

The Business of Policymaking Podcast

Episode 2 – In conversation with Sarah Jackson, OBE

Speakers: Jana Javornik and Sarah Jackson

[00:00:02] **Sarah:** And I think also that academics can be too academic for politicians because politicians need practical solutions and academics almost always say, “Oh, this needs further research.”

So I think that's why a partnership with a campaigning or policy organisation can be really good because it can help academics think about how we can step out of the academic tower and think about practical solutions and practical timescales.

[00:00:30] **Jana:** Welcome. You're listening to The Business of Policymaking – a Leeds University Business School podcast, revealing insights from the world of policymaking.

I'm Jana Javornik and in this episode, I had the pleasure of speaking to Sarah Jackson, OBE. Sarah has been at the forefront of flexible working research, gender diversity and inclusion, fathers at work, policy development and implementation for 30 years, earning an OBE for services to quality of life and twice recognised as a Top-30 influential thinker by HR magazine. In the past, Sarah led various in-house teams that provided analyses, legal advice, and tools for employers.

With her rich history of working in the charity sector, I really wanted Sarah's view on the role of campaigning, the dynamic, the rhythm, the time pressures, the demands she experienced when she was the Chief Executive Officer of the Working Families. That is the UK's charity that provides a frontline legal service for working parents and support for employers in developing family friendly employment for working parents and carers.

I trust we all will be able to learn a lot from this episode about navigating the busy and noisy UK policy world. I hope you enjoy listening to this episode as much as we enjoyed recording it.

[00:01:53] **Jana:** Thank you so much for joining me today, Sarah.

[00:01:57] **Sarah:** It's a pleasure. It's lovely to be here.

[00:01:59] **Jana:** In your multiple roles, you have been at the forefront of flexible working research, policy development, implementation. In one of your roles as the CEO of the Working Families, which is the UK's national charity for working parents and carers, you led various in-house teams that provided analyses, legal advice, tools for employers.

In your campaigning work, which is also very rich, you collaborated with academics and governments, actively created opportunities for and invited research and encouraged debates and knowledge exchanges. Your rich experience has offered an invaluable insight into the process of policymaking and the role evidence plays in this.

Please, could you explain or provide a bit of an insight into your work in the charity sector? How does it look like? What does that entail?

[00:02:55] **Sarah:** Okay. Well, until 2018, I was Chief Exec of Working Families. Now, that's a charity that provides a frontline legal service for working parents and it supports employers in developing good practice in family-friendly employment. So, that gave us two sources of evidence on which to build a case for policy change.

We had, we knew about the needs of parents, and we knew about how policy works in practice, and we then partnered with academics on some research, and we also used our in-house research resource. And what we were trying to do was influence government. And we did have quite a good level of success around flexible working legislation and maternity, paternity, and parental rights.

And today, I'm still in that space. I'm chair of PiPA, Parents and Carers in Performing Arts, and very much covering the same ground, but industry specific. And I also continue to write and research and advise on flexible hybrid and family-friendly working.

I was just thinking a little bit about what it entails, what does policy work entail, and I thought just before we get deeper into the conversation, it was worth reminding people that politics, if we're trying to influence politicians, politics is both fast and slow.

You have a very fast electoral and treasury cycle, where people are looking for instant solutions, they're looking for immediate impact. And so, I remember, you know, one of my great frustrations has always been that all the research that's done into the importance of childcare and support, subsidising childcare, shows that it does pay for itself, and it pays for itself over longer than the four-year electoral period and certainly doesn't pay for itself within the fiscal year. And you can see the Labour Party's backing off their childcare plans right now for that very reason.

And then the slow side of politics is it can absolutely take decades to build a case. So flexible working, for example, you can track back into what politicians like Harriet Harman and Margaret Hodge were doing in the late 1980s and early 90s before they finally got into government in, in 1997.

And the voluntary sector and the researchers were working alongside and influencing that process. So it is, it is both fast and slow. And I think also that academics can be too academic for politicians because politicians need practical solutions and academics almost always say, "Oh, this needs further research".

So I think that's why a partnership with a campaigning or policy organisation can be really good because it can help academics think about how can we step out of the academic tower and think about practical solutions and practical timescales.

[00:05:34] **Jana:** Like you said, it's both slow and fast. But in terms of policy cycles, do you think the policy actually follows the government in office, or do they change with the government? Let's say we get a really good relationship with the current government and then there's a change in government. Okay, it's not happening that often in the UK, but it's happening far more often in other countries. So who do we build relationships with?

[00:06:03] **Sarah:** You have to build relationships with all the major parties and with the officials if you want to be involved in the policy world. Now, whether you want to do that as academics, it's probably not incredibly cost effective to do that. You know, because if you think at Working Families, I had a Head of Research and I had a Head of Policy and they were both working, not full time

because we were a small charity, but bigger charities will have full time people or teams of people who are building those relationships and are tracking the development of policy, policy threads, and interest areas over time.

I feel it's probably not very practical for an academic to single-handedly think "this is what I care about, and I'm going to make sure I make a relationship with this politician, and that will get me to a point where I can influence the law". I think you really have to look much more carefully at the voluntary sector and the campaigning and thought leadership partnerships that you can get involved with, because you have a very specific set of skills and a very specific way of bringing influence into that policymaking arena.

[00:07:10] **Jana:** Sarah, in your really rich experience, what, if any, role should academic research play in informing, setting up policy agendas, in their implementation, their evaluation vis-à-vis, for example, your own? You've mentioned how they differ, but what would be role for the academic?

[00:07:27] **Sarah:** I think the first thing to say is, look, once an issue is firmly on a government's agenda, the civil servants are really good. The House of Commons Library, as you will know, is a fantastic resource. So you've got really, really good people who are writing briefings, who are pulling together the case for new legislation, they're looking at potential impact, and they are drawing on academic work.

So anything that you've been doing in your field of interest can be drawn on at that point. It really does inform how policy is developed and turned into law. I say that with the proviso that politicians are perfectly capable of ignoring all the evidence, as we see now, right now, with the government's response to its own evaluation of shared parental leave, which, the evaluation shows clearly that shared parental leave as a policy does not work, and that fathers need to be properly paid, and they, and all fathers need to be able to access 'use it or lose it' leave.

However, the government's answer is to permit eligible UK fathers to split the current two weeks of leave into two separate weeks. I mean, it's completely inadequate and just is ignoring their own evidence. I also remember a colleague saying to me that they'd gone in to speak to Michael Gove, whose line to them was, "I'm not interested in your evidence".

So be, be realistic about what politicians will do. But what I wanted as a lobbyist was evidence to back up my case. I got my own, I'd got the numbers of callers. I'd got what they called about. I've got employer case studies etc. but it really helps to have the credibility of an academic partner and somebody who has got a track record, who has dug into the issue in the past, and who can bring a new set of insights, if you like.

I mean, a couple of examples, I suppose, one was a piece of work that I did with Lancaster University with Caroline Gatrell, who was then there. And we were looking at fathers at work. And it was a two-year study. It was funded by the National Lottery. Sadly, they never funded research again. It was only one year initiative. It was really valuable. And I would say that probably our findings had no immediate impact. You know, we sort of sat in the, "well, this is interesting" category but what it did do is it absolutely added heft to the work that we and others were doing around fathers and around work and flex and culture.

And it got us thinking so that we then started asking different questions of fathers in the annual survey we did for the Modern Families Index, and that meant that we were able to actually demonstrate and articulate a fatherhood penalty and that really got people thinking properly about what fathers and work need.

Or another piece of work that actually wasn't done in partnership with a voluntary organisation is the work that Claire Kelliher and Charlotte Gascoigne have just published at Cranfield on the part-time furlough. And that started off with a question, right, in 2020, what impact will managing this part-time furlough scheme have?

And it was really for a piece of research. I think it was quite a quick turnaround, based on focus groups and survey work. What they were able to show was that managers who use the furlough scheme to redesign roles so that they were able to keep people on working part time continue to remain more open to part time roles and even to proactively create them.

And that's hugely useful. And I think perhaps it was, it's been fairly low key in its immediate impact because it hasn't been linked to a campaigning organisation. It was Cranfield's own research. Unlike the partnership that we had at Working Families with Cranfield, where we were looking at flexible working and performance.

And that was able to show that managers and workers reported performance gains in quality and quantity, although they couldn't really nail it, you know, nobody can nail the productivity thing, but it's been hugely influential ever since because it was used by Working Families as evidence that flexible working shouldn't scare the productivity horses.

So it's a real, a real example of how a good piece of academic research, whether it's done in partnership with a charity or campaigning organisation, or on its own, but is then given to or drawn attention to, is a real door opener and credibility giver.

[00:11:30] **Jana:** Sarah, your experiences with various organisations at various levels, and also with the range of policy actors and ecosystems - I like that word - provide a kind of unique understanding of the policy landscape, but also, as we've mentioned, of the policy cycle, but also the language, which does matter, the players, and the timeline that policy works towards as we've established, and time constraints under which high level decision makers operate... As we've discussed so many times, that gives kind of like a new meaning to the elevator pitch, are really often rather difficult to understand beyond the policymaking world.

And this can be a source of frustration on both ends. And as you've mentioned, the reason knowledge transfers or exchanges between academia and policy world could fail. But could you walk us through a typical working day of a CEO of one of the most influential charity organisations for parents and carers? The dynamics, the rhythm, the time pressures, the work process, work organisation, all of that. The windows of opportunities to work with academia basically.

[00:12:39] **Sarah:** Well, I have to say, blimey, you know, if you're the chief exec, there is not a typical day because you're doing everything. Sadly, you do not, you don't have time to focus on policy and research, and that's the joy of now being in the role I am. I can now just think about, think about the things I'm interested in rather than how to run an organisation.

But I would say that it's partly about reading and horizon scanning and partly about relationships. So if I use working families as an example, my then Head of Research was on top of what academics were publishing and my Head of Policy was on top of what the major parties were up to in Westminster and in Edinburgh, and at the time in Brussels as well.

And so we knew what was going on, and we knew the legislative timetable. We knew the timetable of the select committees, what the likely areas of inquiry were going to be, and obviously we also know the key areas of policy interest. We know what the various parties are trying to achieve, where that aligns with the needs and concerns of our beneficiaries.

So basically, what I'm describing is a team that's on receiving mode. We're just making sure that we understand what's going on in our world and what the players who we want to influence are interested in and what they're doing. And so we're also then, if you flip that around saying, okay, we're also trying to actually be active players in this.

We're not just sitting and listening. We're trying to get in to see the ministers and the shadow ministers. We're trying to get in to see the officials. And we need to be able to bring them insight. We need to be able to bring them facts that will make them open, unlike Mr Gove and not being interested in my colleagues' evidence.

We need facts that will make them open to the kinds of solutions that we want to achieve. And so a lot of that is about building relationships with all those players, with the researchers, with the policymakers, with the politicians, with the officials, so that you've got a whole web, or your ecosystem, if you like, but a whole web of people that you have to know, and be able to, to talk to.

And it's also about building relationships with all the other voluntary and campaigning organisations who are in the same field. Because what drives policymakers nuts is when they get charity number one bouncing through the door and saying we work on this issue and here's the answer. And this is why.

And then policy number two comes in the next day with a completely different answer. So, for example, we did, yeah, shared parental leave, you know, with all its flaws, took a long time to thrash out and was actually, there were campaigners like the Fatherhood Institute who were absolutely dead set against it and obviously quite rightly, and then there were campaigners like us who were saying we can see it's not going to work but what's being proposed is too damaging for women's rights to be able to support alternatives.

But that was very difficult because we ourselves as campaigners were not united in what we wanted to achieve. Whereas with the right to request flexible working, it was an easier process in the sense that the campaigning organisations had a sense of where we wanted to get to.

It took us ten years to move from the right to request being available to parents of children under five, to parents of teenagers, to all employees, you know, we had to go through a whole stage, but at all times the voluntary sector was basic, the campaigners were basically talking with one voice on that.

So I think going back to what this means for academics is, it's the Head of Research who's making friends with the academics, he or she is looking to see who's interested in our work, who's

publishing in our area, you know, whose published work seems to be moving the agenda on. And quite a lot of that is going to be done by attending events or reading media coverage.

As I do now, I see what the FT is saying about what the academics are saying. Most voluntary organisations, particularly small campaigning groups, are probably not reading your original research, because we just don't have the budget to subscribe, and we probably don't have the hours to spend on it either, quite honestly.

So, we always used to, at Working Families, rely on our academic friends sharing PDFs of their articles. And also just, again, it's the cups of coffee. It's much more time-efficient to be talking to an academic and getting to the nub of what both of us are interested in than reading the lengthy journal articles.

[00:17:12] **Jana:** That's such a good title, let's meet over coffee and discuss research. And it makes so much sense and I would really like to follow up on what you've said in terms of various bits of information that comes from academia and very often, obviously, it is behind the paywall.

So you did mention a few ideas on where you do get the academic both data and work, but are there any others? What would your advice be for academics to help not only sending out the academic messages, but also translating? So, going back to the issue of language, of academic languages that you started the conversation with.

[00:17:43] **Sarah:** Well actually let's talk about that first and then I'll talk about how to be an influencer. But just this thing about language, I think relates back to the different use that a campaigning organisation will make of academic research and the different audiences. So if I think about any of the academic partnerships I had at Working Families, what we did was we produced, either written by the Head of Research or by the researcher in conjunction with the Head of Research, we would produce a popular accessible booklet, pamphlet, whatever it was, it would be between six and 20 pages long, probably. Very much aimed at an employer audience because we wanted HR directors to be able to understand what the research was all about and how to apply it.

And, or, also aimed at the policymaking audience, because again, you just want to be able to get it out to them clearly and simply. Our academic partners would then spend the next several years publishing their own journal articles. And it was always fascinating to me to see that, you know, we'd published X report in whatever year it was, and then we moved on. And that same piece of research is being repurposed and republished over and over and over again.

But then it loops around again, because then when I'm writing a response, perhaps to a parliamentary consultation. So, for example, the evaluation of shared parental leave, that the business department has just published, I contributed to that as did many other people. And in your response, you will go back and cite the academic journals, the academic articles that your friendly researcher has been working on, so that the civil servants who are assessing the evidence have not just got the populist publication that the charity has produced, but they've also got the solid citations that the academics have produced, so that so you can see that there is a lovely sort of symbiotic relationship between the two pieces, the two kinds of publication.

And I think it's also about thinking about impact as well. And being able to show, the times, your academic time scale is a long-time scale in terms of publication. And by the time you're talking about impact, it may well be several years later, and the impact may well have changed.

Whereas what we can do as the campaigning organisation is we can show quick impact. So a good example would be Parents and Carers in Performing Arts. One of the first pieces of research that they did, they work generally with Birkbeck and also with, I think it was actually Central, the drama school, an academic associated with that did the very first piece.

But anyway, they were able to show in one of their very first surveys of the industry that there was no such thing as a job share in the performing arts, just didn't exist. And taking that piece of information, the team then have been working with theatres for the last six years, and we can now show job shares on stage and backstage.

And that's a direct impact output from a piece of academic research. So that's what, you know, brilliant for the academics to be able to then take that to their funders and say, this is what happened.

So that's on language. I think that language and the different uses that people make of, um, academic research, but just thinking about how as an academic, do you engage.

So I think what you should be doing, I think, take a look around really at the organisations that are working with either the communities or on the issues that are of interest to you academically and that overlap with your areas of research and just reach out and say hello. As I said, I think generally anyone working for a charity or lobby group on research or policy is going to be pleased to have coffee with an academic who has shared interests.

I would read what the charity has already published and be realistic about how mature they are in their understanding of what research is. You can get very frustrated working with a charity that doesn't understand the difference between correlation and causation, for example. A lot of lobbyists will run away with correlation very, very quickly because it's an easy thing to talk to a policymaker about.

And be also aware that if they've never had an academic partnership before, they won't be familiar with how it works. They won't be familiar with the timescales. They won't be familiar with the costs. They'll be utterly horrified by university establishment costs because they will think, "Oh, if we're going to partner with an academic, that's great." You know, "If we raise 10 grand, that'll cover our time and a bit of publishing, it'll be fine". And then the academic goes, "well, and that will be, 100 grand". So that's why a lot of the research funding needs to be found by you, the academic.

It's very unlikely that the charity is going to be able to turn up charity sourced fundraising, unless it's a really big player with a good endowment and huge reserves, in which case it may well be used to funding its own partnerships.

And then I would be looking for a partner who can help you with impact. You know, the PiPA example that I just gave you about job shares is a good one.

At Working Families, we always had far more academic partnerships potentially on the go than ever came to fruition because essentially the academic would contact us, Head of Research would have a chat and we would say, "Yes, what you're looking at does sound like it would be of interest to us".

It would then take a year or so to do the application and then it would be a bit longer before the no came back. So I would say Working Families tended to have six, seven, eight or more partnerships that didn't come to anything. Which is another reason that you need to be realistic, that what you're interested in will just be sort of part of, that your charity partner may not be as wholeheartedly excited about your area of research as you are, because they know nothing's going to happen.

Probably nothing will come of this. It's great to get to know you and maybe something will happen in the future. But right now, we're not going to invest too much time and emotional energy in you, quite frankly. But then also look for partners who've got academic advisers. Because if they've got an academic advisory panel, they may well be interested in asking you to join that.

And that can be a really nice way of getting to understand the world of charity and policymaking and lobbying. And also building your relationships so that you do end up with a bright idea that you end up having, funded in partnership with. And I suppose just the final thing I would say is just to remember that your research will need to answer a question that the charity wants to have answered.

And it's going to have to be capable of providing some headlines relatively quickly because the lobbying business is highly competitive, you know, so as a lobbyist I didn't want to be sitting waiting for the perfect research finding while another organisation is getting in front of the minister or the media with their story.

And that story could absolutely be based on having talked to six people on the pavement before they went in. So it is being realistic and finding the way to help the charity get to the answer it needs to get to on the timescale that is going to work for the charity and for that fairly fast political time frame.

[00:25:07] **Jana:** You're really going into the crux of the thing, and obviously there's also one thing that we discussed on several occasions, and that's the geography and geographical location. Does it matter where academics are, compared to where the central government is or wherever the policy world that they are trying to influence is? What's your view on that?

[00:25:28] **Sarah:** I don't think it matters in the slightest. I mean, it, especially now that we can do everything by Zoom, it would, you know, it would have been tricky to have partnered with an academic in Milan 15 years ago because of the cost of travel. But right now, I don't think location has any bearing on anything anymore, unless it is a specific funder who specifically wants to work in a specific area.

So, for example, I can think the Scottish government quite likes to work with Scottish universities, you know, whereas I think the Westminster government, well, it likes its PWCs and it likes its academic institute, but I honestly think it doesn't matter.

[00:26:08] **Jana:** That's useful, as is everything you've said so far. Sarah, there's one thing I'd like to bring up. And that is that you've often mentioned one piece of policy and that's shared parental leave. And, shared parental leave has been kind of undergoing shifts and changes and whatever for the past 10 years.

And obviously there's been so much groundwork before then. So literally we are talking about a two decades' worth of work that's been invested by both academics as well as non-academic groups. So it's just kind of taking us back to your issue that you constantly repeat, timing is crucial.

Even though this policy has taken so much time, I really found it very useful what you said that you can go now back and revisit some of the points you made a decade earlier, uh, and actually go back to the academic research that was published 10 years back.

So, I think it's very useful in terms of the policy cycle that you've mentioned, and you do understand well both the politics of policymaking and policymaking itself. And you also understand different communities, different approaches, different types of policies, different types of decisions, different coalitions, different power plays.

You've seen it all. You've already volunteered a lot of advice, but I wonder are there any other top tips that or advice to academics that you are willing to share with us today? And for the academics who are willing and eager to engage with the policy world, not just charity, but policy world more broadly, on how to reach these processes, in the future, in the hybrid future?

[00:27:37] **Sarah:** Oh, I think the hybrid future is very helpful, isn't it? Because it does mean that you can reach out and going back to your question about does location matter. Location does matter in terms of, if you want to build, I suppose, very deep relation, deep and trusting relationships still need some time that is face to face.

But, for you, if you're sitting in your institution saying, who do I want to get to know? The hybrid world is fantastic because you really can just reach out to anyone you're interested in and say, hi, this is the work I'm doing. Let's have a Zoom call. I think that I also, well, I also know that parliamentary committees are beginning to take evidence by Zoom and I gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament, even before we all got so canny with Zoom, remotely from London, but it doesn't work as well.

I think, definitely, if you can get yourself in front of the parliamentary committee so that you can see the whites of their eyes, you're going to have more impact, certainly. I think what I'm saying in a long and round sort of roundabout way is I don't think I've got any other really clever... I suppose something else, if you're really passionate about a particular topic and you find a lobbying organisation or a charity that you just think is doing what you think needs to be done, then try and get on the board, join as a trustee, because charities like to have academics on the board, because, again, it gives us a bit of cred.

I think there's masses of opportunity for academics to step out beyond the library and have much more practical partnerships with people. I am sure that it is very satisfying when you can see that the thinking you're doing and the research that you're doing is being taken and applied practically by people whose day job that is, but where you both have a shared passion.

[00:29:28] **Jana:** Makes so much sense. Go out and learn about your ecosystem and learn it really well. That's been incredibly enlightening. And I've greatly enjoyed talking to you. So thank you ever so much for joining us on today's show.

[00:29:41] **Sarah:** It's been great fun. Thank you so much.

[00:29:47] **Jana:** You've been listening to the Business of Policymaking podcast from Leeds University Business School. Presented by Jana Javornik and produced by Hannah Preston. If you'd like to get in touch about anything you've heard in this episode, our contact details are in the episode show notes.