

Research and Innovation Podcast: “Gerrin’ on wi’ it” series

Episode 3: "Collaboration is essential for research to be useful and responsive" - Yorkshire academics embracing cross-sector working

Speakers: Dr Andy Mycock and Professor Joe Cook

[00:00:03] **Lauren:** Thanks for joining us on “Gerrin’ On Wi’ It”, a podcast series brought to you by YPern and YPIP, hosted on the Research and Innovation Podcast.

Dr Andy Cock is back with us for this episode, talking to Professor Joe Cook from the University of Hull about what really makes collaboration work in research and community engagement, and shares examples of deep partnerships that have helped turn lived experience into meaningful change across Yorkshire and the Humber.

As always, we've included a list of acronyms and other helpful links from the conversation in the show notes. Enjoy.

[00:00:37] **Andy:** Hello and welcome to “Getting on with it”, a new podcast series about collaboration in Yorkshire and the Humber hosted on the Research and Innovation podcast. I'm Dr. Andy Mycock. I'm Chief Policy Fellow for the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network. And I'm also Cross Programme Lead on the University Policy Engagement Network programme, which is funded by UKRI and the SRC.

Today's guest is Professor Joe Cook. Joe is Chair of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at the University of Hull and Joe's practice is widely renowned both across the United Kingdom internationally in terms of her multidisciplinary focus on issues such as corporate social responsibility and cross sectoral dialogue between public, private, and third sectors alongside wide expertise in gender migration and aging.

The University of Hull is one of the partners in the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership Collaboration, a £5 million ESRC funded project that's bringing together academics, decision makers and communities to harness the power of collaborative research and innovation to address local challenges with informed policymaking.

And Joe is leading on the communities in their places core work stream, which is central to ensuring that YPIP is both community led and community responsive. And today's episode is thinking about how as an academic engaging with policymaking, Joe has experienced collaboration in different ways and the way in which it has informed and in many ways allowed her to develop her practice.

So, good afternoon, Joe. How are you?

[00:02:13] **Joe:** I'm very good. Thank you, Andy. It's lovely to get here and chat with you.

[00:02:17] **Andy:** Well thank you very much for taking the time. We've been hugely looking forward to speaking to you. To start with, Joe, I wonder if you might just say a few words about the community in place's, strand of work.

[00:02:28] **Joe:** Yeah, I mean, to be honest with you, Andy, this is a really exciting way of working for me because we have two key parts to this work. The first part is the community panel where we've recruited 28 people from across Yorkshire and Humber with lived experience, links to lots of different communities and groups and diversity, to work with the YPIP collaboration within its kind of decision making structures. So very, very exciting opportunity. And then the other part of the work, which I tend to lead on more than the panel, is we are working to (in an outreach capacity) to understand what community social action looks like and how to support it effectively in policy and practice. And then as part of that, we're working with six voluntary sector organizations of all sorts of sizes. Some of them are very small, very kind of community led, and we're working with them to evidence their strengths-based way of working to show how they deliver support to individuals, build community capacity and then we'll be using that information to work collaboratively with local authorities so they can learn how to engage and better support, those, those smaller scale voluntary sector organisations and deliver ultimately better outcomes for people in local communities.

[00:04:02] **Andy:** That sounds great Joe, and it really opens up the opportunity for us to think about this question of what is collaboration and why is it so important in Yorkshire and the Humvber and it is interesting because, you know, collaboration is a term which shapes a lot of what we do and yet we never really sort of think down about, well what does collaboration mean? And I just wonder what do you think collaboration is?

[00:04:26] **Joe:** I, I guess for me it's, it's a really, it's a way of life. It's a way in which I structure my research what I hope to do, what I hope to achieve. So for me, collaboration is essential if I'm going to get the research I do to be right, to be useful and to be responsive. So, when you say collaboration, I'm thinking, for me it's about collaboration across sectors all the way down to local people and local residents. So yeah, that's, I guess that's the way I, the way I would approach it and define it.

[00:05:05] **Andy:** So, it sounds like collaboration is something which, which wells that sort of personal interest that you have with connecting with citizens and communities, with the way in which universities can undertake research and different kinds of activities to build that sense of community connection.

[00:05:22] **Joe:** Yeah, I mean, I mean definitely if you were to say how, if I was to explain how collaboration affects the way that I work, for example, I would say that, you know, I'm starting often from a different point to which a lot of university academics would start from. So, I'm starting from the point of teversing the traditional ways of working i.e. sitting in our ivory towers, thinking about what am I really interested in doing? What publications is that going to get me? Is it going to build my career? My approach is, is to think about how can I collaborate with different sectors, with people in communities so I can make the work that I do more relevant to where their needs are at? That what I can produce from that is not just that all the academic things that we have to do (of course I want to publish, of course I want to get research funding in) but actually, it's to produce things that actually are tangible and useful for delivering better services and, and, and better inclusive ways of working for people in communities.

[00:06:29] **Andy:** So, in many ways it speaks to something which is very much welded to the University of Hull's approach to this, which is the idea of a flipped university model that you are seeking to always empower communities and citizens as part of your work. Can you say a little bit more about what might look like.

[00:06:49] **Joe:** I think it can look, it can look different in different contexts and it certainly is an approach that the University of Hull is trying to, to pursue and develop. But, but for me, it's not just about people and communities, it's also about people in positions of agency and decision-making power. So, for me, the flipped approach is also listening to what policy makers and practitioners need in their working lives and recognizing them as humans. We're trying to deal with very, very difficult situations. So, for me, it's not just about how can research deliver benefit to people in communities, which is obviously extremely important and always at the forefront of my, of our agendas. But how can research deliver meaningful, useful solutions for people who work in the voluntary sector, for people who work in local authorities or the health sector so that what they can deliver for people in communities is actually what they need and delivered in a way that works for them and is more likely to support them and produce positive outcomes. So that is the kind of flipped model for me. But it might mean different things to different people as it's, as it's bound to really. But that's how I would approach it.

[00:08:08] **Andy:** Because your experience, if you look at your very impressive CV, you've worked with policymakers across the United Kingdom at all levels of government as well as community organisations and public and private stakeholders. I'm just wondering as you sort of think back, you know, in all those different entities, what do you think makes collaboration successful? What are those key elements that think that makes collaboration have that impact?

[00:08:36] **Joe:** I think there's lots of key ingredients to making it work. One of the things is just taking the time to listen and understand different perspectives to the different demands that people are facing in trying to find solutions to things in their organisations. Creating a level, kind of playing field so that community voice is listened to in an equal way compared to the voice of practitioners and voluntary sector organisations and it's really taking the time to get to know each other, to kind of build trust, to spend time listening and sharing. And then actually to always create mechanisms for feeding back, showing what has happened as a result of us coming together and trying to do this work collectively. What's happened as a result? Has anything changed? And if things haven't changed, why haven't they changed? Because sometimes we're not in control of making things happen entirely are we? So, you know, you can, you know, something's needed, you know change is important, but you can't always, you are not always the person empowering your organisation to deliver that. But if you can come back and you can explain that, I think that's part of the trust building process, you know and part of the key ingredients to making people feel that time spent in collaboration is worthwhile.

[00:10:01] **Andy:** I think it's really interesting. You mentioned, you know, the art of listening I think, you know, reflecting back on my own experience, sometimes academics aren't really taught how to listen particularly well or are indeed incentivized to listen that hard, you know, how has that art of listening affected your practice in collaboration?

[00:10:23] **Joe:** Do you know what I, I would absolutely agree. A lot of academics aren't that good at listening and adapting what we do based on what we hear, but, for me it, it's always, I think - I'm a participatory action researcher, right? And the basic principle of that is that you reflect the voices of the people that you are doing the research with within the research

process. So, listening actually is a really essential skill of a qualitative Participatory Action Researcher, which is what I am. And therefore for me, it's kind of intrinsic, you know, I, it's just the way I understand the world. And if I don't listen and I don't distill and understand and reflect, then, then I'm going to get it wrong. So, I think that it is really important. And if I was to give you an example of how I use this in my current collaborative work. So, for example, I had a project which was called "Local Area Coordination". It was evaluating - it's a strengths-based approach to supporting people in communities so that they don't fall into crisis, and therefore don't put a huge economic strain on service provision within local authorities. So that project was about that. Right? As a result of that work, we produced a strengths-based model, which shows how you can evidence that way of working and the value that it brings to policy and practice and to people in communities. That entire model is based on the stories, the experiences, and the preferences that the people in the, in the communities that we did this research with told us about. So, if I hadn't have listened. And if I hadn't have integrated that into my research approach, I couldn't have built this model. And the model wouldn't be useful to the local authorities who are trying to implement it, because it wouldn't be based on people's lived experiences of being supported in a preventative way in their communities.

So, it, for me, it completely underpins my entire approach to research that if I don't listen, if I don't collaborate, then I won't know what needs to be done and how to do it. So, yeah.

[00:12:40] **Andy:** That's really powerful. It really, you know, that idea that there is something around listening, which in many ways can build trust, it can build that sense of shared experience in some way. And I think one of the things we've noticed in the podcast series thus far is that the word "trust" often comes up in the way in which people talk about relationships and about collaboration. And I, I wonder whether you'd say a little bit more about, you know, what does trust mean to you and how is, how does that affect the way in which you work?

[00:13:12] **Joe:** Well, I think, I think it means that you don't promise things you can't deliver. That's absolutely essential to building trust. I think it's going in, not thinking you know all the answers. Because people then believe that they have no value and you're not going to listen to them. And I think it's kind of working together to identify solutions and only promising to deliver on what is in your ask to be able to deliver. And I think if you breach any of those things, then trust gets broken. So, you know, it is that old adage, isn't it? It can take a lifetime to build trust and moments to destroy it. So, I try and follow that ethical practice around trust in the way that I work with people and organisations.

[00:14:04] **Andy:** Hmm. That's really interesting. There's a sense of realism in there that you don't overpromise and underdeliver in some ways.

[00:14:10] **Joe:** Mm-hmm.

[00:14:12] **Andy:** I just wonder whether, because collaboration is often, it involves multiple partners. It's can be complicated in terms of the way in which it functions, and I just, you know, wonder whether, you know, during your extensive experience of collaborating with different partners, what kind of barriers do you commonly face or what kind of things often come up and how do you overcome them in some ways?

[00:14:39] **Joe:** That's a big question. I mean I think the kind of barriers you encounter are trying to find a common language and a common ground, and which you can all agree that something

is needed. And that something will be done as a result of what you find out. So, for example, I work with a lot of local authorities all over the country, but a lot of them within the Yorkshire and Humber region. And they're obviously driven by particular pressures that are happening, you know, rising need, reduced budgets, the need to kind of find solutions where not all of the delivery falls onto the local authority. Right. And then, and then I also, in the same context, work with voluntary sector organisations who are finding that they've either pivoted towards funding from local authorities, become more like service providers, contracted out service providers, and are seeing those pots shrinking and shrinking and shrinking and then in that process have somehow lost some touch with local populations that they're seeking to serve, or very small voluntary sector organisations who are very embedded in the needs of their communities and, and, and that has to take precedence for them over absolutely everything. So, in that mix where you, when you're looking at, say for example, how do you effectively engage communities, build their capacity and, and respond to their needs? You can see already - all those different actors are pulling in different directions, and at the same time, people with lived experience in those communities are very situated in their own, and their, the people around thems experiences of those processes. So, one of the roles that research can do is it can try and create a dialogue that brings all those different drivers and priorities together in a way that creates some level of shared understanding and a programme of work. And at the same time, it can gather the evidence of those experiences, priorities, needs, challenges, outcomes, et cetera, and collate that in a way that reflects all of those multiple challenges and perspectives. So, research has a way in which it can both create a shared space for dialogue, but also evidence all the challenges and differences in perspectives in a way that is accessible and represents everybody's needs and interests. So, I think, I think that research actually has a very important role to play in creating collaboration between organisations and local communities and their voluntary sector, but not all, perhaps not all academics are terribly skilled at doing that.

[00:17:38] **Andy:** Well, I think that's very true. You know, I think the challenge is, is how do we begin to socialize academics in a more, you know, significant way so that they feel comfortable in that? And in a way it kind of leads to that question, which is, you know, how do we ensure that collaboration becomes business as usual, not just for academics, but for all those different partners that you work with, rather than something which, you know, at times might be ad hoc or it might be limited to a particular funded programme?

[00:18:10] **Joe:** I think in a way, you almost have to take that actor by actor, you know, to see. So, for academics, the challenge is, is that doing research is only part of multiple jobs that academics have to do within universities. Right. And therefore, the way that some academics end up doing the research is in that very traditional way. It's like, what is the, what is the kind of knowledge base I'm trying to contribute to? How is that going to influence discourses and, and approaches in that area? How do I get best published in the top journals? And that really is not the kind of research and academic that's going to contribute to collaboration because collaboration should be driven by - and new research should be driven by "what are the needs?" And you have to be driven by it as an individual motivated by wanting to do research that is useful, that contributes to practice. And if I'm honest, not all academics are ever going to fit into that, that approach. So, there is a major challenge there. And as universities, you know, feel the financial pinch themselves and workloads go up, the space for our colleagues to work in that way is becoming kind of constrained. Quite similar to local authorities, I think really. I mean to, to kind of encourage local authorities to collaborate much more with research and see the benefits that the research has and to collaborate with the communities and other stakeholders. I think it depends in what area, the local authority they're working in. Some

people in local authorities are very much minded to work in that way, and they want to work in that way, but at the same time, they're facing internal pressures around cuts, around rising workloads, around losing staff, et cetera, which makes engaging in that outward looking way, quite difficult for them. So, the, the thing to convince of there is the value that research can bring and collaboration can bring to the, to the challenges that they're trying to, to deal with. And I think that's how I pitch it. If I go to a local authority, I listen and I try and pitch what we can offer based around what I know they really need from listening to them, first of all. And I think for communities. One of the, I mean, for the voluntary sector, they're under so much pressure and collaboration's important to them, but it takes them away from doing the actual support work that they want to do with people in communities. So, it is a challenge for them and for people in communities they're sick and tired of going over the same ground again and again seeing nothing changed, really feeling, not listened to. And, and you know what I like in that zone is that some of them are picking up the, the kind of tatters of things that have happened to their communities and they're making changes for themselves and they're doing it regardless, not needing permission or to collaborate with anybody. They're just getting on and doing. And, and I think that's what we saw during COVID with the mutual aid movement, wasn't it? And I don't think that's particularly gone away. Communities are picking up a lot of the left behind problems and challenges that nobody else is filling the gap with. So, I would persuade them to collaborate, but not if it took them away from. from. doing the really good stuff that they're doing for themselves at the moment. So, yeah, it's a di I don't think I have the total answer to that, if I'm honest. Andy, it's kind of, it's quite a hard question, but.

[00:21:45] **Andy:** I think the fact that you undertake research into collaboration means that we can learn, you know, consistently from practice. You are quite right. Now, I often look at the more conceptual dimensions. We like, we like to ask our guests, you know, one final question, which is, you know, can you provide maybe some kind of an example of where all that you've talked about has come together in your own personal experience, a project that's kind of allowed you to feel that collaboration has been successful, that it has brought a sense of connection and trust and shared mission.

[00:22:21] **Joe:** Um, one project, it's, it's quite difficult to just kind of think of one, but I mean, I suppose a good example. We did a series of projects around the cost of living crisis. We have a couple of local authorities and we worked with them with their voluntary sector stakeholders who were often delivering the cost of living and the household support, fund support and with people who were receiving that support. So, the research kind of helped them gather the types of evidence that they needed to gather to show the difference they were making. And it went beyond simply counting the number of vouchers that have been allocated or the number of people who have came through the doors of a community centre to actually, understanding how relationships were built, how people came in with a problem about food, but actually they had multiple complex needs that were not being unpicked anywhere else. We gathered information of how by supporting people, by walking alongside them, building relationships, enabled them not just to deal with the immediate food crisis that was hitting them, but actually to kind of find a way in which they could lift themselves out a long term crisis and poverty.

And that work was so... It was very moving and very, very, very interesting to do, and it was based on all those players coming together, deciding what we would examine and putting in the commitment and time to gather the data so then we could work with them to analyse it and, and produce outcomes as a result of it. That in one of the local authorities we work with has underpinned their poverty prevention strategy going forward into the future. So, for me, that was very satisfying to be part of a collaboration like that, and it just shows what can be achieved if

people take the time to come together and to listen to each other and agree to wrap resources and support around a process and around evidencing and researching the outcomes of working in a particular way. So, yeah, that, that, I guess that's one of my, one of the ones I've given as, as an example of where collaboration had made a real difference.

[00:24:42] **Andy:** And it's a lovely example by the way, and thank you very much. And more importantly, thank you for taking the time to come and speak to us today. It's been wonderful to hear, you know, your thoughts around collaboration and to think about how, in many ways, it can shape not just academic life, but you know, the place in which universities sit in communities and the way in which they interact with different stakeholders. It's been wonderful to hear.

Well, that's it from us. That's, the end of the, another episode of "Gerrin' on wi' it". Thank you very much to Professor Joe Cook from the University of Hull. We look forward to you joining us again for another episode soon.