

Influential Researcher: Dr Angela Connelly



Angela Connelly is a research associate at the Manchester Architecture Research Centre and a senior research associate at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts. Her AHRC-funded PhD documented the Methodist Central Halls in England as an example of hybrid buildings that were both public and sacred and traced how they have adapted to different social, political, environmental and religious contexts. Since then, she has gone on to work on a range of projects – mainly in architecture and urban planning – that have similarly explored architecture and/or technologies and how they co-evolve with society.

Why do you want to communicate with public policy makers through your research?

My first degree was in politics so, I suppose, I am imbued with the principle that good research should make a difference in social and political spheres. Much of my research is publicly funded and, whilst knowledge for knowledge sake is an admirable pursuit, there is a duty for publicly funded research to be relevant to society and communicated accordingly.

I think it is also important to note that this attitude is not just about engaging with policymakers but in learning to make research accessible and relevant to a number of different audiences.

What were the benefits of attending an AHRC-sponsored workshop exploring public policy engagement? What practical skills and new perspectives did you gain?

Often, public policymakers treat academics as existing in a silo with its own languages and practices – subtle shifts in communication techniques can help to alleviate this. Essentially, I learned that it is a matter of being a good *translator* and offering outputs appropriate to the audience that you are engaging with.

I learned a lot about raising ones profile on social media – particularly on LinkedIn. If you have a meeting arranged with someone outside of academia, it is likely that they will look at your profile there.

I also learned not to be swayed with doing what everyone else is doing. What's the point in developing your own blog if only a few people will read it? I took the decision to publish in existing blogs (e.g. *The Conversation*) as a better use of my time. Indeed, in a recent AHRC project which explores the sustainability of Scottish music festivals, we decided not to spend our precious time and resources on a website but to place some very carefully designed pieces which documented what we were achieving.

I learned about different *types* of policymakers (from local to national scale) and the importance of *timing* – public policymakers operate at different timescales and there may be windows of opportunity for academics to make a difference. For example, contributing to public consultations is a good way of both making a difference to society as well as getting your research potentially considered at the decision-making level.

What are the challenges, and how did attending the workshop help you to address these?

How to #communicate a point in less than 140 characters and make it legible.

There are, however, a lot of challenges. As academics we are taught to caveat our language but things get lost in communication. I think it is important to recognise this and choose to work with people that you trust.

The programme taught me the importance of not dwelling too long on a point: first impressions also count and some brief bullet points can have much more impact than reams of carefully crafted prose. Therefore, if you can't explain the relevance of your work within a few sentences (even less), then you are unlikely to court the attention of policymakers. It can be worth building this into your publication plans; complete the journal article and then turn it into various outputs (blogs, practitioner press, newspaper). There is one important thing to remember – there are different sorts of knowledge and, I think, the key thing is to be open to other perspectives and engage in genuine knowledge exchange rather than just disseminating information.

It is much more difficult to do this with an arts and humanities background as this is, generally less prevalent at governmental level. Doing some prior research is critical – it may be that there are sympathetic elected representatives that might be interested in your ideas. Above all, you need to make it very clear (at the outset) how a policy-maker will benefit from engaging with you.

How has engagement with policy-makers enhanced your research and your career?

For me, engaging with policy-makers has helped on a personal level – have I made a difference, even in a small way? I've been telephoned by local government officials who have thanked me for putting guidance documents together. I've been involved in policy conferences where you hear people echoing phrases from our research.

Mostly, it has broadened my horizons. There is so much to learn from practitioners who are, at the end of the day, trying to do their job too and, perhaps, we might want to reframe things as 'exchanging' rather than 'engaging' with policy-makers. On the AHRC-funded Jetty Project (www.jetty-project.info), which was based in Gateshead, I was aware that I had very little experience of the area and it was crucial to gain the perspectives of those who had long worked in the area. This was built into the project through a series of 'expert' interviews as part of the research process.

From a purely research perspective, the AHRC-sponsored workshop I attended made me think more critically about building networks (particularly within Greater Manchester where I am based). This has been to good end when thinking about putting research bids together and also in asking people to contribute to the research process. At the end of the day, it should be a reciprocal relationship: policy-makers often have very clear ideas of what they want to see from research and it is important to consider these at the outset of the research rather than bolting it onto the end.

You can read more of Dr Connelly's research at the following links:

Flood risk management: now is the time to be innovative

<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/8182/flood-risk-management-now-is-the-time-to-be-innovative/>

'Dead niche' green festivals need to move mainstream (with Jo Collinson Scott and Matt Brennan)

<http://theconversation.com/dead-niche-green-festivals-need-to-move-mainstream-43872>