

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

**Episode 4:** "My knowledge of regional policy is night and day different now" - an academic embedded in South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA)

**Speakers:** Paul Hayes and Dr Daniel Olnier

[00:00:04] **Lauren:** Hi. We are back with another episode of “Gerrin’ on wi’ it” - a podcast series brought to you by Y-PERN and YPIP, hosted on the Research and Innovation podcast. Paul Hayes speaks to Dr Dan Olnier about his experience of bridging the gap between academia and local government by being based within the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority as a policy analyst.

As always, we've included a list of terms and acronyms that have been used throughout the conversation in the show notes, and a written transcript is also available. Enjoy.

[00:00:34] **Paul:** Hello and welcome to the latest episode of “Gerrin' on wi' it” - a podcast series about collaboration in Yorkshire Humber. My name's Paul Hayes. I'm Senior Policy Fellow at Leeds University Business School, and I'm really pleased today to be talking to Dr Dan Olnier, from the University of Sheffield. Dan, lovely, pleased to meet you. How you doing?

[00:00:57] **Dan:** I'm alright, thank you. How's things there?

[00:00:59] **Paul:** It's all right actually. Cold, but nice. So, Dan, today we're going to be talking about academic, local government, combined authority collaboration. Tell us about yourself and how did you actually come as an academic to be working in the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority or SYMCA as we have come to know it, and also if I'm using an acronym here, become part of the Yorkshire Policy Engagement and Research Network.

[00:01:23] **Dan:** Well, I met with Professor Vania Sena, who's I'm now working with in the management school, a couple of years back and we had a conversation about this project and that led to this post. So, it was going in the direction I wanted to go in anyway. And the Y-PERN project really fits with everything that I really care about doing.

So, the aim of the project are - this is my elevator pitch - for this to strengthen the glue between universities within the region and the local and mayoral authorities. So, as one of the policy fellows within Y-PERN, I'm kind of meant to be the glue. So, there's a few of us across the whole of Yorkshire and Humber, and I'm seconded to the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.

So, I've been there for a couple of years trying to work across and build relationships in the mayoral authority and across the Uni and across the region.

[00:02:18] **Paul:** So, are you physically embedded into the combined authority, or do you go there one day a week or do you just work remotely with them? How does it work in practice?

[00:02:25] **Dan:** I go in fairly regularly to have meetings with them. I've actually got a pass card to get into the building. I'm treated as one of the workers that goes there. So, as well as being employed by the university, I'm also employed by SYMCA the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. So, I'm speaking to them on a daily basis. I'm on their Teams chats, so it's very much part of the team there.

[00:02:54] **Paul:** How do you find that as an academic then working with local government officers?

[00:02:57] **Dan:** Right from the start, it's been really refreshing and really nice. The level of collaboration that happens there is just daily and constant. And SYMCA is a relatively new combined authority. It's still very fluid in its working. So, you can have conversations with whoever you like really and everyone's talking to everyone else about how to get things done and everyone's really positive. Sometimes it, you know, feels like slightly too fast working for somebody who has come from academia, but it's still, it's been a really positive experience.

[00:03:33] **Paul:** So in particular work programs, what are you doing with the combined authority? What do you think worked in terms of tangible outcomes for actually having you, shall we say, embedded within SYMCA?

[00:03:45] **Dan:** Well, the stuff I've been working on with them has been around regional economic policy. And that's kind of led to what I'm now calling, open economic collaboration tools that we're trying to build. So, when they've been developing their various growth plans, there's been a couple of growth plans that they've developed since I've been there in the past couple of years.

I've been there trying to support as part of a larger team asking questions around what's the nature of South Yorkshire? Is it economy? Which things have been growing? Which sectors have been growing? What are its various strengths? Where can you find the most jobs? Those kind of questions.

So, my background is in data science. So, I've been going in there and doing a lot of the data work on trying to find different ways of digging into that data to show it in as effective a way as I possibly can.

[00:04:40] **Paul:** So, is your role, sort of mixture of analyst and critical friend to the combined authority. Do you bring a different perspective?

[00:04:47] **Dan:** I think I do. But also, the combined authority have been very supportive of kind of, they use the language of proposing exam questions. So, they say, can you

answer this exam question? Which is a slightly stressful way to put it in some ways. But it also helps to frame it quite well. So, they'll give you a particular question or we'll come up with some questions collectively and then they will allow me to go away and try and come up with answer in whatever way I think is best. Speaking to whoever they think. Whoever I think is best to have those conversations with.

[00:05:25] **Paul:** So that works well for you as well as an academic.

[00:04:54] **Dan:** It has been, and it's just been a really good feedback process. So, I've, it doesn't always work. I mean, I've tested out some different approaches. I've gone away. I've come up with some answers and some ways of showing what's going on and then come back and some things have worked and some haven't. But that's, I think that's a really key part of the process. That's a positive thing because you have to constantly test out which things work and which don't, and then sort of carry on.

[00:05:59] **Paul:** And what do you think the secrets are of making that collaboration successful and making things work? If there's some magic elixir, what would you say it was?

[00:06:08] **Dan:** Magic elixir! I think not coming in with the assumptions that I've often seen in previous ways that academics have thought about. Knowledge exchange prior to this project. And I think it's a real positive statement about the way that Y-PERN has set itself up, that it doesn't really work in that more sort of traditional academic expert comes along and transmits knowledge from on high to local and regional authorities. It's, from day one, just been a sort of a meeting of experts in one room coming from different places and having expertise in different areas. But it's just been highly collaborative and on the same level. So, I think that's kind of the secret sauce. It's just everybody.

[00:06:59] **Paul:** Well, to make it highly collaborative, as you say, were there any barriers you need to overcome at the outset, either from your end or from the end of the people you were working with at the combined authority?

[00:07:09] **Dan:** The barriers are institutional and incentives probably. They're set up in quite different ways. In academia, the incentives to write papers or get grants is a very specific one, and that's how that whole system is built. So, timescales don't match there. There's also the policy cycle of when things are needed for particular growth plans that just again, don't match. I don't think we've fixed that problem, but I think what's happening at the same time is that both through devolution and through what's happening with the universities, both good and bad, is both of those structures are changing very quickly.

[00:07:54] **Paul:** Yeah, I definitely take your point about difference between academic and policy cycles and that things are changing. What would you want them to look like once they had changed?

[00:08:05] **Dan:** I think we're all after the same thing. So, we want collaborative systems for being able to steer us more closely towards evidence that we can trust, and there are reasons both within devolved government and academia, why systems of building that kind of trust are currently under quite a lot of challenge. So, I think there's an opportunity really to try and develop networks that sit across both that can address that sort of issue of trust in the evidence that we built together.

[00:08:42] **Paul:** Is this something about having that lovely phrase, "a single version of the truth" that everybody can tie into, that everybody can see, everybody can potentially critique.

[00:08:53] **Dan:** I think "single version of the truth" might be a little bit strong. I tend to think of it in terms of trying to create a shared ground truth. That doesn't always have to be a single version of the truth because at the scale of South Yorkshire or Yorkshire and Humber communities will have differing views on what that truth might be. So, I think you need to build systems that can allow everyone to join in that process of developing the shared sense of ground truth, including the communities that are affected by the decisions that we make.

[00:09:24] **Paul:** I mean, I think, again, that's a really interesting point about coming out and your comments are about communities and what different stakeholders want. Would that align with, if you, let's say you started this process again, knowing what you, you know now. Is there anything you'd do differently or you would suggest that other policy fellows in Y-PERN or Y-PERN itself, or HE should do differently from what they've done in the past in terms of policy engagement?

[00:09:52] **Dan:** I don't, Hmm. I was thinking about this question before, I think I would probably understand now at this point that the relationship building is the absolutely vital part of this. So, I think there'd be slightly less typical academic going away to a darkened room and working for a few weeks by myself and then emerging a few weeks later with some solution. I think the networking is absolutely key, that...

[00:10:21] **Paul:** It says also something about sustaining relationships. Obviously, what you've got here, Y-PERN, for example, is a fixed term project. Is it the ideal that we mainstream somehow this sort of academic, local government, policy makers engagement? It becomes the day job. On both sides. Can both sides actually benefit from it? Would that be a good objective to have an ambition to have? And if so, how? How could we go about it? Or is it that we pull people in for discreet projects, do it, and then think about something else afterwards?

[00:10:56] **Dan:** I'm not sure we can answer that in the abstract prior to testing it out. I'm actually not sure where a role like this should sit. I do think that it's clearly been demonstrating, we have demonstrated that a role that sits across the universities and local and mayoral authorities is a good thing. How that would get funded, I think is very tricky. Particularly given university is very financially challenged right now. So I think we have to start from the basis that we recognize that it's a distinct role that has value in

the fact that it's not quite attached to any one of these things that it floats between them. But then the flip side of that is it makes it very difficult to figure out quite how it's going to sustain.

I think and this may be slightly optimistic, those kind of things, the sustainability of this kind of role will emerge from building lots of relationships over time. If you build enough and enough trust is built, then I think we'll find a way to make it work. I think trust is absolutely key though, and that's something that I think has been one of the main things that has happened from two years of working is that trust has been developed.

[00:12:13] **Paul:** Yeah, I think trust across all the podcasts is coming out as a commonality, trust, relationships, sustaining work, also higher education as a civic actor and as a civic institution. I mean, what do you think has been the, the view of the combined authority about you, uh, your work with them and the work of other academics? Do they welcome it? Do they want more of it? Is there an appetite out there amongst policy partners for this sort of work?

[00:12:41] **Dan:** Oh yeah, definitely. They, they've been very, very positive about working with us, within SYMCA certainly. And they're keen to continue doing that. They're also, good at understanding that there's a, a larger picture of where they get all of the evidence from and the kind of systems that they're trying to build so that academia is one part of a mixed economy of knowledge that they get. So, they also will use consultants that they're also continuing to build their own internal capacity. So simply going for the single settlement pot.

[00:13:20] **Paul:** Interesting. Now, you mentioned consultants, Dan, what would you say is the difference between your role, at somebody from, you know, one of the big five consulting houses?

[00:13:29] **Dan:** This is a bit of a sort of cliched picture, but I think the main difference is just in how open the work can be and how ongoing. It comes back to the relationship point again, just saying the same thing. But going out to a consultant, you can build longer term relationships with that, but often you'll go to them with a brief, they'll answer the brief, they will hand you the final piece of work that will have some recommendations in, and you won't even usually have access to the data that's led them to those conclusions. And I've heard from policymakers that this can be a problem if they want to try and understand what, what to do with it.

[00:14:14] **Paul:** And from your perspective, how do you think this has actually benefited you as an academic?

[00:14:20] **Dan:** Oh, that's tricky. Well, the level of knowledge that I've developed of regional policy is night and day different now. So, I understand much more what use my own work can, can be within devolution context. And that's been super,

[00:14:42] **Paul:** And would you recommend this process that you've done with SYMCA to other colleagues to engage with other policy makers or local government or the civil service order institutions?

[00:14:53] **Dan:** Absolutely. It's been a, it's been a super positive experience. And other policy fellows that I work with across the Yorkshire and Humber region have been getting a lot of academic benefit from it too. They're getting quite a few papers out from the work that they've done. So yeah, definitely.

[00:15:14] **Paul:** I know earlier you mentioned about resources. What do you think in terms of what would sustain this? What resources and networks are needed to sustain this? And, and let's get down to the, you know, times are hard in local government. Times are hard in academia. Where do, where could we look to fund this or stimulate it or even use things through act as a catalyst?

[00:15:37] **Dan:** I wonder if it's going to have to come from some sort of combination of the. National funding councils and central government to recognize that it's key. It could be that there are small pots of money found from within the region's, councils or single settlement pots when, when they're worked out, but they would need much funding from the universities as well. I feel like UKRI recognizing that there needs to be some sustained funding for these kind of posts that last beyond just one or two years would probably be one of the main ways of making them sustainable.

[00:16:16] **Paul:** So, what we're talking about is basically a collaborative effort by national stakeholders, regional stakeholders, local, again, a network that recognizes value of this stuff and mainstreams the value of what you and other colleagues in Y-PERN are doing.

[00:16:31] **Dan:** Yeah, and I think that needs a bit of work because we have to be able to communicate that really clearly. And a lot of the good things that have come from this are sometimes that are a little bit diffuse. So, I think we have to sort of work out how we translate that into language that can be understood in terms of what the benefits are.

[00:16:52] **Paul:** Thank you, Daniel. That's been really useful and illuminating, and I look forward to talking to people on the next podcast.

[00:16:58] **Dan:** Thanks very much.