), Senior Programme Manager



The Heseltine Institute brings together academic expertise from across the University with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions. Taking a Liverpool City Region perspective, the Institute acts as a channel for evidence-led policy interventions crucial to urban areas. This is done through its leading, convening, brokering and informing activities through collaborative partnerships.

UPEN Contact: [Sue Jarvis](#), Co-Director



SCOTTISH POLICY & RESEARCH EXCHANGE



The Scottish Policy & Research Exchange works with research, knowledge mobilisation and policy communities to improve how evidence and expertise shapes policy. An independent charity, SPRE supports the Scottish research-policy landscape by placing values, equity, learning and improvement at the root of their activities. Key areas of work include relationship and network building, dissemination of opportunities, learning events and resources, and developing innovations in knowledge mobilisation practice.

UPEN contact: [Dave Blackbell](#), Co-Director

City-REDI was established by the University of Birmingham to support regional economic growth through engaged and relevant research. They are also home to the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute, which supports inclusive growth in the West Midlands and across the UK. The University of Birmingham also leads the [Local Policy Innovation Partnership \(LPIP\) Hub](#).

UPEN contact: [Dr Bec Riley](#), Co-Director, City-REDI & Director of the LPIP Hub



LONDON RESEARCH & POLICY PARTNERSHIP



The London Research and Policy Partnership forges long-term, strategic alliances between London’s 40 universities and policy making communities. It prioritises actions across various policy agendas that help policymakers reach decisions and deliver tangible outcomes. LRaPP’s activities include demonstration projects, research commissions and joint initiatives. Based on trustful and enduring relationships between academia and London government, LRaPP promotes experimentation and innovation.

UPEN contact: [Ben Rogers](#), Professor of Practice



Opportunities: No shortage of demand

The experiences that our members shared from their different initiatives highlight considerable demand from place-based, regional and devolved policymakers, public services, universities and beyond for academic-policy engagement. This demand was reinforced by Kersten England in her keynote address and by panel members on place-based policymaking at the 2024 UPEN Conference.

The impetus for political devolution and decentralisation of decision-making in key policy areas is to enable governments at different scales to take decisions in response to common challenges, but in distinct ways.

Whether the issue is the rising cost of living, health inequalities, net zero or inclusive growth, it's not just a case of knowing what works, but what works where.

Place-based regionally contextualised evidence is needed to support policymakers and public services respond to nuances in how challenges manifest and make use of the strengths and assets of the places they serve. Mechanisms for place-based academic-policy engagement provide a vital knowledge resource, particularly where other resources, such as local government research services, have been 'hollowed out' by multiple rounds of austerity.

For universities, these initiatives and collaborations [offer one of the most direct and accessible routes to academic-policy engagement](#) and impact. Many have emerged in the context of wider civic missions and are rooted in institutional commitments to work in partnership with local policymakers, communities and business to make a valuable contribution to place.

As higher education is becoming more proactive in seeking to coproduce research with and for the users of that research, so too policymakers recognise the need for evidence and new ideas that come from the intersection of research, community and business perspectives.

These initiatives and place-based collaborations are often well-placed to convene inclusive spaces for policy deliberation. Contributions from [Emily Morrison](#) from the [Institute for Community Studies](#) at the 2024 annual conference called for these spaces to value the contribution of lived experience evidence for better policymaking.

Given the opportunities for academic policy engagement that this demand creates, the questions for many UPEN members, policymakers and research funders at each event were what can we learn from these initiatives and collaborations about the key ingredients for this work, and what are the challenges they face now and for the future.



Key ingredients for place-based and devolved academic-policy engagement

Valuing knowledge mobilisers

Policymakers within local, regional and devolved governments have limited capacity and skill for academic engagement, particularly given intensifying pressures on their workloads and budgets. Likewise, many academics lack capacity and skills for policy engagement.

In this context, UPEN members discussed the vital role played by knowledge mobilisers, employed within academic-policy engagement initiatives, to 'work between the worlds' by understanding evidence needs, brokering academic evidence (alongside other forms of evidence and expertise), and translating the relevance for policy. They often have a mix of policy, research or consultancy backgrounds, and a range of job titles that signal expertise in evidence synthesis, policy communications, policy engagement and research impact.

While, they rarely fit neatly into university career paths, their value is increasingly being recognised and funded by universities, policy bodies and research councils. With the formation of UPEN these roles are gaining greater collective visibility but there is more to do to formalise them within universities. At the 2024 annual conference, Kersten England called for these mobilisers to codesign processes of academic-policy engagement, that are participatory rather than transactional.

Innovative, collaborative practice

UPEN members described the need to be innovative, explorative and agile in their practice of academic-policy engagement; adopting experimental, learning by doing, and reflective approaches, that recognises how much there is still to learn about the best methods of knowledge mobilisation and coproduction.

This point was reinforced by contributors at the 2024 annual and fringe conference where novel approaches to place-based academic-policy-community collaboration in Nottingham (e.g., the Co(l)aboratory PhD Programme), Leeds (e.g., developing local Areas of Research Interest) and across the UK were shared.

UPEN members acknowledged the time needed to be able to work effectively in this way to ensure it reflected local needs, capacity and resourcing. As Kersten England and Emily Morrison emphasised, collaborating with and convening research and policy, alongside community and business knowledge and expertise, to solve place-based challenges requires building and sustaining trusted relationships on all sides, which requires moving away from short-term funding-led partnerships.



Maintaining independence

UPEN members acknowledged that evidence produced through academic research may not always meet policymakers needs, be politically resonant and it may not be the primary influence on policy decisions.

The relevance of research evidence can be enhanced where that research is coproduced and politically contextualised and mobilised alongside community and business perspectives.

However, academic-policy engagement initiatives must be trusted to bring rigorous research to the table and to engage on the basis of the evidence. This requires – as Kersten England emphasised – actively engaging with the politics of place while maintaining independence, and accepting that research evidence is only ever one factor among many that informs political decisions.





What are the challenges and next steps: developing capacity, connections and learning

Equitable and sustainable resourcing that values academic-policy engagement and those that do it

A key challenge for place-based academic-policy engagement raised by UPEN members across the events, is a lack of resource and capacity on all sides, but particularly for policymaking bodies. This combined with the asymmetric nature of devolution (where devolved powers are not the same across regions and nations), results in an inequitable distribution of capacity and resourcing for academic policy engagement across the UK.

Recent investments in knowledge mobilisation have been heavily one sided - to the benefit of universities – whilst local authorities and regional governance structures (such as Combined Authorities) struggle with under resourcing and unclear policy levers, leading to firefighting and a lack of bandwidth for new ideas and innovation. This is a challenge if seeking to support partnership ways of working, and runs the risk of repeating bad practices – short term transactional engagements with communities which breaks down trust and relationships in the long run.

But even then, only some universities (the minority of UPEN members) benefit from these investments, and – given the resource is coming

predominantly from research funders – it remains short-term, unstable for those employed in these roles, and disrupts relationships when funding stops. This risks deepening inequalities at an individual level (across career pathways), at a sector level (across universities) and across regions, as capacity to support knowledge mobilisation resides in only a few institutions and places.

Whilst these inequalities and precarities are not unique to knowledge mobilisation at place-based and devolved levels, they make what should be more accessible and sought after opportunities for policy impact harder. UPEN members stressed the need to build long-term capacity within the academic-policy engagement ecosystem to support knowledge mobilisation at place-based and devolved levels.

This requires broadening out funding and putting this funding on a firm footing within universities and policy bodies.

In addition, it needs to support those regions without funding – those universities without a ‘home’ region – and those universities where their value offer to policy is not just about research, but draws on the value their institution brings to their region, such as through teaching and learning.



In the meantime, UPEN universities and the sector as a whole, needs to build knowledge mobilisation careers into our academic and policy institutions, while continuing to develop, train and learn from past experience.

This is a key area of work for UPEN as a whole, particularly supported by the Professional Development Committee, the Devolved & Regional Subcommittee and the Equity Diversity and Inclusion committee.

Cross-initiative collaboration and learning

Panel members recognised that where place-based and devolved policy engagement initiatives have been established, they can run the risk of becoming so focused on their place that they miss opportunities to collaborate with and learn from others.

That a local authority in West Yorkshire may have similar policy needs to one in Lancashire, the Midlands or Wales, shouldn't be overlooked. Equally, the best expertise is not always located in the place where policy is being developed. Learning relevant to place-based policymaking may exist across regions, nations and internationally but interpreting that learning in context takes place-based expertise and brokerage.

Similarly, innovations in place-based and devolved policy engagement may have value to other places, and initiatives and collaborations could benefit from sharing and learning from practice elsewhere. There is a need for active reflection on and communication of the lessons from place-based and devolved academic-policy engagement leadership, and to build opportunities for cross-initiative dialogue.

UPEN has an important role to play in convening and broadening the networks that enable this exchange, and joining up to build capacity and capability. UPEN is collaborating with key partners across the sector, including the Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) Strategic Coordinating Hub, to ensure best practice and learning is shared and connected between initiatives.

Changing landscape

With the Labour government signalling a continuation of devolution and through the swift establishment of the Council for Regions and Nations, comprising the heads of the devolved administrations and the mayors of the combined authorities, there's a strong opportunity for UPEN members to engage with devolution agenda.

In particular, in ensuring that devolution and evidence informed policy making continues to evolve and works.

This is increasingly pressing, as the Higher Education sector continues to face significant financial challenges, with the current wave of redundancies rippling across partnerships, and with greater pressure on universities to prioritise revenue-generating endeavours.

With the majority of UPEN members on fixed term contracts, there is real risk that this evolving and impactful area of university work comes under threat.

As the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Engagement and Place at Newcastle University Prof Jane Robinson advocated at the Devolved & Regional Fringe Conference, policy engagement work needs to be seen as core to the university's mission and way of working. This is also underpinned by UKRI's Executive Champion for Place and Research England Executive Chair, Prof Dame Jessica Corner's work on [developing an investment strategy for places](#).

The UPEN Devolved & Regional committee will play an important role here in engaging with government and supporting the agenda to support place-based agenda through connecting across universities and keeping policy engagement on the agenda.



Conclusion

Universities, policy bodies and funders have shown that devolved and place-based academic-policy engagement is an activity they value and want to support, but there is still much to be done to develop, secure and enhance how this is done.

We look forward to further discussions, events and collaborations with UPEN members, policy partners and place-based initiatives, to further our understanding on what is still needed and needed next to sustain, learn from and maximise the impact of this practice, which holds such hope for better place-based and devolved policymaking.

The UPEN Devolved & Regional Committee will host its next conference in Birmingham, Spring 2025. Follow UPEN or subscribe to the newsletter for further updates.



About the Sub-Committee

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) was set up in 2018 by a small group of universities. It now has more than 100 UK university and policy relevant organisations as members.

Our membership comprises knowledge brokers, impact officers and academics who are interesting in strengthening academic-policy engagement. The network is entirely voluntary.

UPEN's founding purpose was to make it easier for UK governments and legislatures to communicate their needs and opportunities with researchers by providing a 'one stop shop' through which opportunities can be shared more easily.

UPEN's activities include a weekly UPEN newsletter, strategic projects led by Vice-Chairs and Sub-Committees, an events programme, and a regular blog, as well as members' meetings and our annual conference.

Our co-chairs for UPEN currently are Andy Brown (University of Leeds), Sarah Chaytor (UCL), and Chris Hewson (University of York). Previous chairs are Matt Flinders (University of Sheffield), Stephen Meek (University of Nottingham) and Gavin Costigan (University of Southampton).

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) Devolved & Regional Sub-Committee was set up to connect the growing number of place and region focused initiatives that support academic policy engagement.

The Sub-Committee membership comprises knowledge brokers, impact officers and academics who are interested in strengthening academic-policy engagement. The network is entirely voluntary and is represented by UKRI funded and non-funded initiatives.

The Sub-Committee meets regularly, and hosts events and blogs to share its wider work.

Our co-chairs for UPEN Devolved & Regional Sub-Committee are Bec Riley (University of Birmingham) and Cami Dijkstra (Leeds Beckett University).



To join the network or get in touch, email secretariat@upen.ac.uk



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Acknowledgements

UPEN Devolved and Regional Conference 2024 Panel 1 - Devolution and academic policy engagement: the lessons so far

Dr Hannah Durrant
Cardiff University

Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett
University of Leeds

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Newcastle University

Sue Jarvis
University of Liverpool

Ben Rogers
University of London

Dave Blackbell
Scottish Policy & Research Exchange

Bec Riley
University of Birmingham

And Leeds Beckett University for hosting this conference.

Panel 2 - Academic Policy Engagament: Building sustainability & resilience

Dr James Canton
ESRC

Sarah Chaytor
UCL, UPEN Co-Chair

Dr Rommany Jenkins
Research England

Professor David Sweeney
University of Birmingham

Prof Jane Robinson
Newcastle University

UPEN Staff

Laura Bea
Network Manager

Jade Harris
Policy and Communications

Panel 3 - The Future of Devolution and the role of Universities

Felix Kumi-Ampofo
West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Dr Andy Mycock
University of Leeds/Y-PERN

Kersten England
Bradford Culture Company

UPEN Annual Conference May 2024 - Panel on Place-based policymaking

Juliet Jopson
University of Leeds

Rich Pickford
Nottingham Trent University

Jon Gleek
Doncaster Council

Emily Morrison
Institute for Community Studies

Megan Wade
ESRC

The University of York for hosting the 2024 conference, and the University of Birmingham for hosting the 2023 Conference.

UPEN Annual Conference May 2023 - Panel on Place-base

Dr Hannah Durrant, WCPP

Prof Steve Martin, Cardiff University

Kayleigh Renberg Fawcett, CAPE

Liz Shutt, Insights North East

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UPEN Members

Our membership currently sits at over 110 institutional and non HEI members. Our members are the powerhouse and heart of UPEN.





UPEN Members

