

Building Intergovernmental Capability Through Secondments: Lessons from Japan for the UK

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This briefing explores how England's devolution reforms could work more effectively by using staff secondments as a core part of the delivery system. It focuses on learning for the UK from Japan in terms of how secondments (referred to in Japan as staff transfer systems, but described here as secondments) can operate as a practical lever for strengthening devolution and improving delivery across scales.

Drawing on lessons from Japan's structured, legally grounded approach, it shows how predictable and reciprocal staff movement can strengthen local capability, improve coordination across government tiers, and connect national policy design with local operational realities. The briefing identifies persistent challenges, such as unclear accountability, capacity gaps and fragmented learning. It argues that well designed secondment frameworks can help address these by moving expertise to where it is needed and building the relationships that make collaboration work. It concludes that mobility improves multi-level governance when it is planned, supported and evaluated as part of devolution's operating model. The following is a summary of the key points of the report.



Key finding: Secondments across tiers of government can strengthen governance by boosting capacity and improving coordination

Staff secondment frameworks across tiers of government can help address recurring governance challenges. Accountability weakens when roles and decision rights are unclear. Capacity gaps persist when places inherit responsibilities without the specialist skills to use devolved powers effectively. Coordination is undermined when functional geographies do not match administrative boundaries. Learning is slowed by short funding cycles, fragmented programmes and weak feedback loops.



Key takeaway

Prioritise reciprocity and system learning. Two-way movement improves policy design and strengthens delivery by ensuring experience flows in both directions.

Standardise where it improves fairness and effectiveness. Set clear expectations on objectives, duration, induction, handover, and evaluation to reduce inconsistency and widen access.



Key finding: Staff secondments work best as structured delivery infrastructure enabling sustained cross-agency coordination

Our analysis shows that staff secondments add most value when treated as delivery infrastructure, not as ad hoc fixes or primarily as individual development opportunities. Well-designed secondments move knowledge and expertise to where it is needed, connect policy design with operational realities, and build professional networks that make joint working more consistent. These benefits matter most in policy domains with shared responsibilities and complex delivery chains, where outcomes depend on sustained coordination.



Key takeaway

Make secondments a strategic instrument of devolution. Design frameworks to build local capability, support shared priorities, and enable effective working across tiers.



Key finding: Secondments enhance collaboration but cannot replace clear mandates and proper resourcing

Staff secondments cannot substitute for clear mandates about who decides, who funds, who delivers and who is accountable, or for adequate resourcing. They can, however, improve system performance by strengthening the human capabilities and relationships that make collaboration work in practice.



Key takeaway

Secondments can strengthen collaboration, but they cannot compensate for unclear mandates or inadequate resources.

Build in safeguards and sustainability. Protect local autonomy, manage impacts on individuals, and leave capability behind through knowledge capture and succession planning.



Key finding: multi-level governance improves when staff movement is planned, supported, and evaluated as part of devolution's operating model.

The UK and Japan offer complementary lessons. The UK demonstrates flexibility and innovation in workforce movement, alongside risks of uneven practice and unequal access to expertise. Japan shows the value of systematic pathways that connect tiers and normalise the circulation of experience, while also underscoring the importance of transparency, clear objectives and protections against over-centralisation or the erosion of local priorities, so mobility reinforces rather than weakens local autonomy.



Key takeaway

Measure contribution of secondments to outcomes, not just activity. Track improvements in joint decision-making, pace of delivery, local capability, and results for communities.

