ESRC IAA CASE STUDY

University of York's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Secondment

Shaping York's Autism and ADHD Strategy

Dr Laura Fox and the City of York Council



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When the City of York Council's Public Health team began refreshing the city's Autism and ADHD Strategy, they faced a challenge familiar to many local authorities – a tight deadline and limited specialist expertise.

To strengthen the work, the council partnered with the University of York through a short secondment supported by the University's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, bringing in Dr Laura Fox, Lecturer in Psychology and Education, for one day a week over three months.

Her role was to provide the subject knowledge, research insight and community perspective needed to shape a strategy that truly reflected the experiences of autistic people and people with ADHD across the city. The collaboration quickly became an example of how secondments can bridge gaps between academic expertise and real-world policy development.

We spoke to Dr Laura Fox about how the secondment came about, what it achieved and why this way of working matters.



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HOW IT ALL BEGAN

"I went to a council meeting because they'd published their draft ideas, and I just wasn't very happy with some of the language," Laura explains. "I realised that the people writing the strategy were experts in public health and strategy-writing – but not necessarily in autism or ADHD. That was the moment when we saw that working together could be the answer."

Every local authority is required to publish an autism strategy, reviewed every five years. In York, the decision had been made to combine autism and ADHD into a single, all-age strategy covering children, young people and adults.

When a funding opportunity for short-term secondments arose through the University, Laura applied successfully and formally joined the Council's Public Health team for the duration of the project. It was a natural fit. "I've always wanted to work at policy level," she says. "I came into academia with problems I already knew existed from working in schools. I wanted to understand who actually shapes policy and whether the people that policies are about really get to feed into them." York's geography helped. "Because York has its own City Council, relationships are quite close," she explains. "You're not spread across a huge county. It makes collaboration much easier."

WHAT THE SECONDMENT INVOLVED

Laura's role quickly became central to the strategy's development. She began by synthesising existing research. "There was no point in them trawling the literature if I already knew it and had it to hand," she says.

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She then led a series of co-production workshops across the city, working directly with autistic people, people with ADHD, families, carers and community groups. "We'd sit down and say: this is the Council's plan. What do you think? What's missing? What feels unrealistic? Those conversations were the most important part of the process."

When the Council staff member leading the strategy had to take sick leave, Laura stepped in to run most of the in-person workshops. "They've said they wouldn't have been able to do them without that support," she notes.

Afterwards, Laura analysed the feedback, identifying key themes and feeding them directly into the drafting process. She also reviewed and edited multiple drafts of the strategy, particularly around language and framing. "Language really matters," she says. "If you're saying you want a neurodiversity-informed strategy, the language has to reflect that. Saying 'autistic person' rather than 'person with autism' might seem small, but it signals respect and understanding."

CO-PRODUCTION IN PRACTICE

For Laura, this was not a consultation as a tick-box exercise. "This was proper back-and-forth," she says. "The Council were genuinely responsive to what people told us." One example particularly stayed with her. "Someone pointed out that the strategy talked a lot about employment, but nothing about self-employment," she recalls. "A lot of neurodivergent people choose self-employment because it gives them control over hours and environment – and that just hadn't been considered." That feedback led to concrete changes in the final strategy, including guidance for employers on being neurodiversity-friendly and recognising different working patterns.

Laura believes her position as an academic, but not a Council employee, helped people speak openly. "I could say, I'm working with the Council, but I'm not part of it," she says. "I think people were more honest because of that."

A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON MUTUAL LEARNING

The relationship with the Council was collaborative and supportive. Laura worked closely with Peter Roderick, Head of Public Health, and Jodie Farquharson, who led on children and young people's services. "They were brilliant," Laura says. "They were really open about explaining how council processes work – things I just didn't know."

In turn, Laura brought academic tools the Council didn't routinely use. "I ran the workshops like focus groups," she explains. "That structure – taking notes, tracking themes – isn't necessarily how public engagement is usually done, but it worked really well." She hopes that approach will continue. "They're now monitoring the strategy through an ongoing group," she says. "I imagine those methods will feed into that."

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IMPACT BEYOND THE STRATEGY

The Autism and ADHD Strategy has now been published, but Laura stresses that the real impact lies in what happens next. "This isn't a document that's been written and forgotten," she says. "There's a live group that meets regularly to monitor progress, and responsibilities are shared rather than sitting with one person."

For Laura personally, the secondment has reshaped her work. "It's helped me understand what policy actually does and where it can make change," she reflects. "I'm now putting in new grant applications because I know who to talk to and what their priorities are."

New projects are already emerging, including work on education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and improving how children's voices are captured, particularly for those who do not communicate verbally. "These connections wouldn't have happened without the secondment," Laura says. "You could find email addresses online but that's not the same as having worked together."

WHAT A SECONDMENT MAKES POSSIBLE

For Laura, the experience challenged assumptions about how academia and local government work together.

"I was worried at first," she admits. "I knew the theory but I didn't know how the Council actually operated. But everyone was incredibly welcoming. It became something I really looked forward to every week." She also values the protected time the secondment offered. "I could say: these are my hours. Tell me where I'm most useful," she says. "That flexibility helped both sides."

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Her advice to others is simple: "Just have a go. The application process is straightforward and it's a great way to learn new skills, meet new people and work on something that genuinely matters."

Looking ahead, Laura is clear about what she hopes people take away. "This shows what's possible when universities and councils work together properly," she says. "It's not one-way. We bring expertise but they bring access, insight and real-world impact."

And for the communities involved? "Go to the engagement sessions," she adds. "People really are listening. It's not just a tick-box exercise."

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