

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

Episode 6: "Bringing together coalitions of the willing" - Yorkshire stakeholders collaborating for shared outcomes

Speakers: Paul Hayes and Kersten England CBE

[00:00:01] **Lauren:** You’re listening to “Gerrin’ on wi’ it” - a podcast series brought to you by Y-PERN and YPIP, hosted on the Research and Innovation podcast. On this episode, Paul Hayes chats with Kersten England on her long-term career in local government, and more recent work in enhancing academic policy engagement in Yorkshire. There's a list of acronyms and other terms used during the conversation within the show notes, and there's a written transcript available also. Enjoy.

[00:00:29] **Paul:** Hello and welcome to “Gerrin’ on wi’ it”, a podcast about collaboration in Yorkshire and the Humber. I'm Paul Hayes, I'm Senior Policy Fellow at Leeds University Business School. Today's episode features Kersten England, CBE. Kersten currently serves as chair of Bradford 2025, City of Culture and Chair of the Young Foundation. She's also got a very long, and I'd say distinguished history in Yorkshire and Humber in local government as Chief execs of previously both Bradford and York Councils. She's also a co-investigator on the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP). Hello, Kersten. How are you doing?

[00:01:10] **Kersten:** I am absolutely fine on this, rather dreich Yorkshire morning. I think it's just about as dreich in Scotland as well, where I'm from, but I'm fine. I'm looking forward to the conversation, Paul.

[00:01:19] **Paul:** Good. So, what we're talking about today is collaboration. I mean, a large part of your history, you did chair, for example, the Yorkshire and Humber Chief Execs move across. What do you think as the value of collaboration? Why do we collaborate? Why should we collaborate?

[00:01:34] **Kersten:** Yeah, well look, Paul, as you say, you know, most of my career was in local government and 14 years of that as a Chief Executive. But I would say that throughout my career, and actually I started out in community development, um, and as an anthropologist, which I think has been enormously instructive throughout my working life. But largely in local government, we've been asked to tackle issues that have no simple answer, and the local authority alone couldn't possibly solve it. Whether you're talking about levels of kind of anti-social behaviour in a neighbourhood, whether you're talking about poor health outcomes for certain communities, whether you're talking about people without the skills for the jobs that are appearing in the labour market. Every single thing I've been asked to achieve, particularly as a Chief Exec, but even before, has required forms of collaboration. I mean, I suppose, a couple of instances stand out for me. The first is that before I was a Chief Exec in the early 2000's, Bradford and a number of other places experienced the worst public disorder on the mainland of the UK for decades. Yeah, I mean, I did have the experience of living in Mosside in 1981 when there were riots. But 2001 was an awful summer for places like Bradford where we had, you know, a level of public disorder. Young men ultimately in prison for their actions on that time, community relations falling apart, trust in public agencies at an all-time low. And I had responsibility for, putting together the recovery plan from that situation. Now, that was absolutely about getting alongside and listening to communities. It was about bringing youth workers, community workers, bringing the police, bringing the health services, together to

actually start to rebuild trust and covenants, to really listen at depth to what was happening for communities and together to forge a plan for how we were going to put the place literally back together. And actually that was my first significant experience. I mean, I've been an academic myself, don't get me wrong, but of working with academics in the university because the University of Bradford, this is in the early 2000's and obviously it has the world's first Peace Studies department. At that time they got hugely engaged with us. They worked alongside us on a community mediation process, community tension monitoring. They also put together what was called a programme for a peaceful city, which was an interdisciplinary gathering of academics and professionals and communities to talk about the things that were really challenging in the city and bring the best of our expertise, whether it was lived experience or academic understanding together to try and craft ways forward for a place. And that was a seminal experience for me because I think that's the kind of formula or conditions for success that I've carried throughout my working life. So, you know, that's a very stark example, isn't it?

I mean, obviously the pandemic was the other one. Where because Bradford has had an abiding tradition of bringing together coalitions of the willing - who are willing to work cross boundaries, hierarchies, labels. Yeah, to a lesser or a greater extent. Don't get me wrong, it's always challenging. There are vested interests, there are conflicting incentives. But at the time of the pandemic, we brought a coalition, a network together, before the first lockdown because we'd identified between the clinicians, the academics, and the people working with communities, the disproportionate vulnerability of certain communities. And we were thinking about, and crafting, and crafting with those communities, communication, doorstep conversations, youth worker outreach, young people designing interventions with young people. That, that was humbling to me, because I was, you know, obviously I was sitting in the middle of this fantastic network that you can't control. You, you have to bring it together in quite a relatively unstructured way and allow it to do its thing. And you know, as Chris Witty said, if, you know, Bradford did have very high levels of COVID infection but if we hadn't done what we'd done, it would've been so much worse for Bradford.

Now those are both examples of, in extremists, I suppose. and so, the challenge is can you do that in peace time?

[00:06:07] **Paul:** I think the coalition of the willing is really quite interesting that you've used. That also assumes that there's the unwilling and people who don't want to collaborate and how you actually bring those together. So, in terms of learning points: how do you reach, how would you reach a critical mass in terms of developing collaboration, in particular with higher education, academia, universities, further education? What's the tactic? What works, and also what doesn't work?

[00:06:36] **Kersten:** I would say, this applies to academia but also applies to all other forms of collaboration, you do have to understand the drivers, the incentives, the national frameworks, the regulatory frameworks. What does success look like in that institution's terms? I've spent quite a lot of time since I've been working, in the university context, listening to academics talking about their anxieties and insecurities at this point in time, the precarity around the sector, how their careers progress, what they get rewarded for, what they have opportunities to kind of spend time doing and understanding some of the contradictory kind of forces at work.

So, there is, at one level there's quite a big push in, central government thinking and even in the research councils around place-based and collaboration. At the same time, there is if not an existential crisis, there is a real challenge to the sector that it hasn't experienced. You know,

local government's been experiencing it for over a decade, as you know, Paul, but I think it is, you know, the, the extent of the challenge right now is pretty acute.

I mean, and as you will know, I've lost, colleague co-investigators through the process of running this research programme because the universities have made them redundant or they've chosen to take an early exit. So, I've had to really listen to and understand how can you build the grounds for collaboration, which acknowledges all of those challenges. The first thing is to walk in the footsteps of the listen in depth, understand that, and then be absolutely realistic. And I still notice sometimes when we're talking, I'm still thinking in my civic, local government head, right about what makes for success and impact, and particularly as we're at the moment building the case for investment. I'm absolutely thinking about the difference it makes in a place for the communities and the people of that place, and therefore why a local authority would be really invested in it. And then I'm caught short because I'm kind of hearing from the other side, but actually, how will that be in the REF, the KEF, the TEF? Do you see what I mean? Will it really make the difference? Will it help that person to advance their career? And we've got to find the sweet spot in all of that. And make the case that collaboration will bring greater benefit to all (rather) than an institution benefiting. Because there's this thing at the moment about, you know, should one university anchor the research grant? You know, do they get the recognition? Does that represent success for them? And so those are all, I think you probably recognise too, Paul, challenges that we need to work through.

[00:09:24] **Paul:** I was going to come back to that. In terms of collaboration, there's a tactic about bringing people together to collaborate. And then there's turning collaboration into outcomes. And what do you think you, you've been quite heavily involved, for example, in the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership and Y-PERN, the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network.

What do you think your learnings from your involvement in those two programmes, particularly around making a change in Yorkshire and the Humber have taught and also that other lovely question, what would you have done differently?

[00:09:55] **Kersten:** Yeah. Yeah, always. So I think on Yorkshire Policy Engagement Research and Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership, we have done really useful work. Yeah. Because it has been connected to real need and a mandate from the kind of the, those responsible for leading and governing in those places.

Right. So, if I think about one of the outcomes from YPIP early outcomes of products is the Yorkshire Engagement Portal and the Yorkshire and Humber Office of Data Analytics, which is produced, and this follows a conversation with Yorkshire's political leaders and chief executives about wanting to have a comprehensive data set for Yorkshire that allows them to explore the vitality - we use the word vitality - of the region in all its different aspects. You know, comparatively look at trajectories, be able to interrogate it for kind of like the correlations between different aspects, whether it's about economic growth and adoption of electric vehicles, for example, just, you know, the kind of questions you might want to, to, "Hmm. I wonder if there is a correlation between those things". And led by the University of Sheffield, we've produced, in beta at the moment, but a really interesting kind of site which you can explore and navigate, give feedback on. And I think that's, that's for me an example of a real positive. Similarly for Y-PERN I think some of that work, alongside combined authorities, emergent combined authorities, yeah, listening intently to the fact that they are under pressure to produce various strategic plans in order to access full integrated settlements from

government, being able to bring academic expertise as critical friends or do specific deep pieces of research on aspects of what will make for economic growth. Whether it is like the early years in childcare system, which is a really important part, the supply side, if you like, of economic growth. I think those things have been really important. So, and in all those instances it is about that, it is about academic rigor and expertise, but it is also about responsiveness to agendas that are significant and of the now. Now, what would I have done, different. I think there, one of the things is probably, much of the work is very good, very sound. Does it have as much exposure? Is it as accessible as it needs to be?

Is it building that sort of shared sense of it being owned? Does it still feel a tiny, a bit transactional? As in we want this, you go in, do it. Which for me is not in the end, the absolute apogee of collaboration. I think, in the next phase of our work, having more shared governance and co-design of research, pieces of research. Yeah, and building the capacity and capability for research activity in both the third sector, in local government, in the business sector, so that it's not "academics do research, we do policy". We actually, we need to do a bit more blurring of those lines. So those are some of the things I think I would do differently. I want, I want the collaboration to feel genuine that all parties feel bought into it equally.

[00:13:30] **Paul:** So are you saying that you, because a lot of the collaboration projects you've talked about have been very specific linked to circumstances. So, they'll have a start date and an end date. How do we make collaboration to day job across all the sectors you've talked about? Given different capacities, different cultures, different ways of working. How, how do we bring that together? I mean, in some ways this is like, what's the legacy of what you've done over the years and how do we mainstream that?

[00:13:56] **Kersten:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's, that is quite hard to do starting at regional level. I do think it requires layering up. Right. because I'm obviously, a lot of the time I'm drawing on my experience in Bradford, which is a big place, don't get me wrong, you know, over a half a million people, but has the benefit of having a university in its place and has 30 years about of conversations at every level between the university, the health service, the police, the community, and the local authority, and I do think there is no substitute for building some of those capacities and capabilities and habits. Whole system leadership at a place level. I do still think that's an agenda and I've been particularly keen to explore how places without a university could begin to develop connections and links and think about how they connect to things like, so for example, our, we had a wellbeing board, you know, the health and wellbeing board that you have to have, having a university presence at that, having a public sector leaders board, having university presence in that, the strategic partnership landscape of a place, whether it's the economic partnership of the health and wellbeing partnership, is there an academic connection to that? And then for me. The other bit is a number of places in Yorkshire have the Health Determinants Research Collaboration funding, which is very specifically to rebuild the research infrastructure for local government. And I, again, part of the intention there was those three or four places, I think there will be other rounds, should be reaching out and creating a network of local authorities who are seeking to build their research capacity. We've reinvigorated the policy network, haven't we? And, and the, the local authorities are beginning to meet. So, I suppose what I'm trying to describe on the civic side here is the governance, strategic partnership architecture, the professional kind of networks and infrastructure that obviously one of the great things we've done through YPIP is build community research activity. And in my other role as Chair of the Young Foundation, we are leading a big project across the UK on community research networks, which, and, but there are lots now of good examples across Yorkshire.

[00:16:18] **Paul:** So, if I'm clear, I've got you down to three things, Kersten. in terms of, one is governance, making sure everybody's got a voice in the right place, et cetera. Two is networks that people are talking to each other formally and informally. And the third one is capacity building.

That will identify particularly in things like community sector or local government that's been hit by austerity that we, we look to actually build and rebuild capacity in those areas.

Have I, have I missed anything? You think?

[00:16:46] **Kersten:** No, I mean at some point we need to talk about resourcing as well, you know, so I think you're absolutely right, Paul. Governance, networks, capacity. I also think there's something about the valuing of this activity and that leading to kind of sustained investment in it. And I, you know, we can go a long way with contributions in kind and the time of people. At some point I would really like to see, and I'm talking particularly about universities and local authorities and strategic authorities now, seeing the value of it and being prepared to make a down payment in the core activity because I think we can use that to leverage additional funding from foundations, research councils, you know, government departments and things like that. I've seen that happen. But the core, and this is classic, isn't it? It's the same thing in the voluntary sector. It's that core funding that is critical and that is harder to acquire. So I'd like to see we can build a resource base that allows it to continue.

[00:17:50] **Paul:** And, and also again, how do we sustain those resources once we've built them? And do we need new institutions? I'll, I'll end on it an interesting question for you, should there be a think tank for Yorkshire and the Humber?

[00:18:04] **Kersten:** Well, that's a very big question, and I think should there be a think tank that brings together the best of thinking from across academia, the think tank world, the business world, local? Do you know what I mean? I'm, I'm quite interested in exploring a concept, a new institution that is neither think tank nor academia that can be bought into by all. Look we are a population size of Scotland as I know only too well. Right, and, I think probably we do need the, that heft of thinking and focus on our region. Because I think we are critical to the prosperity of the UK but we know we have an asset base that is rich, not, but not properly deployed. And I think that, you know, a properly invested in and constructed think tank bought into by all could really support us in thinking through some of the big challenges we're going to face. And some of the ambitions that we have.

[00:19:02] **Paul:** Kersten England, that's been fascinating. Thank you so much.

[00:19:06] **Kersten:** Thanks Paul. It was fun as well, wasn't it?

[00:19:08] **Paul:** Absolutely.

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