The Business of Policymaking Podcast

Episode 5 – In conversation with Paul Hayes
Speakers: Jana Javornik and Paul Hayes

[00:00:00] **Paul:** One of the clichés about English local government, and it's probably increasingly true, is it's data rich and analysis poor. This is where partnerships with academia, with think tanks, with other organisations become vitally important.

[00:00:21] **Jana:** Welcome back to the Business of Policymaking, the new podcast from Leeds University Business School, with myself, Jana Javornik, and Hannah Preston as producer. My guest today is Paul Hayes, Senior Policy Fellow at Leeds University Business School. We talked about his experience as a policy manager at a local council in Northern England and what it is like working in local government.

We also discussed how local governments engage with academics and how academics can get on policymakers' radars and build networks with colleagues working in local councils. Apologies if you can hear some drilling quietly in the background at one point. The joys of working outside a building site.

We also have a special guest appearance from Paul's cat at some point, whom you might be able to hear in the background if you listen very carefully. I really enjoyed talking to Paul about his previous job and finding out more about (working at the UK) local government. I hope you too will enjoy listening to our conversation.

 Hi, Paul. Thanks for joining us today.

[00:01:25] **Paul:** Thank you, Jana.

[00:01:27] **Jana:** It's really good to have you on the show. So, Paul, you have recently joined Leeds University Business School as a Senior Policy Engagement Fellow. Prior to joining us at the business school, you were a corporate policy manager at Wakefield council (that's up north in Yorkshire) and a policy lead for the key cities group, which is an association of 27 mid-sized UK cities.

You gained invaluable insight into the processes of policymaking at the UK local level. Might you tell us a bit about your past role and work? What did it entail? What does being a corporate policy manager at a local council entail?

[00:02:10] **Paul:** Absolutely. Thank you, Jana. Unlike the civil service, there's not really what you could describe as a policy profession within English local and regional government. So, I came up through performance management, through project management, through what was also called 'best value', which was a strategic programme brought in by the last Labour government around analysing services within across local authorities in England when they were fit for purpose.

I've done policy in the Corporate Centre for roughly 20 years in Wakefield, and, as you say, with key cities, which was a cross-party group of local councils from, as I say, 27 cities across England and Wales. The big difference between policy and the civil service, as I would put it, is that local government is obviously a lot smaller.

It's got a lot more focused and smaller corporate centres than the civil service. The policy profession and policy people, you can usually count on one hand, and that's not within a city, that's probably across a region. In West Yorkshire, there's about eight or nine policy people, and they pretty much, those in the corporate centre, do everything.

That's the big difference. If you're in the civil service, you're in a department, you're in, I don't know, you're in Transport, you're in Highways, you're in Health. In local authorities, you pretty much do everything. So, I was lead author for corporate strategies, and that wasn't just the Council's corporate plan.

I wrote, for example, a Community Safety Strategy. I wrote a Third Sector Strategy, working very closely with politicians and supporting them. I also led on things such as the Census, digital switchover. You become a jack of all trades in local authorities. And that, I think, the fundamental difference.

And the other one is, of course, you're operating locally, you're operating within a very small geographical area, with a lot more politicians who are a lot closer to you than in the civil service.

[00:04:14] **Jana:** That sounds amazing. I hope there were some Jackies of all trades as well, not just Jacks?

[00:04:19] **Paul:** Oh, yes.

[00:04:20] **Jana:** Adding to that, what role, if any, would you say the in-house analyses have in policy process at this level? You've mentioned that you basically covered everything.

And I'm sure you've also covered the policy analysis and all of that. Did you in that role actually get to engage with academics in academia, wider research? And if, why and how did you identify potential consultants from academia?

[00:04:51] **Paul:** I think the big thing to add here is the impact of austerity over the last decade on English local government. You're talking about organisations that have had a 40 percent cut in their budgets. So, what you've got, again, is the capacity is very limited across certainly midsize local authorities. Some of the larger combined authorities have capacity, but they've got quite a larger strategic role.

I'll give you an example. In 2012, there were probably four people in Wakefield dealing with policy and that didn't include the data people, etc. Post that, there was me. Also, I then had

strategic responsibility for equality, diversity, and inclusion as well. Plus, as I said, any other little job that came up.

You still had a lot of data. One of the clichés about English local government, and it's probably increasingly true, is that it's data rich and analysis poor. This is where partnerships with academia, with think tanks, with other organisations became vitally important, and certainly as the 2010s went on.

So, I ended up doing a lot of commissioning of research pieces from universities, including we just completed in Wakefield, for example, a very large three-year research the Economic and Social Research Council-funded programme, with the Social Science Institute called Northern Exposure, which was around racism and community cohesion in Brexit-voting northern towns.

And you end up engaging with a lot there. So Key Cities, for example, commissioned research from both Think Tanks and academics. It commissioned work from CURDS, the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies at Newcastle (University) about city economies. This is one of the problems, namely, that local authorities lacked economists, sociologists, anthropologists, but those areas of research have become increasingly important to local authorities.

So what you end up doing is working with and trying to build relationships. Now, for a lot of places, that's not too bad because they've got a physical university presence, so they will know where to go to. But there are many places in the UK, the smaller places, (that) don't have a physical university presence.

So, relationship-building with local institutions or regional institutions becomes massively important. And one of the problems is you're quite time poor in doing this. So, what I would try and do was make relationships with institutions and attempt to engage with those. But also, you find, and this is probably a criticism of academia, that universities don't operate as corporate entities.

There was another university that Wakefield attempted to engage with for a Memorandum of Understanding, and one of the problems in terms of engaging research was you had to go around roughly, I think, there were 20 schools in that institution that they wanted to meet individually and there was a real problem, so you end up honing it down, which is a shame because academics, all the work I've done, adds an awful lot of value, they have the thinking time, they have the critical skills. This is where academics can add value to local authorities that local authorities don't have anymore.

And then, that's still an ongoing issue and it doesn't look like ending. So, the critical skills are not, what you've got is a lot of people who are very good at delivery in local public services. They also understand their locality. But what they don't have is the time to look at it from a press perspective, and that's the value of academic partnerships definitely.

[00:08:30] **Jana:** You've raised the issue of time. Could you give us a some sense, the nitty gritty details around the speed and the timelines local governments are working against?

[00:08:44] **Paul:** One of the clichés, another cliché of local government is, What time are you going home tonight? As in, Can I have a report in two hours? And you end up doing that sort of work. The other one is local government is unique in England. That is, it has to balance a budget on an annual basis. NHS trusts don't have to do that, for example.

Civil service doesn't have to do that. Local government does. So, everything becomes an annual budget cycle. Decisions, very much important strategic decisions affecting places are made on a very quick turnaround. It's very rare, for example, you'll get a multi- year research project.

Projects will be done in two to three months. Data will be wanted within a month. And then also that will go through political process, that will include commenting on it. So, you operate on a very quick timescale. Sometimes it's a quick and dirty timescale in terms of writing. For example, corporate plans are written in three to four months, usually by two to three individuals, with one lead author.

[00:09:46] **Jana:** So, you're taking the concept of time to an entirely different level. You've mentioned that it's really important that you curate and obviously first establish and then really nurture the relationships with various academic networks. And I do wonder, when one is willing to collaborate with you, how does a good academic or a good academic network actually get onto your radar?

How do you identify them? You've mentioned local universities, but obviously, as you've also said, not all local governments have access to those.

[00:10:18] **Paul:** I also used to say (that) the greatest tool for a policy person was Twitter. Because again, local authorities don't, for example, have access to academic journals. They're paywalled. It's Twitter, it's media. It used to be, for example, conference attending. It was also who you engage with.

It was also what you'd probably describe as the trade press. So, in local authorities, it'd be things like the municipal journal, the local government chronicle, even down to things in the broader media. That's regional media, local media. So, having a media profile for an academic and having a social media profile for an academic, it's that sort of thing that's going to get you noticed by policy people.

[00:11:02] **Jana:** You've mentioned Twitter, which is obviously now called X, but let's not go there. What would you advise academics do to raise their profile on social media?

[00:11:12] **Paul:** A big hint is to engage with people. So, you will have people that will put a post. Comment on that post, develop a relationship.

There's a lot of people, academics as well as people in other local councils that I built relationships through engaging with them on social media, commenting, obviously politely, but engaging with them and actually having debates with people through Twitter. Certainly, yeah, as you said, it's going in an interesting direction at the moment, but in its heyday, I always described it to people as one of the best tools.

Also, what would happen is, for example, a government spending review would come out. So, you'd have the speech from the Chancellor, you'd literally have Twitter on another screen and watch who was commenting using the hashtags on that. And you'd start to find people that were interesting, you'd follow them, they'd follow you back, you'd build a relationship with them.

So, the use of things like hashtags on Twitter and targeting it as a search tool were really good in terms of developing relationships and sustaining them.

[00:12:18] **Jana:** That's very useful. I think in terms of getting not only the presence, but actually getting the content and getting it right and at the right time. This is one of the questions I have for you regarding your previous role: how an academic can actually get the timing right?

Because obviously we often think research we do has societal value. And it's not necessarily time sensitive, whereas policymaking, in a policy world, you are surrounded by very much politicised world, depending on what's trending on the political agenda at the time. So how can we as academics get to understand the political agenda, the really fast-paced timeline against which things change at the policy level?

[00:13:01] **Paul:** Again, it's (about) building and sustaining relationships. One of the things I've always said to academics I've commissioned is, I don't want to see your report in three months. I want you at the end of a phone. A good academic becomes, in some ways, an unofficial adviser. And you will introduce them to people.

You will take them around your organisation. You will virtually introduce them to people and they get a feeling. It's like a process of osmosis. You can see it occasionally snowballing, in academics start to understand, they go beyond a lot of time, which you've got relationship. They do. And I think the term 'trusted adviser' is actually quite appropriate.

They're certainly seen as having less of an agenda. Should we say think tanks or big accountancy and consulting firms will come in with an agenda, they'll come in with a product, yeah, that they've done somewhere else. But if you're an academic, you've got a quality mark, and you're seen as independent and neutral, you're not trying to sell a product.

And that's good in terms of, you know, the reputation of somebody coming in from a university or an academic institution to work with a government agency that they've got that background and pedigree. So, I worked with a couple of people - I'll go back again to

the project around community cohesion. Literally, I had those people as cohesion advisers. They were finding things from their perspectives. They were going beyond their research projects to things that they might find useful in future. So, we ended up having a discussion, for example, around agricultural migrant workers with one of the researchers who wanted to do some further stuff on that.

Also, again, what government can provide academics a lot of the time is not money. The two big things I've always said I can provide to you as a researcher is, one, data that you don't have to run around and chase because there are datasets within governments that are not publicly available. You can go through them, but they're incredibly useful and the researchers I've worked with have found them incredibly useful.

And the other one is access. Not just within organisations, but within a wider area, in particular, stakeholders, business, community groups. One of the things I could do in my previous role was to facilitate that access because it improves the quality of the research that comes out, but it also benefits the researcher for doing further work.

[00:15:30] **Jana:** Paul, you spent a couple of decades in a fast-paced, politicised environment working for and with the local government, having now moved into academia. Everything you've described, having thinking space, giving you the perks … I would probably, as an academic, slightly disagree with.

But I do wonder what the lessons are, what are the skills that you are transferring from one (role) to another? Let's remind our listeners that you are now working as a senior policy engagement fellow at Leeds University Business School. So, what it is that you are bringing from your previous job onto your new one into an academic setting and how can academics work with you?

[00:16:10] **Paul:** I'm still coming to terms with my role. I've only been around a few months, but I'm describing it as a mixture of matchmaking and translation. Writing for policy audience, for example, is very different to writing an academic journal paper. I've learned that the other way around.

It's a different skill set. It's supporting colleagues. To actually think ,"Right, how is somebody in the policy field? What do they want? How do they want that data? How do they want those recommendations presented? How would you write a select committee submission for a parliamentary select committee?"

So, that, in some ways, is one of the roles I'm undertaking (in new role) to support academics at the Business School. I think the other one, of course, is my address book. Who do you know? The English subnational state is a very fragmented thing. So, we've had, what, 12 years of neoliberal government, we've got stuff that's privatised, there are entities that operate as partnerships, they're changing names of organisations, changing roles, and remits of organisations. The devolution agenda in England.

It's fragmented and it's complicated and sometimes it's quite hard, unless you've actually been in that environment, to say who is responsible for what because it can get confusing. So, part of my role is supporting academics where these are the people you might want to talk to. These are the people who are engaged in that area.

This is what's likely to be on their policy radar. So, I think that's where, hopefully, I'm adding value within the school to researchers and academics.

[00:17:56] **Jana:** So, how do you get onto academics' radar? In an earlier question was about how academics could get your attention as someone working in the policy field, now, how do you get onto an academic radar, so that academic colleagues come to you and use your support and service?

[00:18:12] **Paul:** Yeah, one of the things certainly for my role is to be proactive, to try and understand what people are doing. One of the things I started doing during the pandemic, and it grew like top speed, was when, during lockdown, I started doing a daily policy alerts, which was a précis of everything that came out from think tanks, everything that I could find that came out from government departments, some academic research in there, that seems to have grown like wildfire.

Now, my external policy version has about 450 subscribers, not just in academia, but within government, and it's an incredibly useful tool, so much so that I get embargoed advanced copies of policy documents and things like that. And the other one is, for example, within the business school, there's a set of research areas.

It's looking at those things, right. (For example) You're looking at the Centre for Decision Research, looking at their webpages. These are the sorts of things you're doing, you engage with them. How can you… this is me - I've just started at the business school. I understand you're doing X and Y. How can I add value? There's a lot about being proactive on both sides,

I think, and I know you can call them sides on both elements of the partnership. The academics need to be proactive. But, of course, so do policy people because it both adds value as well as you build virtuous circles. And, I'm back to that snowball metaphor, that once things start to snowball, relationships start to snowball, too.

Knowledge transfer from both sides starts to snowball. Then you, you get the value of those partnerships, and the value of collaborations increases probably exponentially. I mean, I've known academics I've worked with for good few years now. I'm still engaged with them. There are other institutions, not at Leeds themselves, but I've still got excellent working relationships with them.

They send me stuff. They invite me to things; they call me up and say what's going on about X and Y and it continues to work. The big thing is to have people that you can talk to probably about a variety of subjects. It's to build networks. Networks are great.

[00:20:22] **Jana:** You keep talking about networks, but let's focus on the, and I'm going to use that only for the podcast purpose, post-pandemic period. Obviously, we aren't there yet. This has changed the way we engage. It has opened up new opportunities and I'm sure local governments have changed their approach to reaching out to various different groups and networks as well.

Have you seen that happening? Is that your experience? And if so, the physical geographical distance is probably becoming less of an issue? So, apart from Twitter, how do we become available and how do academics become more reachable across this large country as well as internationally?

[00:21:05] **Paul:** I think you're very right. Microsoft Teams and Zoom have delivered a paradigm shift in how people operate. I, for example, at the end of the pandemic got pulled into a couple of advisory groups from academics I've never met before, at the universities in London to support their activities. Advisory group seems to be quite a big thing in terms of pulling people together and building networks.

The virtual networks are strong. You don't have to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning anymore and get on a train to London to meet somebody for two hours. Or when there's somebody you'll only ever see in six months, you can start building that relationship remotely, so that has become incredibly useful. There were people I've never engaged with globally before that now I can do via Teams.

So, I did some work with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and what's called Preston Model back in Key Cities days. They've got contacts with the Democracy Collaborative in America. Again, you end up engaging utilising new technology because you don't have to go to the conference now, physically.

And a lot of the time the policy people can't be released to go to the conference. You can't take a week out to do that, but you can take half an hour to attend a seminar or a session. And good Think Tanks and academics are building those sorts of things and events and they're putting them online.

And they give you people and say, right, this will take you an hour, but it'd be incredibly useful. You'll meet 35 people. You'll get 35 people's emails. You'll also get, you know, a transcript. And you'll know these people are interested and they're the people you might want to talk to later on. It's a very high-tech version of business cards, but it works.

[00:22:46] **Jana:** Love that. Having crossed to the other side now, into academia, how do you see your role developing? You've mentioned several times in our offline conversations that you're still learning the ropes. Obviously, the transfer probably isn't as smooth because the two worlds are simply too different.

So, first of all, what is one of the biggest differences you've noticed between the two, and, second, how do you see your role developing in the future?

[00:23:19] **Paul:** The biggest difference between sectors, and again, I'll come back to it, is thinking and thinking time. I'm amazed sometimes the thinking time that academia actually has. Because I am so used to, as I say, What time are you going home tonight? I still remember a bunch of civil servants coming up to talk to us about levelling up and my boss turns up at nine o'clock and says, Can you write a briefing note about what Wakefield asks are for levelling up? All right. What time are they coming? Oh, in one and a half hours. The chief exec wants it. So, you did a lot of quick and dirty stuff.

You don't get the rigour. Academia has the rigour, which is very much a different thing. But, there ais the critique of academia from the policy side that it is all about the rigour. But what policy people want, in some ways, yes, they want the evidence, they want the background, but what they really want is, what do I do next?

What's your recommendation for action? Because, in some ways, there's very little point in engaging with academia for somebody to tell you what's going on; which is useful. But the most important fact is, what do I do about it? And I always describe it as the advice should be, What do I stop doing?

What do I do? What do I start doing? Or, what do I do differently? And these're the things that politicians want to know; they are people with remarkably short attention spans. They will not read a bibliography. Quite the opposite. So, it's that sort of things. What I want to do in working with academics, and I'm not an academic, I want to help academics engage and deliver impact with those people by saying,

This is the style. This is what politicians, what senior managers in the public sector are comfortable with. How can I help you engage with them, make a difference, give them the tools and the ideas? I think that I could see a success in my new role, in terms of supporting the business school and individual academics and groups of academics in making an impact. And again, in going beyond individual projects and sustaining long-lasting partnerships that become productive and can go off in different tangents and different directions.

[00:25:50] **Jana:** Listeners probably don't know that you and I have been working quite closely together on something that's going to, hopefully, become a product soon, let's hope. So, no spoilers here, but as an academic who keeps popping into policymaking, everything you've said resonates with me.

 But knowing both worlds, what would your top tip be for academics who are eager, willing, and able to engage with the local government?

[00:26:34] **Paul:** My top tip for academics is one… How would I do it if I was an academic in a university, had a piece of research and thought this may be of interest to local government, to somebody operating in a local public service, because obviously you have the NHS that operates at a local level, too?

You have things like housing associations, street housing providers, you've got the police, you've got a variety of people. So, it's about trying to find somebody to talk to who will open the doors for you. Usually, in the corporate centre or in a central organisation, their Comms are usually quite good as an entry through, because, you know, you want somebody who can signpost you into that organisation. Do that Team's chat, have coffee with somebody, start bouncing ideas off. Saying, I want to do research on this is probably not going to get you very far because, one, it's probably not on the top of the politician's radar as this week's problem. So, what what's on this week? What are the issues affecting your place or your organisation or the people you serve? And then tell them that you are interested in that area.

Can we negotiate some form of collaboration that can benefit us mutually? I think that, in some ways, that's the top tip. In, you have to be proactive. A lot of the time they're not going to come to you, the policy people, because they're too busy. It's easier in a place that again, has a local physical university presence, because there will be the relationships.

So, if you're in somewhere like Leeds that's got a very large city organisation, probably about, what, four universities at the moment within the city, there'll be people in your institution who have existing relationships. So probably the first thing would be to go talk to them and say, right, who do you know at the local authority, who do you know in the NHS, who do you know in the police that may be interested in this piece of research, or this area? And then

literally go and engage with them. I've lost count of the people say, "Oh, I'm doing some research on X. Can I come and talk to you in Wakefield?" That's not on my radar. And I'm so sorry, but I've got other things to do. You know, if you come back to me and talk about why, which is what I'm panicking about at the moment, then this is a thoroughly different conversation. What I used to come back with was, "have you got a colleague who's researching X?" So you may not benefit an individual academic but certainly benefit their institution or their faculty or their school. And again, you keep them on the radar.

I think that's the big thing; it's relationships; it's being proactive. It's also recognising that just because you go to somebody with an opportunity for research, that they're going to take that up. But they may take something else up that you leave there. It's a process of negotiation between a public institution and either an individual or a group of academics, and they seem to be the most productive relationships.

It also gives you opportunities. There's something called overview and scrutiny in English local councils, which I think is massively underused by academics. That's basically the local equivalent of parliamentary select committees. So, what you have is scrutiny panels and they have a right to roam and investigate and they always have an annual work programme of areas and they don't just look at council services.

They look at issues across. I used to manage a scrutiny function in Wakefield. They look across the area around issues. And again, they are more than happy at times to invite academics to present to those panels, again, in terms of delivery of impact. Overview and scrutiny is a much underused tool to engage with local public services and make an impact in local public services.

[00:30:38] **Jana:** That's been incredibly useful. I think Hannah and I will need to change the title of our podcast from the Business of Policymaking to "Let's have a cuppa", because that's probably one thread coming across all conversations we've had so far; namely, let's have coffee and let's discuss. And let's present research.

So, Hannah, you and I should probably rethink the title of our podcast. Paul, is there anything I haven't asked, and you think academics should really benefit from your wealth of knowledge?

[00:31:09] **Paul:** No, as I say, I think the clue is always, because I've sat on the other side of the hill from it, it's the relationship that counts and the relationship is ongoing and the relationship goes beyond, a lot of the times, the parameters of what you'd understand to be the research project. Because what you've got, again, I think one of the downsides, occasionally I've found of academics, is they know an awful lot about quite a small area.

So occasionally it's "Point me in the direction of your colleague". Or, "that's really interesting. Can I phone you and ask you about this?" And sometimes I'll say, well, I know somebody in that faculty or somebody, yeah, three doors down who can add value and you end up adding that value. It's again, it's virtuous circles. It's snowballing. It's relationships. Both sides need to be in it for the long haul. It's always a good sign you're exchanging Christmas cards with an academic.

[00:32:03] **Jana:** Let's be green, right? Let's get a cuppa instead of a card. Paul, I really enjoyed talking to you. I've learned so much. Thanks ever so much for investing your time and sharing your precious knowledge and experience with us.

[00:32:17] **Paul:** And ditto. I'm enjoying working with you very much, Jana.

[00:32:19] **Jana:** Thank you for that. Thanks, Paul.

[00:32:21] **Paul:** Catch you later. Bye.

[00:32:23] **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.