ESRC IAA CASE STUDY

University of York's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Secondment

Improving collaboration between York's health and care partners

Professor Federica Angeli and the York Health and Care Partnership



Understanding how complex systems work – and how they can work better – sits at the heart of Professor Federica Angeli's research.

As Professor of Public Management and Strategy and Deputy Head of the School for Business and Society, she focuses on collaboration across health and care systems, leadership in complex organisations and the social inequalities that shape access to health and wellbeing.



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A secondment from the University of York to the York Health and Care Partnership gave her the chance to put that expertise into practice, working directly with health, social care and local authority leaders during a period of major system change.

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WHY NOW?

The secondment, which ran from June to December 2024, came at a pivotal moment for health and care partnerships in England, as Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) were being established to shift the focus from competition to collaboration, improve population health and tackle long-standing inequalities. Place-based partnerships like the York Health and Care Partnership brought together NHS organisations, the City of York Council, voluntary and community groups, education providers and others working alongside local communities. Operating without formal authority or dedicated budgets, they presented a distinctive organisational challenge. "For me, as a social scientist, that made it incredibly interesting," Federica explains. "You're asking organisations with very different cultures, incentives and pressures to collaborate – without hierarchy, without command-and-control mechanisms."

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Working partly from home and partly from shared office space near York station, Federica joined meetings, observed decision-making processes and spoke with partners across the system. She conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews with people at board, managerial and operational levels, spanning NHS trusts, local government, social care, education, housing, the voluntary sector and primary care.

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"What mattered to me was hearing perspectives from different levels. How collaboration feels at board level can be very different from how it's experienced on the ground."

Alongside the qualitative interviews, Federica used social network analysis to map how organisations were collaborating in practice and how those relationships shifted depending on the partnership's objectives, such as emergency care or prevention. "One of the key insights," she says, "is that collaboration in itself doesn't automatically add value. It has costs. It relies on trust, time and personal relationships – and different goals require different organisations to lead."

GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE

Despite the complexity and uncertainty of the system, partners were able to articulate both the benefits and challenges of collaboration with remarkable clarity. "They had thought deeply about this already," she says. "What they were missing was a channel – someone to listen, to create a space where those reflections could be voiced." Several interviewees described the process as therapeutic. "They told me they don't normally have an interlocutor," Federica explains. "They were carrying concerns about power, language, decision-making – and this gave them a way to express them."

A recurring theme was the perceived disconnect between strategic discussions at board level and operational realities on the ground. Differences in organisational language, power imbalances and limited feedback loops were all identified as barriers to effective collaboration. "Simply being made aware of this is already a form of impact. The study has been recognised for bringing those dynamics into the open."

FROM FINDINGS TO ACTION

Rather than producing a report that sat on a shelf, the secondment was designed to feed directly into practice. Federica presented her findings to the partnership board in July 2025. "There was a real sense of recognition. People saw their own experiences reflected back to them – and that created curiosity about what could be done differently."

The recommendations focused on unlocking the partnership's full potential, including clearer communication channels between board and operational levels, more transparent decision-making, greater involvement of partners and communities and rotation of board membership to ensure a wider range of voices are heard. "The risk otherwise is that the same voices dominate and decision-making no longer feels democratic."

The value of the secondment in bringing these approaches to the fore is shared by Natalie Caphane, Assistant Director of System Planning for York Health and Care Partnership: "Federica's work with the partnership created valuable space to reflect on – and celebrate – the progress we have made in strengthening collaboration across the health and care system, while also surfacing some of the challenges experienced by partners. Acknowledging

these issues collectively was a crucial first step in addressing them and in deepening our understanding of what needs to be in place to enable genuine collaboration within a complex system. The recommendations Federica has provided will serve as an important guide for the partnership, one that we can return to as we navigate changing structures, emerging strategic opportunities, and the multifaceted challenges facing our system."

The work is now being taken forward through an action plan and the development of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes to support collaborative leadership and shared ways of working.

BUILDING LEGACY AND PUBLIC GOOD

While organisational change takes time, the secondment has already created a lasting legacy. Through the partnership network, Federica has secured a PhD studentship for a practitioner-based researcher who will continue working with the York Health and Care Partnership (and other place-based partnerships) over the next four years. "That's incredibly important," she says. "It turns a short-term project into a longer programme of work."

Federica continues to work with the partnership, observing its evolution and supporting reflection over time. She hopes the findings will also inform other health and care partnerships nationally. "This isn't just a success story. It's a case study that shows both the benefits and the pitfalls of collaboration – and that's what makes it useful."

Ultimately, the public value lies in supporting better leadership, stronger partnerships and, over time, better outcomes for the people of York. "If we can help partnerships function better, we can support services that are more responsive, more equitable and more closely aligned with local needs."

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WHAT SECONDMENTS MAKE POSSIBLE

For Federica, the secondment reaffirmed the power of co-production.

"This wasn't consultancy. The project was born inside practice, from questions practitioners themselves were asking. My role was to bring theoretical depth and robust methods, not to impose an external agenda."

Her advice to others considering a secondment is clear. Start with the partner's challenges, not your own ideas. "When you co-produce from the beginning, you walk at the same pace. There's no imbalance – and that's when real collaboration happens."

She also highlights the importance of institutional support. "The University of York was incredibly supportive, from the bidding process to regular check-ins – and the recognition that this work matters."

Federica finished with one key message. Meaningful system change requires time, trust and the willingness to listen. "You can't transform systems without shared language, shared learning and space to reflect. Secondments create that space – and that's where real impact begins."

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