



Year 2 Regional Report

# CONNECTING THE REGION THROUGH UNIVERSITY POLICY ENGAGEMENT






# INTRODUCTION


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We are delighted to introduce this report summarising Y-PERN’s activity to date. In the current conjuncture, where Universities are quite rightly being asked to offer increasing support for regional development, we believe that Y-PERN offers a shining example of how Universities can support local and regional policy making in a genuinely collaborative and inclusive way.

The Y-PERN report evidences in detail how Yorkshire and the Humber is leading the way in regional academic policy engagement, and suggests how Universities can support multi-level governance for inclusive and sustainable growth. Let us continue to work together across the region for the benefit of the places we live in, work in & call home.

 **Andrew Brown**  
Y-PERN Academic Director

 **Kersten England CBE**  
Y-PERN Engagement Director

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) is transforming the way university academics and knowledge exchange experts work with policy partners across the region.**

In doing so, Y-PERN is supporting local and combined authorities in multi-level governance and joined-up policymaking across Yorkshire and the Humber and nationally. It is also facilitating the new UK Government in inclusively delivering English devolution, a modern industrial strategy, and its plans for change.

Our Year Two regional report highlights Y-PERN’s extensive activities over the past year, reflecting on what we have learnt about our impact and value, and outlining some of our key successes in the past year, including:

- More than doubling investment into the region to facilitate academic-policy engagement through the £5M ESRC-AHRC-Innovate funded ‘Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership’ (YPIP).
- The adoption of a ground-breaking inclusive place-based and democratic approach to policy and community engagement based on shifting and sharing power for action and change
- Implementing systems-thinking across local and regional policymaking, including local growth plans and diverse areas of policy including early years education and childcare, skills strategies, and female entrepreneurship.
- Working with local and combined authorities across the region to support systems-based approaches to evidenced-based policymaking and intra-region policy transfer and scaling.
- Adopting a ‘live laboratory’ approach to enhance understanding and evaluation of devolution across region, working with both established and emerging combined authorities to explore how to adopt an evidence-based approach to widening and deepening devolution.
- Collaborating across partner universities and local and combined authorities to support the development of multi-level frameworks of Areas of Research Interest.

- Building capacity and resources to support enhanced academic-policy engagement across the Y-PERN network, drawing university and government knowledge engagement and brokerage expertise and networks.

- Providing leadership in academic policy-engagement at the national level, with team members co-leading the UK-wide University Policy Engagement Network, and delivering of impactful national conferences, seminars, roundtables, reports, and blogs.

- Evaluating and evidencing Y-PERN’s value and impacts with our university and governmental partners, public and private sector stakeholders, civil society organisations, and communities to build inclusive, sustainable, and resilient academic-policy engagement infrastructures and systems to better address the policy challenges of today and tomorrow.

Looking ahead, the report stresses the imperative for Y-PERN to continue break down silos and forge new connections, for example in collaborations on wider determinants of health and on environment, thereby to further expand its support for the UK Government’s missions.

# 1 — AN INTRODUCTION TO Y-PERN

The [Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network \(Y-PERN\)](#) is transforming the way academic researchers and knowledge exchange experts in twelve universities work in partnership with policymakers across the region. It is enabling sustainable and resilient academic-policy engagement that maximises the flow of research and expertise into public policy. Y-PERN supports multi-level governance and joined-up policymaking across Yorkshire and the Humber and nationally, harnessing and expanding policy engagement ‘network infrastructure’ to utilise the region’s world-leading academic data, evidence, expertise, and analytics in real-time and for the long-term.

Y-PERN is a key element in the operationalisation of the [Memorandum of Understanding between Yorkshire Universities and Yorkshire and Humber Councils](#) signed in 2021 to work in partnership in addressing the region’s economic, social, and environmental opportunities and challenges, including health and wellbeing, to deliver better outcomes for all our communities and places (see opposite for detail on Yorkshire Universities). This commitment to driving innovation in evidence-based policymaking is pioneering new ways to harness our region’s academic research and expertise.

Y-PERN is founded on a federal structure which means it is not embedded within a single university or institutional policy unit. It is based on four ‘sub-regions’ which relate to existing and emergent strategic Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs): South Yorkshire, East Yorkshire (including the new

Hull and East Riding Combined Authority), North Yorkshire (including York) and West Yorkshire. Each sub-region has a director and academic steering group, and there are eleven Policy Fellows who are based in universities across the region. Y-PERN facilitates interconnections between the constituent universities, and local and combined authorities of sub-regions, and ‘upwards’ to the Yorkshire and the Humber scale. Also consequently, beyond to national and international scales. Additionally Y-PERN connects to a wide range of communities and public and private sector stakeholders. A region-wide Y-PERN academic steering group, comprised of the sub-regional directors, provides oversight and strategic direction for the project.

A major success of Y-PERN in its first two years has been more than doubling the original investment into the region to facilitate academic-policy engagement through the £5M ESRC-AHRC-

Below:  
Y-PERN Policy Fellows



Above:  
YPIP launch

Innovate funded [‘Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership’ \(YPIP\)](#). This is the only [Local Policy Innovation Partnership \(LPIP\)](#) based in England and is part of a ground-breaking £23M UK-wide programme of academic-policy engagement, activity, and innovation. These pioneering investments in academic-policy engagement mean our region’s universities, working in partnership with our local and combined authorities, can better support the new UK Government in delivering [English devolution](#), [a modern industrial strategy](#), and its [plans for change](#).

The following report provides an overview of Y-PERN’s sub-regional and region-wide activities over the past year. The report also reflects on what we have learnt about Y-PERN’s impact and value, and next steps for the project in Year Three and the second phase of the project.

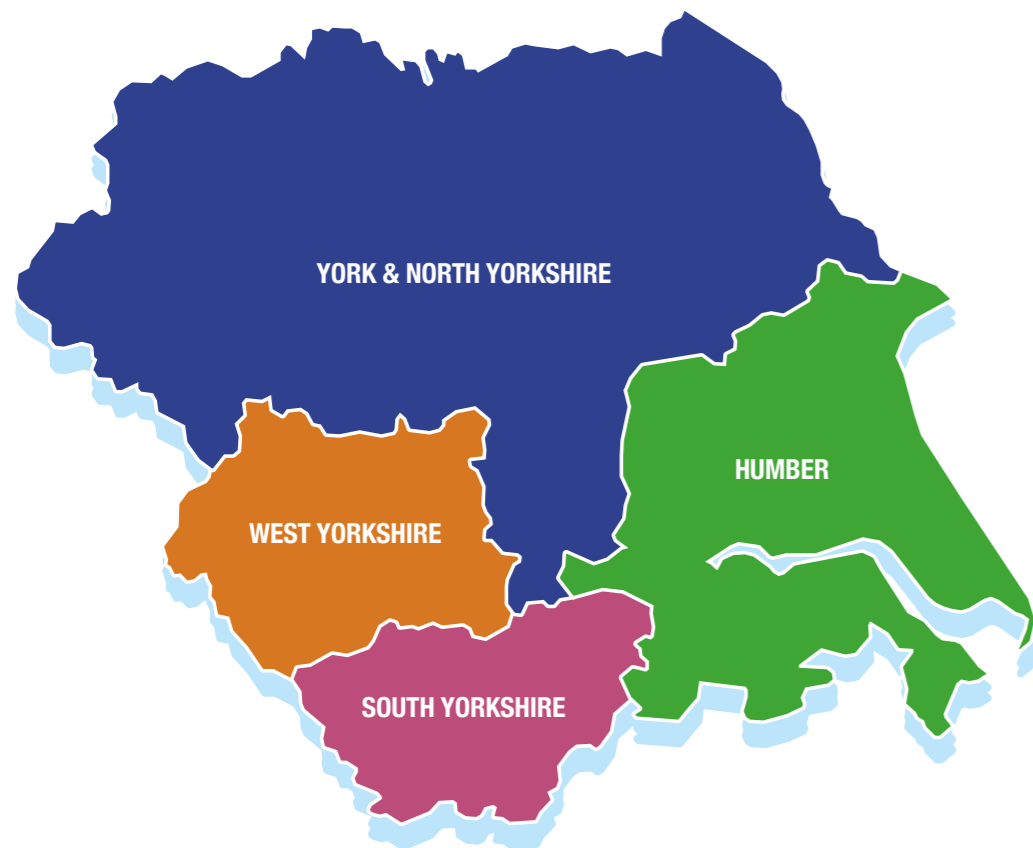


## YORKSHIRE UNIVERSITIES AND Y-PERN

Y-PERN and [Yorkshire Universities \(YU\)](#), a regional partnership of twelve universities, work closely together. Y-PERN is embedded within the existing YU infrastructure and provides a direct link to university leaders and diverse parts of the higher education sector, including knowledge exchange and professional services. YU has played a key role in amplifying the value and profile of Y-PERN - both within the region and beyond. As one of the key sponsors of Y-PERN, and with the YU Executive Director, Dr Peter O’Brien, also acting as Y-PERN Policy Director.

Major YU outputs in the past year, such as the [YHealth White Paper](#), published with [Health Innovation Yorkshire and Humber](#) and [NHS Confederation](#), have illustrated Y-PERN as an innovative example of regional collaboration between our universities and policymakers. Significantly, its partnership with YU has helped to ensure that Y-PERN featured in the [2024 Universities UK Blueprint](#), as part of a case study of YU, and that the HE sector ‘trade press’, such as [WonkHE](#), as well as regional press and media, including the Yorkshire Post, have communicated narratives about the value of Y-PERN, and its distinct network approach to academic policy engagement.

## 2 — HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FOUR YORKSHIRE & HUMBER REGIONS



Y-PERN publishes four annual sub-regional reports, which detail the multiple ways we have facilitated academic-policy engagement in collaboration with our local and combined authority partners. Our partners act as friends, building connections and convening collaborative networks with policymakers and public sector, business, think-tank and community stakeholders to offer a 'safe space' for discussion about policy and evidence. We support the co-writing and delivering reports, briefings, articles, forecasts, data, analytics, evaluations, horizon scanning, providing valuable advice on local and combined authority reports, policies, and strategies (such

as Local Growth Plans). Our sub-regional teams also broker relationships with central Government and Whitehall.

In the past year, we have hosted training on a wide-range of issues including devolution, community engagement, academic-policy engagement, the impact of AI, and writing for business. We also facilitated the timely and impactful dissemination of research and sharing best practice across the country and internationally, and supported collaborative grants and bid writing, placements, and secondments. *The following pages showcase some stand-out activities from our sub-regions.*



Above:  
A workshop on  
barriers to female  
entrepreneurship  
(York & North  
Yorkshire)

### Convening and connecting to support the new Mayoral Combined Authority

The Y-PERN programme commenced as the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA) was still being established and formalised. The University of York and York St John University have worked closely together through Y-PERN to provide a platform for academic engagement, helping to shape the new Combined Authority's strategy and policy through workshops, meetings, and roundtables with North Yorkshire Council, and the City of York Council. A key aspiration was the alignment of partner university research agendas with emergent policy, drawing on existing evidence bases and exploring new opportunities for collaborative and complementary work. Y-PERN colleagues now sit in the YNYCA offices and work side-by-side to establish clear communication and to develop efficient and effective ways of working. In this way, Y-PERN has established a partnership approach to engage with and feed into YNYCA policy and strategy by drawing on key research strengths across our universities.

### Female entrepreneurship research

The Y-PERN Policy Fellow based at the University of York has contributed to a project with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the two local authorities and new combined authority on female entrepreneurship. The project has involved the participation of many female entrepreneurs across York and North Yorkshire, with the aim to better understand the barriers and challenges they face and identify appropriate policy interventions. For example, the project identified the need for better transport connections to overcome a key barrier to female entrepreneurship. The project's initial summary report ([accessible here](#)) has informed the YNYCA local growth plan, thus shaping both the initial strategic stage of the policy cycle, while maximising research-to-policy impact and benefit over the long-term.

## EAST YORKSHIRE, HULL AND THE HUMBER



### Pioneering in community engagement

At the University of Hull, Y-PERN has fuelled the pioneering adoption of an inclusive and democratic approach to community engagement built on two interrelated aspects: relational engagement and shifting and sharing power for action and change. This approach co-creates equitable and relational encounters, starting from needs identified by community partners, then involving these partners throughout the research process (see for example, the [Ideas Fund](#) and [Risky Cities](#)). The Y-PERN team has co-delivered several academic-policy-community engagement projects, building trust and long-term relationships. These initiatives include the [Hull Poverty Truth Commission \(HPTC\)](#), Town Anywhere, the Water & Coasts Community Futures Network, and the work with Hull and East Riding Councils towards a Mayoral Combined Authority in 2025.

Evidence of the significant impact of this pioneering approach to community engagement has been the successful YPIP Phase One and Phase Two successes which has led to a further £5 million investment in the region. This has been supported by Y-PERN, with the University of Hull team leading on community engagement. The fundamental aim

of YPIP is to bring marginalised communities into academic and policy-related research and decision-making. The Y-PERN team at Hull has, furthermore, been able to expand community network relations for flood and climate change resilience through the Water and Coasts Community Futures Network. In turn this has deepened relations with other regional networks such as the [Yorkshire Integrated Catchment Solutions Programme](#) and the [Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission \(YHCC\)](#).

During the past twelve months, the University and Y-PERN have co-hosted several engagement events to explore the challenges and opportunities created by the new [Hull and East Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority](#). It has brought together senior University leaders and researchers, political and policymakers from the Hull and East Riding local authorities, Yorkshire Universities, business and community leaders, and other interested in devolution. With the election of a new mayor in May 2025, Hull-based Y-PERN team will work closely with local and combined authority partners to support a range of engagement, training, and other policy-focused initiatives and events. It will also support engagement with the new Greater Lincolnshire County Combined Authority, building on existing links with colleagues at the University of Lincoln.

Above:  
Hull Poverty Truth  
Commission

## SOUTH YORKSHIRE



Above:  
People Place Policy  
Conference 2024  
at Sheffield Hallam  
University

### Feeding academic insights into SYMCAs Skills Strategy and Plan for Good Growth

Collaborating with Y-PERN Policy Fellows, research teams at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield have collaborated to move from a reactive contract research model to create appropriate infrastructure with the [South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority \(SYMCA\)](#) for long term strategic policy engagement. This has included the provision of evidence to support priorities, providing critical challenge, enriching data analysis, and deepening relationships between SYMCA, Sheffield Hallam University and University of Sheffield. This has included the secondment of the University of Sheffield Y-PERN Policy Fellow into SYMCA to work alongside their officers.

To support a Skills Strategy for South Yorkshire, the Y-PERN team at Sheffield Hallam University produced a report assessing evidence on the effectiveness of a range of interventions which could be funded or supported under the Strategy. The report informed partnership discussion and commissioning activity. To support South Yorkshire's Plan for Good Growth, Y-PERN at University of Sheffield contributed two key aspects: a clear story about South Yorkshire's structural economic history, and an econometric examination

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Cities (2024) L.A. Evidential: Improving Evidence use in local economic policymaking. Available at: [L.A.-Evidential-April-2024.pdf](#)

of where growth has been most significant in more recent years.

Y-PERN has thereby provided quantifiable benefits for SYMCA, such as the provision of skillsets where capacity is limited, knowledge transfer and co-production of outputs. Of equal value have been the informal and implicit policy outcomes that emerged through close, continuous collaboration. SYMCA's Assistant Director for Growth, Business & Skills [has written a Y-PERN blog capturing the key benefits](#) of this approach.

### Scaling up

Many local and mayoral combined authorities are facing similar regional economic questions, and the same challenges answering them. These include addressing the "skills gaps in the policy making process [that] lead to overreliance on consultants, preventing in-house skill development"<sup>1</sup> Y-PERN is exploring the region-wide and national significance of the South Yorkshire work on skills, and wider work concerning data and analytics. This connects to the Yorkshire Vitality Index and Yorkshire and Humber Office for Data Analytics, two initiatives carried forward by YPIP and led by the University of Sheffield which we outline in the region-wide section of this report.

## WEST YORKSHIRE



A diverse range of Y-PERN activities in West Yorkshire have addressed a range of policy issues including housing quality and homelessness (led by the University of Huddersfield), better supporting SME growth (led by the University of Bradford), enhancing creative industries (with Leeds Conservatoire, Leeds Arts and Leeds Trinity Universities), and embedding economic systems thinking into the [West Yorkshire Combined Authority \(WYCA\)](#) and its Local Growth Plan (led by the University of Leeds). Y-PERN has delivered workshops on the impact of AI, community engagement, devolution, and on improving business case development and appraisal. There has been a particular focus on supporting our smaller and specialist universities through a range of training workshops at Leeds Conservatoire, Leeds Arts University and Leeds Trinity University. Y-PERN also contributed to the first Policy Week held at [Leeds Beckett University](#), providing a well-attended workshop on devolution and regional policy engagement.

### Bringing childcare into WYCA's economic strategy and local growth plan

The West Yorkshire Policy Fellow team led a project that reached out, drew upon and synthesised the expertise and outputs of ten projects related to early years education and childcare in the sub-region (including [Born in Bradford](#)). The project did this through a call for evidence, roundtables, follow up meetings, and support from the [University of Leeds Policy Support Fund](#). The resulting Y-PERN report is currently feeding into the long-term and system wide thinking of [WYCA's Local Growth Plan](#). As the Y-PERN sub-regional report for West Yorkshire emphasises, inclusive growth is not just about narrowly economic matters but is rooted in social provisioning, a key component of which is early years education and childcare. The system map and policy insights in the report (that are being iteratively improved with insights from diverse stakeholders) are thus feeding into the beginning of the policy cycle, enabled by the long-term relationship between academics and policy officers that Y-PERN has nurtured.

Above:  
Early Career  
Leadership Event



Above:  
West Yorkshire Academic  
Policy Networking event

**“Inclusive growth is not just about narrowly economic matters but is rooted in social provisioning”**

### Supporting multi-level governance

A vital function of Y-PERN illustrated in West Yorkshire has been working with our five local authorities and WYCA both individually and in collaboration to support joined-up, multi-level governance. An ongoing example of our work with local authorities has been our collaboration with Kirklees Council, led by Y-PERN colleagues at the University of Huddersfield, where we have been meeting regularly to map out routes to strategic collaboration focused on key policy priorities. This builds on existing work to establish local [Areas of Research Interest with Leeds City Council](#). Another example is Y-PERN's support for Wakefield Council's successful [Health Determinants Research Collaboration \(HDRC\)](#) bid. Y-PERN also hosted four externally facilitated leadership workshops that brought together senior local and combined authority policy officers and university researchers and knowledge exchange professionals from across West Yorkshire to build relationships and develop collaborations (including some noted above). One of these workshops focused specifically on early career officers, researchers, and knowledge exchange professionals and was held at the University of Huddersfield.

# 3 — REGION-WIDE ACTIVITIES

## Connecting our Region

We see in the four sub-region reports how a significant number of Y-PERN activities and themes are being connected or scaled up to a Yorkshire and Humber regional level and beyond, including initiatives focusing on the environment, community engagement, skills and SME support, and data and data analytics. Y-PERN has further developed work on data systems through the Yorkshire Vitality Index and Yorkshire and Office for Data Analytics. This was initially commissioned by Yorkshire and Humber Councils and is now led by the Y-PERN University of Sheffield team. Y-PERN has also delivered initiatives at a national level. For example, it has co-led [Green Book Business Case training](#) in collaboration with HMT's Green Book User Group, [CityREDI](#), the UK Civil Service 'Exploring Economics' group (including a conference with 400 civil servants from across the UK) and the [Yorkshire Integrated Catchment Solutions Programme](#).

Y-PERN co-organised and hosted a timely national conference in July 2024 on [regional policy engagement and the future of devolution at Leeds Beckett University](#). This event brought together leading figures from the policy and university worlds to discuss [how to better support devolution through policy engagement](#). Y-PERN also co-hosted [an event at the Labour Party Conference](#) with UPEN and colleagues from other regional policy engagement initiatives, including City-REDI (University of Birmingham) and the [Heseltine Institute](#) (University of Liverpool). This event brought together leading local, regional, and national politicians, policymakers, academic researchers and knowledge exchange

**“Emergent findings from the research, currently being reviewed, indicate that an iterative, evidence-based approach to evaluating the success or otherwise of devolution is needed to inform next steps.”**

Below:  
Y-PERN and Leeds Beckett team supporting the UPEN Devolved & Regional Conference.



professionals to discuss devolution and regional policy engagement. There has also been significant interest nationally and internationally in our approach, and Y-PERN has engaged with partners in New Zealand, Australia, and Brazil.

## Yorkshire and Humber as 'live laboratory' for regional devolution

A Y-PERN research project led by the Leeds Beckett University Policy Fellow has sought to better understand the complex system of multi-level governance (MLG) arrangements across Yorkshire and the Humber considering ongoing devolution in England. A team of researchers has explored existing and emergent local and sub-regional combined authority arrangements and relationships in response to a request from the Yorkshire and Humber Councils, the collaborative body of all the region's local and combined authority leaders.

The research has focused on three broad areas:

1. What are the existing powers, funding and capabilities of local and combined authorities and are they located at the appropriate level?
2. What scope is there for collaboration across the region? What has worked well? What could be improved?
3. What is the desired direction of travel in relation to the devolution agenda and central-local government relations?

An initial review of international and interdisciplinary literature revealed that the role of place is pivotal in shaping how devolution is manifested. This underlined the need to examine the specifics of the multi-level governance and institutions in Yorkshire and the Humber. To this end, the project conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the political leaders and chief executives of the local and combined authorities across the region.

Below:  
UPEN Devolved &  
Regional Conference,  
hosted by Y-PERN and  
Leeds Beckett University

Emergent findings from the research, being reviewed, indicate that an iterative, evidence-based approach to evaluating the success or otherwise of devolution is needed to inform next steps. This offers a unique opportunity to utilise the Yorkshire and the Humber region an area with four combined authorities of differing maturity, powers, resources, capacities, and policy challenges - as a 'live laboratory' case study to enhance understanding of regional devolution in England. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to explore issues of evidence and community-based policy engagement in terms of scalability and transfer, thus hosting the potential to considerably enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of devolved, multi-level policymaking

By adopting evidence-based approaches to existing devolution to inform future constitutional reform, issues of place offer the potential to better capture its outcomes and impacts for policymakers, communities, and citizens. Y-PERN seeks to better understand how community and citizen participation 'sits' with a complex system of multi-level government and democracy, and how it might better shape a devolution process that has thus far proven to be government led. Working with the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership will allow us to explore how 'double devolution' could work across the region, and how local and combined authorities can better integrate communities into this work.

This research project commenced prior to the General Election in July 2024 and has continued in the context of a rapidly changing policy environment, with the incoming Labour Government's plans for devolution and local government being developed as the research progressed. The publication of the [English Devolution White Paper](#) in December 2024 provided a clearer understanding of the UK Government's intentions, and further work will build on the initial findings and identify and respond to respond to the changing requirements of Yorkshire and Humber Councils. The third phase of the Y-PERN/Yorkshire and Humber Councils devolution research is currently being undertaken with leading policy and strategy officers from local and combined authorities across the Yorkshire and Humber region. This will

**“By adopting evidence-based approaches to existing devolution to inform future constitutional reform, issues of place offer the potential to better capture its outcomes and impacts for policymakers, communities, and citizens.”**

see the recreation of a Yorkshire and Humber Councils Policy Officer Forum which will focus on the further expansion of devolution and different aspects of policy engagement.

## Evidencing and enhancing the value of academic-policy engagement

In the past year, Y-PERN has undertaken a range of activities to share our experiences and learnings to support the understanding and practices of academic-policy engagement. Beyond the national conferences and workshops outlined earlier in this report, we have hosted workshops, conference papers, and briefings with key organisations and networks including UPEN, the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project, the Regional Studies Association, the UK Political Studies Association, the Sheffield Policy Campus, the Civic University Network, Transport for the North, the Institute for Government, the Productivity Institute, Praxis Auril, and the UK Government Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. We have also engaged with a significant number of universities and policy networks, sharing knowledge and providing guidance on developing regional academic-policy engagement networking and practice.





# 4 — WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT SO FAR

## The value of Y-PERN

Y-PERN's activities over the past year have considerably strengthened evidence about its value and the conditions under which regional academic-policy engagement in the Yorkshire and Humber region can best function. These initiatives illustrate how Y-PERN is building on our successes and establishing national and international pre-eminence in regional academic-policy engagement and civic engagement. This is particularly important for our region at a time when the UK Government and UKRI are seeking more place-based funding approaches.

*Key learnings include:*

### Success paves the way for more Success

Y-PERN's pioneering model has honed a systems-based approach to regional academic-policy engagement. The impact and resonance of this innovative model has led to a doubling the original investment into our region through the success of the £5M ESRC-AHRC-Innovate 'Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership' (YPIP) bid. The only such award in England, YPIP is led by Y-PERN's strategy director, Professor Gary Dymski (University of Leeds), and Y-PERN's Director of Engagement, Professor Kersten England CBE.

The success of Y-PERN's 'network of networks' partnership approach has been key to building regional capacities and resources supporting evidence-based policymaking. In our second

**“The success of Y-PERN’s ‘network of networks’ partnership approach has been key to building regional capacities and resources supporting evidence-based policymaking”**



Above:  
Devolution Event

year, we have built closer ties with the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission (YHCC), the National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration Yorkshire and Humber (NIHR ARC YH) and its four NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs), the ESRC-funded Yorkshire Policy Collaboration (involving the universities of Huddersfield, Leeds, Sheffield, and York), and the Yorkshire Integrated Catchment Solutions Programme. Significant investments in regional research and policy engagement initiatives have an aggregate value of more than £40M. Y-PERN value has been demonstrated through greater collective coordination and collaboration to maximise individual and collective benefit of each initiative. For example, Y-PERN and YHCC are core partners in YPIP, while Y-PERN also works closely with NIHR ARC YH as part of the [West Yorkshire Combined Authority Scientific Advisory Group](#).

A third striking success in academic policy-engagement has been Y-PERN's leadership at the national level. Y-PERN members from York and Leeds universities co-lead (with UCL) the national Universities Policy Engagement Network

(UPEN) which brings 110 Universities across the UK together to collaborate on developing professional practice and activities. Other Y-PERN members sit in various positions on the UPEN executive committee and have led a range of nationally impactful activities in the past twelve months. One of Y-PERN's partners, Sheffield Hallam University, hosts the [Civic University Network](#) and leads the [National Civic Impact Accelerator \(NCIA\)](#), an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of how universities can better deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. Y-PERN Chief Policy Fellow, Dr Andy Mycock, co-published an important new report in June 2024 with NCIA on how universities can better enhance the [student civic experience](#).

### The (largely untapped) value of 'joined up' data sets, analyses, and analytics

Y-PERN's second year work has flagged that there is relatively little collective utilisation of existing data, data analyses, and data analytic

capacity across the region. This is in part due to the dispersed creation, collation, and analyses of existing data across silos in universities, local and combined authorities, UK Government departments, public sector bodies, think tanks, and in the private sector. Even when his dispersed data is in principle publicly accessible, it is not in practice easy to collate. Y-PERN's work in partnership with YPIP has highlighted how the return on investing in dedicated connective infrastructure to break data silos is potentially enormous.

During our second year, Y-PERN, working alongside YHCC, NIHR ARC YH and other region-wide bodies, has supported the development of YPIP's Yorkshire and Humber Office for Data Analytics which seeks to provide a regional connective infrastructure. Y-PERN and YPIP are actively engaged in discussions across UK Government and UKRI, for example, regarding the development of a National Data Library, to shape future UK data infrastructure development in the required direction. This will be a priority area of Y-PERN's work in its third year and as it transitions to its second phase.

**“The challenges of connecting the supply and demand for research and expertise in regional policymaking has highlighted the importance of professional knowledge exchange and brokers in universities and their counterparts in local and combined authorities.”**

Below:  
Town Anywhere Event



## An inclusive approach to devolution at a local and regional scale

Y-PERN has taken advantage of Yorkshire and the Humber's environmental and economic geography that makes it a microcosm of England and the UK, hence an ideal 'live laboratory' for testing policy innovations and engagement of all kinds. Asymmetric devolution across the region means Y-PERN is developing understanding of the impact of diversities in place and institutional structures and relationships in shaping multi-level policymaking. We know from discussions with local, regional, and national government stakeholders how important it will be to continue to provide and test innovations to enhance regional policy engagement systems and processes that are rooted in place but are agile and adaptable with scalable insights. For example, Y-PERN is working with its regional academic and governmental partners to develop a connected multi-level framework of Areas of Research Interest. This will aid the connecting of research and policy agendas to ensure a more timely and impactful approach to evidenced-based policymaking.

In collaboration with the LPIP programme, UPEN, and the NCIA, as well as our fellow regional academic-policy partners and networks, Y-PERN is part of a collective national 'mission' to deliver efficient multi-level governance. Our connections with this developing ecosystem of like-minded partners and networks, we have been able to share good policy engagement practice and enhance capacity and expertise across the region and country. The role of our communities in this work is key. The region-wide co-development and implementation of the activities of YPIP (under the themes of data, inclusive growth, environment, and empowering marginalised communities) have been made possible by Y-PERN's connective research and policy engagement infrastructure and relationships across the region, offering tangible evidence of the value of our networks-based and systems-based approaches.

## The importance of implementing systems-thinking in real-world situations

Systems-thinking expertise has been brought to bear across Y-PERN's activities during our second year. Y-PERN's belief in the value of building and formalising long-term relationships, making connections, building trust, and breaking down silos as a path to significant efficiency gains in public policy evidence use is key to our work. To realise this value requires expertise in applying systems thinking; expertise in which the region's academics are world-leading. For Y-PERN, systems-thinking has meant dispensing with outmoded rigidities in disciplinary boundaries, such as the rigid boundaries between economics, other social sciences and humanities; between human sciences and engineering and environmental sciences; and between quantitative and qualitative methodology.

Take the example of 'value' itself. From a system-thinking perspective, narrow concepts of short-term and localised private financial value are insufficient. We must also consider system-wide and strategic dimensions of economic, social, cultural, environmental, and technical value without immediately collapsing each to a single financial dimension. Only in this way can we fully understand the 'system of systems' that is our region and make truly transformational interventions. As several of [our blogs](#) on the nature of economics and on improving business cases indicate, Y-PERN has only just started to realise the gains that stem from applied systems-thinking. During our third year, Y-PERN will continue to seek to demonstrate the significant benefits in networked regional systems-based approaches, and the need to strategically invest in their further development to realise fully their potential to enhance evidenced-based, long-term, and joined-up policymaking.

## The pivotal role of knowledge exchange & brokerage functions

Systems-thinking has also informed Y-PERN's work over the past two years in developing its networked approach to the practice of policy engagement. The Y-PERN team has worked closely with knowledge exchange teams and senior institutional leaders and academics across our partner institutions to establish a systems-based approach to the provision of research and expertise in local and regional policymaking. As part of this work, we have hosted a range of workshops and discussions with universities and government partners to better understand the current institutional landscape. The recognition that each of our universities and governmental partners has different structures, capacities, and resources to support efficient and effective academic-policy engagement has been key. The challenges of connecting the supply and demand for research and expertise in regional policymaking has highlighted the importance of professional knowledge exchange and brokers in universities and their counterparts in local and combined authorities.

At a time of continuing austerity, another key learning has been the need for appropriate capacity of local and combined authority partners to take advantage of university research and expertise. Effective collaboration between institutions requires stable, dedicated staff within each institution to act as a bridge. Undoubtedly, the recent challenges in terms of funding and complex policy and service demands on resources have ensured it has been challenging for many of our local and combined authority partners to engage in our collaborative mission. The scale of engagement and investment in this shared project from our governmental partners has, considering such challenges, been heartening, deeply rewarding and beneficial for all concerned.

**“The connection of our systems and network-based approaches has seen a growing confidence in how governmental partners can best integrate the value and kudos of independent research by university academics.”**

## The value of academic independence

The building of stable relations with local and combined authorities has been key to encouraging a greater appreciation of the distinctive value of academic-led research in the development of strategy and policy. The value of university research as distinctively long-term, system-wide, and strategic is better understood due to enhanced collaboration with our local and combined authority partners. The connection of our systems and network-based approaches has seen a growing confidence in how governmental partners can best integrate the value and kudos of independent research by university academics. This has seen a greater appreciation of the value of academic research alongside the existing strengths of in-house research teams and private consultancies.

Below:  
Policy fellow Neil Barnett presenting on devolution at the Leeds Beckett University Policy Week



# 5 — NEXT STEPS FOR Y-PERN

The final year of Y-PERN's initial phase funded by Research England will build strategically on the foundations laid our first two years in operation, and the learnings from our endeavours outlined in this report. These foundations will enable, in Year Three, an increasing focus on Yorkshire and the Humber regional-wide information-sharing, syntheses and activities. To achieve this, we will focus on several key areas of work:

Building a strategic regional research ecosystem Y-PERN has both provided and further evidenced the need for connective network infrastructure that (i) enables efficiently 'catching' ongoing academic-led research in real-time for policy purposes and (ii) structures long-term relations of universities with public sector bodies to efficiently co-shape university research to enhance evidence-based policymaking to benefit our communities. Such an infrastructure is not based on a transactional customer-client model but a network approach that can efficiently bring university research and public bodies together.

In its third year, Y-PERN will strategically build on and develop the provision of this infrastructure in line with our learnings from practice and in response to our policy partners needs and priorities, and enhanced devolution across the region. The recent request for Local Growth Plans, a statutory requirement of the new UK government, in all four of the Mayoral Combined Authorities of Yorkshire and the Humber, saw Y-PERN provide system- and place-based research, evidence and expertise. In this endeavour, Y-PERN *complemented* both in-house *and* private consultancy research. University research cannot and should not seek to *replace*

**“Y-PERN will strategically build on and develop the provision of this infrastructure in line with our learnings from practice and in response to our policy partners needs and priorities, and enhanced devolution across the region”**



Above:  
Hull Poverty Truth  
Commission, University  
of Hull team

the vital in-house operational research functions that support government, nor the targeted, transaction-based research of private consultancies. Rather, university research provides distinctive and complementary research of a kind that can support long-term strategy to support strategic evidenced-based policymaking.

During Year Three, Y-PERN will challenge a hitherto established culture whereby local and combined authorities often rely on either in-house or private consultancy research for public sector research needs. Universities offer another, complementary option, that is especially relevant for strategy research and policy development. A key logical next step that Y-PERN is to build a 'research ecosystem' which enhances its policy engagement infrastructure and relations to connect with private consultancies, think-tanks, in-house local and combined authorities research teams and other research-active public bodies, to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of collaboration supporting evidenced-based policymaking.

## Enhancing policy engagement capacity and resources

The systems-based approach to policy engagement which Y-PERN has supported has provided a strong framework to grow capacity and resources to support our collective mission across our regional partnership and networks. The diverse university professional support functions supporting research, innovation, knowledge exchange and engagement have proven vital in this work. Y-PERN's team of Policy Fellows and its academic steering group have been able to work with a growing body of professional staff within our partner universities and colleagues across the region's local and combined authorities. For, example, The York Policy Engine (TYPE), based at the University of York have worked closely with Y-PERN to support the new York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority and Mayor, collaborating with colleagues at York St John University to provide training and capacity building programmes. This has led to the embedding of the York Policy Fellow within the new Combined Authority to further develop relationships and enhance partnership working.

Research England 'Policy Support Fund' has resourced regional engagement activities and innovation. For example, the University of Leeds has used Policy Support Funding to fund a groundbreaking Y-PERN research project into childcare for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. The University's policy unit, Policy Leeds, have also drawn on Policy Support Funding, to develop an innovative approach [to local Areas of Research Interest](#). Working with Leeds City Council, they have created a groundbreaking model which outlines a series of research questions which relate to key areas of policy. During Year Three, Y-PERN will help Policy Leeds to evaluate this work, and extend the model to other local and combined authorities. Working with our university and government partners, we will also explore how we can best support the transferability and scalability of evidenced-based policy across the region, both within and across our four sub-regions.

As the new UK Government seeks to cut back on the private consultancy bill and tackle grand challenges of inequality and environmental collapse, the lessons from Y-PERN's second year are that facilitating joined up, multi-level policy engagement - an aim identified by the ESRC LPIP programme, UPEN, UKRI and the UK Government's English Devolution White Paper is a shared mission which requires long-term investment and support. It is vital that universities, government bodies, and research councils continue to invest in sustaining a connective infrastructure such as Y-PERN. The loss of Policy Support Fund, which is currently under review by Research England, would have significant negative impacts of the scale of policy-focused research.

At this time of prolonged public sector austerity, another vital consideration is how local and combined authorities across the region can enhance staff capacity and engagement in this work and invest in its further development. For a small (when compared to private consultancy spend), long-term investment in local and combined authority staff dedicated to facilitating access to university research capacity and the wider regional policy engagement network could exponentially increase the impressive activity outlined in this report.

## Growing our network, increasing and further evidencing our value

During the final year of this initial phase of Y-PERN, we will continue our work in a range of innovative and impactful ways. Our 'network of networks' approach, which is key to strengthening relations, trust, insights, and a shared mission across the region, will be enhanced through a series of workshops and other events held with our partners

and other research and policy networks and organisations. In seeking to better connect research and policy communities, we will host a range of events to better understand the role of knowledge exchange and knowledge brokerage professionals, and our region's university policy units, in developing a networked systems-based approach to policy engagement. A workshop with our small and specialist universities will explore their experiences and

**“We will further evidence the value of our unique and already impactful network-based and systems-based approaches to academic-policy engagement”**

challenges in undertaking in policy engagement, and how to better streamline teaching and education in our work. The Yorkshire and Humber Council's Policy Officer network will also consider how local and combined authorities might better connect and collaborate across the region.

In seeking to secure the sustainability of Y-PERN after its three-year pilot phase funded by Research England, we will further evidence the value of our unique and already impactful network-based and systems-based approaches to academic-policy engagement. An independent evaluation of Y-PERN is ongoing and will present a final evaluation of Y-PERN before the end of its pilot three-year period. A range of reports, academic journal articles, blogs, and other outputs will be published, which members of the Y-PERN team will present at academic and professional body conferences in the UK and internationally. Project dissemination events will be hosted at a local, regional, and national scale including a Y-PERN conference to be held in the summer of 2025. Our evidence and evaluation work will inform deliberations about the structure, focus, and funding of Y-PERN second phase.

## Y-PERN Policy Fellows

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 Dr Chau Chu ([University of Leeds](#))  
 Dr Thomas Haines-Doran ([University of Leeds](#))  
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 Dr Peter Mukarumbwa ([University of Bradford](#))  
 Dr Dan Olnier ([University of Sheffield](#))  
 Dr Jamie Redman ([Sheffield Hallam University](#))  
 Dr Elizabeth Sanderson ([Sheffield Hallam University](#))  
 Dr Juan Pablo Winter Sepulveda ([University of Hull](#))

## Y-PERN Academic Steering Group

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 Professor David Spicer ([University of Bradford](#))  
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## Our Funders

Y-PERN is funded by [Research England](#), part of [UK Research and Innovation](#). It engages with English higher education providers, to create and sustain the conditions for a healthy and dynamic research and knowledge exchange system in the higher education sector.

## Glossary of Terms

**CAPE**

[Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement](#)

**ESRC**

[Economic and Social Research Council](#)

**HDRC**

[Health Determinants Research Collaboration](#)

**HEYCA**

[Hull and East Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority](#)

**HPTC**

[Hull Poverty and Truth Commission](#)

**iCASP**

[Yorkshire Integrated Catchment Solutions Programme](#)

**LPIP**

[Local Policy Innovation Partnership](#)

**NIHR ARC YH**

[National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration - Yorkshire & Humber](#)

**SYMCA**

[South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority](#)

**UKRI**

[United Kingdom Research and Innovation](#)

**UPEN**

[University Policy Engagement Network](#)

**WYCA**

[West Yorkshire Combined Authority](#)

**YHC**

[Yorkshire & Humber Councils](#)

**YHCC**

[Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission](#)

**YNYCA**

[York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority](#)

**YPC**

[Yorkshire Policy Collaboration](#)

**YPIP**

[Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership](#)

**Y-PERN**

[Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network](#)

**YU**

[Yorkshire Universities](#)





## Keep updated and explore future opportunities

For regular updates about Y-PERN's activities, opportunities and events visit: <https://y-pern.org.uk/>. You can also sign up to our newsletter to ensure you don't miss anything Y-PERN-related by scanning the QR code.



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