

'Not another toolkit' – How do I REALLY influence decisions being made that affect me, my work or my local area?

YPIP policy, influence and decision-making session

Tuesday 23 September 2025

Summary

Overview of the day:

A group of 27 attendees gathered for this session to have an open, honest, and vulnerable conversation about the different perspectives and experiences of policy and the policy process, and realities of working alongside each other so that decisions are informed by the people and places affected by them.

The attendee group was made up of representatives from academia, policy making, and community organisations, including 5 representatives from the YPIP Community Panel. These panellists are diverse members of the public who also have experience of working in and for their local community.

The session looked to raise discussions on what we know on how policy is done currently, and with better understanding, awareness, and trust what could be possible. The objectives were:

- Establish what we mean when we say 'policy' and share information on the infrastructure of policy making processes
- Develop an understanding of the blockages we're each facing in trying to work alongside each other for effective decision making
- Identify themes and potential ideas to help shape next steps in working together to shift the ways things are currently done

The approach for the session was centred around reciprocal sensemaking and deeper listening for understanding synergies and crossover in each other's experiences. The intention for the conversations throughout the session was going beyond 'that's just how it is' and sharing the realities for the different stakeholders in the room to think about what can be done to create shifts in effective and informed decision making. There is a need to understand where people are coming from and their different perspectives on policy questions and challenges.

The session demonstrated this approach by starting with a presentation to de-mystify policy and the policy process and led onto a summary of the trends coming through for this type of work and examples of existing practice. These discussions were built on with panel discussion sharing the work of HDRC Wakefield, The Ideas Fund, Hull Poverty Truth Commission, and the YPIP Community Panel.

After lunch the group engaged in a Long Table exercise in a dinner party scene to share their experiences and perspectives of restrictions and blockages in making collaborative and informed decision-making happen, including the roles of culture, resources, bureaucracy etc. The exercise questioned that when something goes well in making progress in this space, what is stopping it from shifting to mainstream practice. Furthermore, if we're wanting to go beyond 'that's just how it is', what elements of existing work and resources are helpful for this.

The final part of the day was a table exercise to identify common themes that are creating blocks for us all that could be resisted and which we could try to address, or what could be done to change and shift things. There was an ask of the individuals, their team or organisations as to what they could do to support in taking ideas forward, and to also think about who was not in the room who would be valuable to these conversations and subsequent actions. There was a call to action for attendees to make pledges on how they could contribute to move things forward, or to share ideas on where else these conversations could be taken; into influential spaces or existing forums and networks who are also exploring these topics.

“I liked that this was smaller and almost felt like meaningful networking meets seminar style learning meets effective knowledge mobilisation.”

“I really valued the well-chosen participants and the way the event was directed. The long table exercise was a highlight, giving me the freedom to speak openly without fear of judgement. The atmosphere felt safe, engaging, and truly welcoming.”

Common themes and takeaways:

The **use of language** stood out as a common theme and was demonstrated with attendees from across the stakeholder groups prompting each other to rephrase or simplify their contributions when things felt inaccessible. The differences in the language we use in our different sectors, roles and groups highlighted that many are already involved in policy and having influence on decisions that affect them, but the terminology of policy and policymaking creates a sense this is something else and is only done by certain people. Policy does not need to be overcomplicated, but some will mystify the subject to keep others at arm's length. Accessible and clear language supports equitable engagement and allows people to feel like they can contribute. There was an expressed need for better understanding of how to navigate the system to break down barriers to collaboration, and uniform, clear use of language across stakeholder groups would encourage this.

“My key takeaway from the event is that I gained a much deeper understanding of policies, which completely changed my perception of them.”

The groups recognised how vital **trust and relationship building** is in making any of this work. Engagement built on relationship building is ongoing and sustained, whereas typically communities feel they only have certain windows to have their voices heard. There were many comments relating back to how the system worked during peak COVID times, where this crisis offered an opportunity for the delivery of trust-based funding and relationships were appreciated as sufficient accountability. The need for bureaucratic applications and reporting with laborious data collection were pushed aside to focus on the needs of communities. The removal of the barriers of lanyards, egos, and silos are key to trust and relationship building, and The Poverty Truth Commission Hull demonstrated how a space can be created for civic and community actors can connect on a human level and appreciate what is affecting them in order to collaborate. People need to be willing to be uncomfortable and feel safe to challenge and be challenged. By stripping things back to this relational level, this creates a culture where everyone's knowledge matters and moves away from extractive research practices. There was an acknowledgment that relationships build strength but cannot be scaled which is a limitation for policy innovation in scaling and replicating elsewhere.

At the same time, the conditions for relationship building can be supported more widely. The key components of relationship building that are often not afforded to people are **time and flexibility**. Funders do not allow time for relationship building so this can make engagement activities tokenistic. There is a need to highlight the cost-benefit across sectors of allowing time for relationship building and how this will build sustainability and speed things up down the line and in future processes. Flexibility is also needed in being able to report and produce insights and findings in different formats, such as the HDRC in Wakefield who are working with community journalists to tell stories from the community.

There was a clear desire and drive in the room to do things differently, but it was agreed that to move things forward these shared values would need to be channelled into **finding common ground/pressing issues**. The notion of 'what's in it for me' was discussed that people need to feel the real-life benefits and difference from the work we do.

"Perhaps future sessions could be improved by focusing on real issues: cultural awareness in academics, business, recruitment, health, funding, and community life."

Ultimately, the group felt that we need to take an **asset-based approach** starting with what we've got and championing the positives of what's strong, rather than what's wrong. We need to **acknowledge and learn from what's gone on before**, where we're currently at, and when and where there are blockages to moving forward. We need to define what these blockages are and who they affect. One attendee commented that we often underestimate community memory, which further breaks down trust when people feel like they've seen this all before. Within our policymaking institutions, there is also a limited corporate memory which can allow initiatives and decision-making to feel cyclical and repetitive. We need to review what was working in the past and what led to it failing or not being able to continue.

Things to consider:

One of the asks of the group was to think about **who was not in the room on the day** that would be needed to help progress this work, which included politicians, funders, community leaders, and senior roles in policymaking. An interesting comment highlighted that there has been a lot of work around community engagement practices to include grassroots communities that are seen as 'hard-to-reach', and equally **senior leaders need to be treated as a hard-to-reach group**. We need to be exercising these same principles to gain access to and bring senior leaders into these discussion spaces.

"Expand the invitation list to include more relevant key decision-makers in the area."

Young people were another crucial group missing from the discussion and there was recognition that early buy-in is needed for their voices and needs to be included. They are the policymakers of the future and early inclusion of young people into these spaces brings their equally valuable knowledge into informed decision-making.

As the session was named 'Not another toolkit' there were discussions about **balancing the need to provide written outputs** for business cases and building an evidence base for future funding bids, **whilst not reproducing information, insights, and findings** through toolkits, guides etc. There is still value in producing written outputs through storytelling, but there needs to be more dissemination of what's already out there and building on this to **reduce duplication** and making best use of available resources.

Direction of travel for next steps:

The session confirmed many things that we already knew, and we want to try doing things differently. Through the activities and discussions in the room, there are two pathways that will drive our next steps:

- Tinkering with what already exists - the need for socialisation and education around policy, the policy process, and the role we all play within this. This would look at how can we make the existing system better for stakeholders to be more influential.
- Creating more radical change – building on the shared values of the diverse stakeholders in the room and the desire to do things differently to create shifts in the way we work alongside each other.

An overall key message that came out of the session is wanting to build an infrastructure of trust and relationship building that can continue beyond the YPIP project.