ESRC IAA CASE STUDY

UNIVERSITY of York

University of York's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Secondment

A research and practice partnership on local welfare

Susan Wood, City of York Council and Dr Jed Meers



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Susan Wood is Welfare Benefits Strategic Partnership Manager at the City of York Council, working across the authority and the voluntary sector on financial inclusion for residents. Dr Jed Meers is a Lecturer in Law at the University of York and Deputy Director of the Administrative Fairness Lab, whose research over the past decade has focused on social security, universal credit and local government decision-making. They had met previously while putting together a bid to the Lloyds Bank Foundation focused on the local welfare safety net, the emergency help councils provide when people hit crisis point and national benefits do not cover the essentials. “The ideas overlapped completely with what we were trying to do,” Susan said. “That’s how the relationship started.”



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HOW THE SECONDMENT CAME ABOUT

Supported through the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, the secondment gave Susan four funded hours a week to work alongside Jed at the University, initially for a year. At the same time, they received a £100,000 Lloyds Foundation grant supporting related work on local welfare provision. Rather than treating these as separate projects, they deliberately let them inform each other.

“We were broadly concerned with the same things,” Jed explains. “Council tax support, crisis provision, discretionary help – all the bits of the local welfare safety net. We had done research on this at the university. Susan was working on it in practice. The question was how to work together properly.”

WORKING TOGETHER IN PRACTICE

This was not consultancy or knowledge transfer after the fact. “Nothing we’ve done has been for the sake of it,” Susan says. “Everything linked back to my day job. We tried to make it count for more than one thing.” She describes it as a Venn diagram – her council role at the centre, overlapping with the secondment and with the Lloyds-funded work, each strengthening the others.

Front cover photo: Attendees at the Crisis and Resilience Fund meeting, hosted by the Welfare Benefits Unit

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The University of York already had strong links with the Council in specific areas. “There hadn’t been much work on welfare,” Jed says. “Given how much of that research we do, it felt like a weird gap.” From Susan’s side, formal engagement with the University was limited to short graduate placements. “Nothing directly connected to the work I was involved with,” she explains. “So, when this was suggested, we were very keen to build the relationship.”

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PROTECTED TIME

“The secondment gave me extra thinking space I wouldn’t otherwise have,” Susan says. “Being physically based at the University for those hours helped protect that space.”

CHANGING COUNCIL TAX COMMUNICATIONS

Susan and her colleagues had been working to improve how the Council communicates with residents who fall behind. “During the secondment we built on this by trialling alternative letters and a new communications platform, allowing the Council to contact residents by text.” Jed’s involvement provided what Susan calls “a neutral external voice. Having someone with an outside perspective helped us negotiate and move things forward.”

WIDER OUTCOMES

The secondment also supported other work. Funding accessed through the partnership enabled the development of Digital Friendly York[1] as a standalone charity to champion digital inclusion across the city. “We wouldn’t have gotten that developed in the way we have without this process,” Susan says.

The partnership also created capacity to evaluate local welfare schemes and to link council activity more closely with the city’s poverty strategy and national organisations like Resolve Poverty. “Being in a different environment reminded me that other people are thinking about similar issues too.”

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

“It’s completely changed how I think about researching the local welfare state,” says Jed. “You can interview policymakers, but that’s not the same as understanding what day-to-day practice looks like.” Working alongside Susan gave him a fuller picture of day-to-day practice. “There is a tendency in academia to do research, write a briefing and hope it lands. This flips that. You are working on issues at the point they are useful.”

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1 https://www.livewellyork.co.uk/information-and-advice/learning-training-and-employment/digital-inclusion-digital-friendly-york/



Susan Wood speaking at a meeting about the new Crisis and Resilience Fund

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THE REALITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

There were challenges. Four hours a week is still only four hours. "We're both incredibly busy," Jed says. "You have to be disciplined." Susan set boundaries to protect her time. From the University side, there was no formal funding for staff time, meaning the work had to sit alongside Jed's teaching and other commitments. "I love that part of my job," he says, "but it is a resource constraint – and that is true across all higher education now."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Even so, both are clear about the value. "We've made two and two make five," Susan says. The partnership will continue for a further 12 months, with the council tax communications project and Digital Friendly York moving into delivery. Relationships with the Council and with external partners have deepened and new funding opportunities are emerging. Asked what advice they would give to others considering a secondment, they are both in agreement. "Do it," says Jed, "but recognise that building relationships takes time and resource." Susan added: "Time is the thing we never have funding for – and it's the very thing that makes this work."

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