Research and Innovation Podcast: "Gerrin' on wi' it" series

Episode 5: "The key thing is equitable, reciprocal knowledge exchange" - building and sustaining collaborative relationships

Speakers: Paul Hayes and Kate Macdonald

[00:00:03] **Lauren:** Hi, you are joining us on "Gerrin' on wit' it, a podcast series brought to you by Y-PERN and YPIP hosted on the Research and Innovation Podcast. Paul Hayes and Kate MacDonald sit down to discuss the challenges faced by the voluntary and community sector in Yorkshire, and the need for reciprocal, respectful working across sectors to make good collaboration work.

Check out the show notes where we've included a list of terms and acronyms used throughout the conversation, and you can also find the written transcript. Enjoy!

[00:00:36] **Paul:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Gerrin' on wit' it. My name's Paul Hayes. I'm Senior Policy Fellow at Leeds University Business School, and today I'm in conversation with Kate Macdonald. Kate has over 30 years of experience in academia, NHS Mental Health Services and grassroots community projects. She also founded TimeBank Hull and East Riding, co-facilitates Hull Poverty Truth Commission, and is Development Coordinator for the Ideas Fund, which connects communities and researchers. She also leads the community panel for the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP). Kate, Hello and welcome.

[00:01:11] **Kate:** Hello

[00:01:12] **Paul:** How you doing?

[00:01:13] **Kate:** I'm good. Good to be here.

[00:01:14] **Paul:** Just to start off then, what do you see as the key challenges from your perspective, for the voluntary and community sector across Yorkshire and Humber?

[00:01:24] **Kate:** Oh goodness. I think there's an underestimation of the innovation that's in communities and in, community organisations that are very often developed out of a local need. And, part of the challenge is that in order to keep going is the continual round of funding and short-term funding. That's, that's a really key thing, which, really means it's a struggle to continue a long-term vision. So, other things that are challenges are truly having an equitable voice when you're working alongside statutory services and even universities as well. So, there's something about a disconnect between our understanding of all those different contexts and across all three as well. So, you know, academia, statutory bodies, actually really understanding and respecting the innovation that's within communities, and also communities understanding how academia works or the challenges that people are experiencing within, say local councils or local authorities or things.

[00:02:25] **Paul:** So it's financial barriers, what you'd say, structural barriers and probably cultural barriers around people understanding each other.

[00:02:33] **Kate:** Absolutely.

[00:02:34] **Paul:** How do you think we can overcome those and what do we need? Is it around capacity? Is it around skills? Is it around understanding each other better? What are the tricks and tips for this?

[00:02:45] **Kate:** I think it's all of those things, and something that we so often don't take account for is one of the key things is actually having the time to build relationships. And when you have the time to build relationships and trust and that space, then you have opportunities to really understand the different context that people are living or working within. And there's something in there about equity as well. You know, you mentioned culture, there's power and what is healthy power and what enables people to work alongside each other.

[00:03:20] **Paul:** How do you make that time, Kate? How would you make that? You just said voluntary, community sectors are incredibly busy, you know, dealing with short term funding. How do they get thinking and engagement time?

[00:03:30] **Kate:** I think this is, this is really, really challenging with within the voluntary, community sector, but within all sectors as well because we're very focused on outputs very often, and outcomes can actually suffer as a result of that. So I think there's a massive need to actually take better account of that within funding processes because my experience of taking time to build relationships, to build trust between the different sectors, it enables other work to happen much better, much deeper, further down the line.

So it's almost like you're upstreaming the relational work, which enables everything else to flow much more easily.

[00:04:12] **Paul:** So, at its basic, is there a lot to be said, for example, for going for coffee with people, for keeping those relationships going?

[00:04:19] **Kate:** Yeah, but I think it's a bit more than that. So there's something in here around when we're in our roles, whether we're in a university, whether in a local authority or within the community, we often lose that sort of human to human thing, and actually the whole picture, in a way. I think the challenge often, when we're working is we are looking in the sort of siloed or that window of the particular work that we're doing, rather than in a whole systems place based way of thinking, which is what we do when we're at home. We don't look at things in little boxes. So there's something in that around having that time and understanding how things interact and impact on each other, that I think if we can overcome that, we're going to have better place-based, equitable solutions that value communities, universities, statutory bodies, and really sort of pay respect to the assets that each of them bring. So there's something about we needing to level the playing field and really be able to like deeply listen to each other, understand each other, and then all the rest follow.

[00:05:26] **Paul:** Have you got any examples of where from, obviously from your experience where this has actually worked and, and what worked and, that other lovely question, what would you have done differently?

[00:05:36] **Kate:** Well, I guess there's a couple of current examples. One is, and it is a national thing, it's Poverty Truth Commission. So this is a process. We've got Poverty Truth Commissions all over the country. We're just going into our second commission in Hull. But a key part of that is, is bringing what we call community commissioners, so that's people with lived experience of poverty, together with civic commissioners, so that's people who have the power to make decisions and bringing them together to look at issues that they're wanting to focus on together and then working on them together. And it's quite incredible. The relational part of that is incredibly important and really does take time and is invested in.

The other project is The Ideas Fund. We've been around for about five years and this one where we're connecting really grassroots communities. It's funded by Welcome, delivered by British Science Association, and it's in four places in the UK, including Hull. And this is how we connect researchers with grassroots communities.

But the key thing, this is for equitable, reciprocal knowledge exchange. So very often you hear, I think in this context with communities, this is one of the other challenges is how communities feel extracted from and you can learn so much more again by building those relationships and seeing how that impacts both ways as well.

So, with the Ideas Fund, it's very much, it's not about the traditional sort of outputs, outputs, numbers, all of that. It's actually the project in service to the relationship. And then what we're exploring is like how that actually makes a difference in the work that happens. And the answer to that is, it's absolutely incredible. And very often with a lot of the, the projects we've got over 20 in Hull, but I think there's around 70 or 80 across the four different places. But it's like how, by trusting communities, it's both having an incredible impact on them. It's having an impact on the researchers and in the context of what YPIP is about, it's actually those groups are now moving on to start influencing policy as well.

So those are two very tangible and live examples. The Ideas Fund is where we're really, trying to learn about what are the components of that. One of the foundational things is relationships.

Just the final thing is, and we're in, it's sort of in the middle, we're coming into our last year, it is YPIP as well with a community panel. So again, you know, we're exploring culture, healthy, toxic power, and how we actually bring community members together with academics to actually really see how we can truly be co-producing and truly be, I guess, understanding each other's context and then becoming more than the sum of our parts for that.

[00:08:29] **Paul:** Kate - yeah. You've just said that magic word co-production, which you hear all over the place, but seems to have either a whole different meaning or people don't actually understand what it means. What do you think co-production actually means and what does good co-production look like?

[00:08:45] **Kate:** I think it's - this is something that is so common. We have these words, people perceive them as becoming fashionable. People use them, but the reality is we are just doing business as usual, but using different words for it. So I'd say good co-production is absolutely about those relationships.

If you take the time to really get to know each other, understand the different contexts that you are looking at, and then work alongside each other for solutions - that is co-production. So

there's something in there about what does that feel like? And does each, each sort of actor within that system feel that they're actually heard.

They're heard, they can disagree, they can be creative together, and they can come up with solutions together using the strengths that each has. So, it's very much asset-based approaches there as well.

[00:09:34] **Paul:** Yeah, you mentioned that each sector and each part of this, if you want to call it a triangle – statutory, academic, community groups - each has their own strengths, but each wants things from one another.

Given that a large part of this is an academic audience for this podcast, what do you think the third sector wants from the academic sector in Yorkshire and Humber?

[00:09:54] **Kate:** Yeah. I mean, I would always say, I would really like to flip that to what do each reciprocally need? So, in practice with, you know, academia, working with communities, they need those communities. Communities, they could really do with accessing the sort of knowledge and the data that academics are generating. And there's a big wall. There's often a paywall between that. There's the challenges with, I guess academic projects is very often you're on the back foot, even when it started, and then you're just racing towards an end goal.

I think there's something about communities they really need, they need to be respected actually. I think one of the other challenges with research council funding as well is that with communities very often I, running a community organisation, will have, there'll be a big project happening within the university and I'll be asked to match fund that project as a community sector where we literally don't have the money.

So there's just, there's something within that about how we need to rethink how funding is done as well.

[00:10:58] **Paul:** that makes sense. And it does keep coming back to A) esteem, B) power, C) time, and D) probably funding. Which would you say probably is most important to those? Is it you need the money? Is it you need the people to talk to? is it you need to be listened to? Which, yeah, if you had to prioritise those.

[00:11:16] **Kate:** I wouldn't. It's all of those things, and I think this, this is something that you know, I often hear is that we know relationships take time. How can we do it quicker? No, actually relationships take time. All of those other things, if you take time to build relationships, then you're able to like really deeply listen to each other and also hear each other, and then together actually work together. So I really feel like, these are the ingredients to the recipe.

[00:11:44] **Paul:** Yeah, I see your point around building sustaining is quite an interesting point about how once you've got those relationships, you put the time and effort in, they may be linked to particular fixed term project or a fixed term pot of money. How do you sustain that ongoing relationship, either with an academic partner or a statutory body? Beyond you know, what's good practice in that, in that area for yourselves, as you know, as voluntary community groups?

[00:12:08] **Kate:** I think, I think this is, this is a massive thing that is very live for us at the moment within YPIP as well. And there's something, yeah - how do you have relationships that go beyond roles? I think there's a gap actually networking in how we maintain those connections.

And you know, we talk about institutional memory, don't we? Communities have a long memory of what's happened before these cycles of funding and thinking you're getting somewhere, and then maybe it's a change in leadership or a change in government, and that project stops. So there's something about how do we maintain those relationships outside the job roles or project roles?

That is, maybe there's something about a place-based connection that you as a human being, as an individual are a member of. So, within communities and within academia, I mean, just, just giving another example of something that I've done, been done in Hull for me, there's so much amazing work happening within the voluntary and community sector.

It's that time as well to go beyond like networking, to really build trust between us as well. This is another challenge as well because of the way funding is done. It pits us against each other in terms of competing for funding, where it'd be much better to have like an asset-based approach about what are our strengths and having a more place-based funding as well.

Yeah. So I think we've got a gap in the market, in a sense, of how we maintain those relationships, how we think about memory of projects that have happened before so we are not constantly starting again.

So if we understand what we've done before in place in Yorkshire or whatever, what's worked, what could have worked if we just carried on that investment a bit, a bit longer and actually start on that platform rather than going in the cycles of just starting again every 20 years, then I think we are going to be moving in the right direction.

And that also in the context of systems thinking, and not being in these little silos, again it comes relationships, collaboration, place-based systems approaches. I think this is the key moving forward.

[00:14:19] **Paul:** So how would we do that? You met that point about institutional memory across all sectors is really important, but how do we keep it going? I mean, even things like YPIP has got a lifespan. It will finish at the end of 2026. So what happens next and how do we keep, you know, the good stuff that's been done going, how do we learn from the stuff that didn't go so well? And then how do we take that forward?

[00:14:43] **Kate:** I think, I think we've got a little, one piece of work that's, you know, drawing things together within YPIP is the "Not Another Toolkit" project, that process, you know, where we're actually trying to explore, well, if there's been good practice before, why hasn't that been integrated with into a system?

And so some of these questions are coming up, you know, around, that institutional memory and where community have that memory, so listen to that memory. How do we come together

to learn and support each other from what is has been good practice across the region and wider, to enable us to keep moving and not starting again.

So I feel there could be something that comes out of there that again, is a sort of reciprocal exchange and support across the region that is built on relationships and interest as well that keeps those connections going.

[00:15:41] **Paul:** So is there something about putting time and effort into what can best be described as lines of communication, keeping the relationships going, who's doing what's out there across the region and beyond if there's good practice. But how do we get people to recognise the value of that? I mean, you started out pointing out that you know, the community sector is time poor. It's running around dealing with a bid from one time to the other. The statutory sector's got its own pressures. Academia's got its own pressures. How do we make this, people across all those three sectors think and feel this is important.

[00:16:14] **Kate:** I think, yeah, I was thinking just then, it's so often with these things, it's a nice to have, it's seen as a nice to have, but we've got these outputs. We've got, you know, we've got to, we've got to get to the end point. We predict where we're trying to get with a project rather than having this space. Like more action research, more time for reflection together and making the connections and the interconnections. When people experience these sorts of communities of practice, my experience, this is something that we have with The Ideas Fund, and actually we are doing within the community panel as well, people really find the experience incredibly valuable. I think this is where this links into the wider systems of funding and everything else. It's like we need to be lobbying I think in a way to, to enable this sort of time to be prioritised because it's not a nice to have. If we have this time, if we have this time for reflection and action learning, then we are going to have better outcomes in the end.

[00:17:16] **Paul:** You just mentioned communities of practice, and other than those words like co-production that's bandied around and not really, and has different understandings across it, what do you understand as a community of practice, and why should we have them?

[00:17:28] **Kate:** Yeah, I mean, I think I have a particular process with the community of practice, which I use in lots of different contexts, and part of that is very much is taking account of the individual and how they're doing. And then it's looking at sharing the context of what's happening in their world, in their projects and all of that.

And then actually exploring where are the synergies, where are the interconnections? Where are the opportunities to support each other? So that process in itself, I've found is in incredibly useful, not only in having that sort of peer support, but enabling other projects and other solutions to emerge out of that.

So I think it's something, it's not just a talking shop, there's something about, it's still bringing the human into it, the relationships into it, the peer support into it as well.

[00:18:16] **Paul:** Yeah. That makes sense. One final point then in terms of, obviously you've been involved in YPIP, the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership for the last three years. What do you think are the key learnings from that? And let's end on something. What would you have done differently?

[00:18:31] **Kate:** Okay. Well, I think all the things that I'm saying are the really essential ingredients. YPIP has had its own challenges. You know, it's a massive project with huge ambitions as well, and lots of outputs and outcomes to hit. So, and within that we are also coming up with the different cultures of academia, you know, policy, community, all of these things are very live in there. So I think there was, there was a pressure around that time to build relationships. But I think coming in, as we're coming into the next year, that that is being acknowledged and we're looking at where we are and where we want to go. So I, in a sense, it's enabled, I guess it's a confirmation of those things that are really important that I feel if we, as we come through to the end of that project, if we're able to sort of really communicate that as we go forward.

And have processes in place that really enable those equitable spaces. So for example, we are looking at the future of the community panel and how that would fit within Yorkshire. I think that is a good outcome. So, yeah, no doubt there's learning. We didn't give enough time for that.

We desired to, but the pressures of the way it was funded and everything impacted on that. So, , yeah, I'd definitely give more time to that.

[00:19:55] **Paul:** Kate, thank you so much for that. Again, more points to ponder, points to go forward. Thank you very much. It's been excellent. Thank you.

[00:20:03] **Kate:** Thank you so much.