P254 / Local government and policy innovation in health policy and beyond.

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

Chair : Benjamin Hawkins (University of Cambridge)

Second Chair : Nancy Karreman (University of Cambridge)

Third Chair : Amber van den Akker (University of Bath)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Local governance systems have emerged as important sites of policy innovation in health and wider public policy debates. Importantly, they can also serve as incubators for innovative, and sometimes radical, policy ideas. For example, local jurisdictions have been key actors in the implementation of interventions to improve health outcomes (e.g., developing policies on air quality, active transportation, and access to nutritious food). Local governments have also adopted innovative approaches to local economic development and community wealth building, utilising the powers at their disposal such as public procurement, commissioning and investment) (Rose et al., 2023). On the other hand, local innovation can lead to geographical asymmetries, for example in health service provision and outcomes, raising important questions about health equity at the national level. Similarly, the possibility for local action can introduce new burdens on local-level actors and create additional calls on already constrained resources.

The potential for locally-driven innovations to move beyond the *status quo*, or to break policy equilibria, has often exceeded that at the national level, and so can be an important vehicle for policy innovation and spillover both horizontally and vertically. At the same time, there is a tension between the potential for ‘bottom-up’ policy entrepreneurship at a local government level, and the institutional and political factors which shape and constrain local decision-making from above, including multi-level governance structures, funding streams and political cycles. Differences in mandates, structures and ways of working within local government mean that policy officers must potentially navigate both horizontal and vertical challenges.

Policy innovation can occur within the context of federal systems or through other forms of devolution to the regional and local levels. Existing scholarship documents the role of policy entrepreneurship and policy learning in driving local policy innovation, and resistance to this by commercial actors and other vested interests (e.g., Daly et al., 2026; Lauber et al., 2021). Scholars have also explored the role of ‘the local’ in addressing global challenges from different disciplinary perspectives and in different substantive policy areas such as health, climate, and economic development while adopting a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g. Gaffney, 2025). This panel aims to build on previous research focused on health policy making in the UK through comparative analysis with other areas of public policy and policy contexts. It seeks to encourage nuanced and theoretically-informed approaches to the study of local policy action, to examine the local level as a site of policy innovation and entrepreneurship from different perspectives and across polities, to understand the interactions with, and constrains placed on local policy actors by, central governments, and to spark comparative analyses between policy areas beyond health.

References

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CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel seeks to explore the interconnection between local and national government in policy innovation, focussing on the ways in which local government can be a site of policy entrepreneurship and contestation which can in turn impact national and even supranational policy debates and outcomes. At the same time, we recognise and seek to examine the structural, political and economic constraints placed on local policy actors from above, within complex and varied systems of multi-level governance. Emerging from a focus on health policy in the UK, we are keen to foster comparative analysis between health and other areas of public policy, and between the dynamics of multi-level governance in policy-making contexts in the UK and in different political systems.

We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers across any area of public policy, which engage with local-level policy innovation and entrepreneurship, multi-level governance and policy spillover, horizontally and/or vertically. This may examine how local policy developments have come to shape national policy debates and policy outcomes or even global policy agendas. At the same time, studies of the constraints placed on local policy innovation by national (and supra-national) policy structures fall within the remit of the panel. We especially encourage comparative analyses across policy issues, political systems and policy-making contexts.

We are keen to encourage conceptually or theoretically innovative and interdisciplinary papers on unresearched polities and/or policy issues. This may include contributions on the role of commercial and other interest groups within the policy making process and how they navigate and coordinate their activities across multiple levels of governance, (see, for example, Ralston and Hawkins 2026). Similarly, incorporating an explicitly local lens for policy analysis to explore decision-making and networks across decision-making may also prove fruitful (Reeve et al., 2015).

Potential substantive policy issues to explore could include national planning and policy frameworks; the role of economic reforms and austerity in constraining local policy innovation; fluctuating capacity and resources at different levels of governance, and interconnection of local and national government in the field of economic regeneration (see e.g., Theodore, 2020; Mavrot & Sager, 2024).

References

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