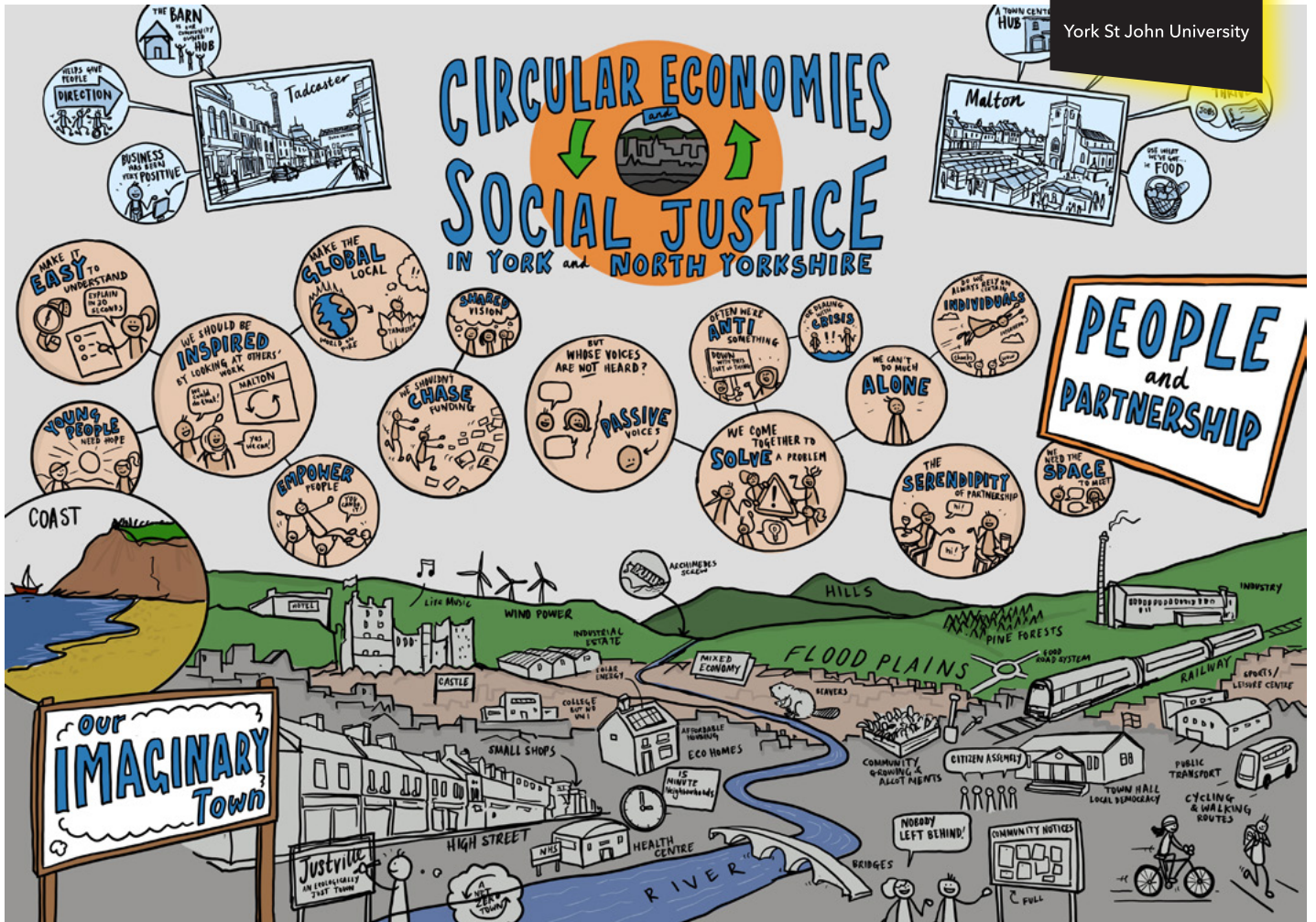


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York St John University



Circular Economy in York and North Yorkshire:

Place, partnership, and play

March 2025

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Introduction

Building on emergent relationships with two North Yorkshire towns, Tadcaster and Malton, researchers from York St John's (YSJ) Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) and York Business School (YBS) wanted to explore processes for creating collaborative partnership structures in driving transformation and transition toward circular economies. This report captures the early development of this exciting new project manifest in a workshop day at the YSJ campus in York. This includes initial steps, tools adopted, and the power of play in enabling integration and transformation.

In doing so, it hopes to inform the call from Tadcaster and Malton for cross-town partnerships that are transformational rather than transactional, long-term and personal rather than short-term and formal, iterative rather than final. The research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the enablers and barriers to 'making things happen' with people in local and regional contexts.

The report first provides an overview of the regional and local contexts in which it is set. It then explains how the research team designed and developed the workshop and its constituent activities, including the aims and principles they sought to achieve and embed. Next, the findings from the event are discussed, structured around two main activities. The final section offers a summary of reflections and intentions for future partnerships before outlining the proposed next steps for this project.

The research team includes Vicki Pugh, who facilitates delivery of the ISJ's Living Lab and is a researcher in the field of ecological justice. Tom Ratcliffe is collaborating with the Yorkshire Dales to explore how under-represented communities relate to the outdoors and nature to enhance their health and well-being, access and social justice in this National Park. Owen Powell has been developing the Fairer Future for York (Powell, 2024) project, exploring how to build local coalitions for meaningful change and lasting community wealth.



Figure 1: Workshop at York St John, 2025

Circular Economy in North Yorkshire

York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority aim for the region to reach net zero by 2034 and net negative by 2040. A route map to carbon negative is currently being consulted upon at the time of writing of this report with a final draft expected in March 2026. A circular, sustainable economy is required to accelerate these changes, enable a coordinated approach to decarbonise the region and to create opportunities from this route map to be carbon negative (York & North Yorks CA, 2025). The Combined Authority define a circular economy as:

“...a way of working that promotes using only what we need, stopping waste and making the most of all our resources, including people, products, services, systems and our planet” (YNYCA, 2025)

In 2025, the Combined Authority are looking to build on the actions of the York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to develop circular economies within the region. The LEP developed a circular economy strategy, a Circular Towns and Communities Network (which includes Circular Malton) and worked on a Yorkshire & Humber circular economy framework. Carbon emissions and biodiversity loss are driven by the consumption of resources by humans, often these resources can be exploited or wasted, and not always fairly distributed. The Combined Authority highlight an increase in material efficiency and circularity as a key requirement for the region to become carbon negative.

From early meetings between ISJ researchers with Combined Authority and City of York Council members, it became evident that governmental strategies will require implementation, buy in and support at a community level to achieve these goals. Strong community partnerships across regional networks are very important to creating a resilient region in the face of climate and biodiversity emergencies.

Significant to this work is the understanding that much circular economy development has, to date, been conducted by community-led, VCSE groups. However, through working closely with individual towns, it is evident that the resources available to community-led groups differ greatly, and that a degree of fragility exists as many groups are volunteer-dependent. Furthermore, previous attempts at connecting regional towns to share models for circular initiatives, as well as share resources, can fall short.

Malton and Tadcaster, North Yorkshire towns with populations under 8,000, are two such places that have taken on this task of circular economy development at the hyper-local level. They are also demonstrative of a key point - that community-led circular initiatives exist within the social, political fabric of towns. Circular economies are imagined and realised, enhanced and hindered, in unique ways. And, whilst this reality is widely known, little work has dug deeper into the people-centred processes that 'make things happen'. Circular economy work can often fall into the field of developing models, with the good intention of 'sharing the knowledge' with like-minded groups. However, important activity occurs in the messier spaces, the serendipitous solution-finding, and ever-evolving efforts that do not always make their way into glossy, finalised reports. Such omissions risk perpetuating a cycle of 'case study' generation that, while helpful, misses key realities.

This is what we hope to highlight in this report – that the sharing of knowledge must also involve a degree of making new knowledge together. It is an experiment in the opening of those playful, imaginative spaces where the building blocks of circular economy success are not modelled in the abstract but de-modelled, giving weight to the understanding that such 'work' relies on people. More specifically, it is usually done by an embedded group of individuals who are already immersed in social change-making in their locality.

It is with this in mind that in the design and development of the workshop we focused not on the creation of models of circular economy, but rather, on the creation of partnerships. Specifically, partnerships that build knowledge together, that are ongoing, evolving, and open to knowledge that may otherwise be sidelined.

The creation of playful spaces is again important here; often, people come into a situation expecting to step into a certain role, to apply a specific type of knowledge perceived as appropriate for the context. However, before this workshop and in spending time outside of 'circular economy' themed meetings and in the places meaningful to such groups across a range of contexts, profoundly relevant, rich knowledge

1 A routemap to carbon negative is currently being consulted upon at the time of writing of this report with a final draft expected in March 2026.

2 The LEP developed a circular economy strategy, a Circular Towns and Communities Network (which includes Circular Malton) and worked on a Yorkshire & Humber circular economy framework.



Figure 2: Map of York and surrounding areas. (OS Maps, 2025)

was revealed. For example, a deep understanding previous community initiatives that have failed, including the limitations and political levers that undermined a particular project. These are case studies that rarely make it on the tidy case study pile, but that reveal significant realities of the town's political and economic landscape.

The workshop aimed to draw out the experiential knowledge that individuals held, and that spanned multiple contexts. It aimed to open understanding about how individuals have acquired unique, relevant methods for finding the pathways and processes to driving change and that are informed by long-term engagement in social justice within their communities.

This report acknowledges that establishing forms of circular town 'model making' can be effective yet highlights the benefits of taking the time to think beyond knowledge sharing to knowledge building and partnerships – together and toward an ever-evolving future.

Tadcaster and Malton: Commonalities and divergences

The towns, Malton and Tadcaster, participated in this workshop based on strong interest and community actions in circular economy; pre-existing relationships with researchers at The Institute for Social Justice; interest in working collaboratively due to shared socio-economic town infrastructures.

The following profiling of the towns is important. It demonstrates the impact of socio-political context on

circular town initiatives – the shape and success of decision-making processes. Tadcaster is a market town situated between York and Leeds, with a population of 7,400 (ONS, 2022). Malton sits almost diagonally opposite to the north-east of York, with a population of 6,600 (ONS 2022).

Malton has developed a strong identity as 'Yorkshire's Food Capital', drawing on its independent businesses, artisan makers and market traders to generate tourism. The site 'Visit Malton' evidences the powerful, professional efforts that go into advertising the town as "a town of markets and makers" (Visit Malton, 2025). In 2018, the *Financial Times* deemed it a 'town transformed', 'reborn' and working counter to the fate of many northeast market towns in the region. Malton has a very close physical and political town partnership with Norton, including 'The Malton and Norton Area Partnership' which complements the work of the town and parish councils and other authorities.

Tadcaster's town identity is somewhat trickier, with its profile dominated by regional and national press about flooding and the influence of a single industry, with one brewery owner reportedly owning 70% of the town (Blacklock, 2024). In 2015, the 18th-century bridge was washed away, severing the town. 2017 and 2022 were notable years, with flooding driven by severe weather and failures in drainage infrastructure. A *Flood Alleviation Scheme* informed by the Tadcaster Flood Defence Alliance (TFDA) is due to begin work in 2025, featuring banks and stone steps, as well as defences along Wharfe Bank Terrace. Addressing the threat of flooding is deemed imperative to the *economic survival of the town* (Fewster, 2024).

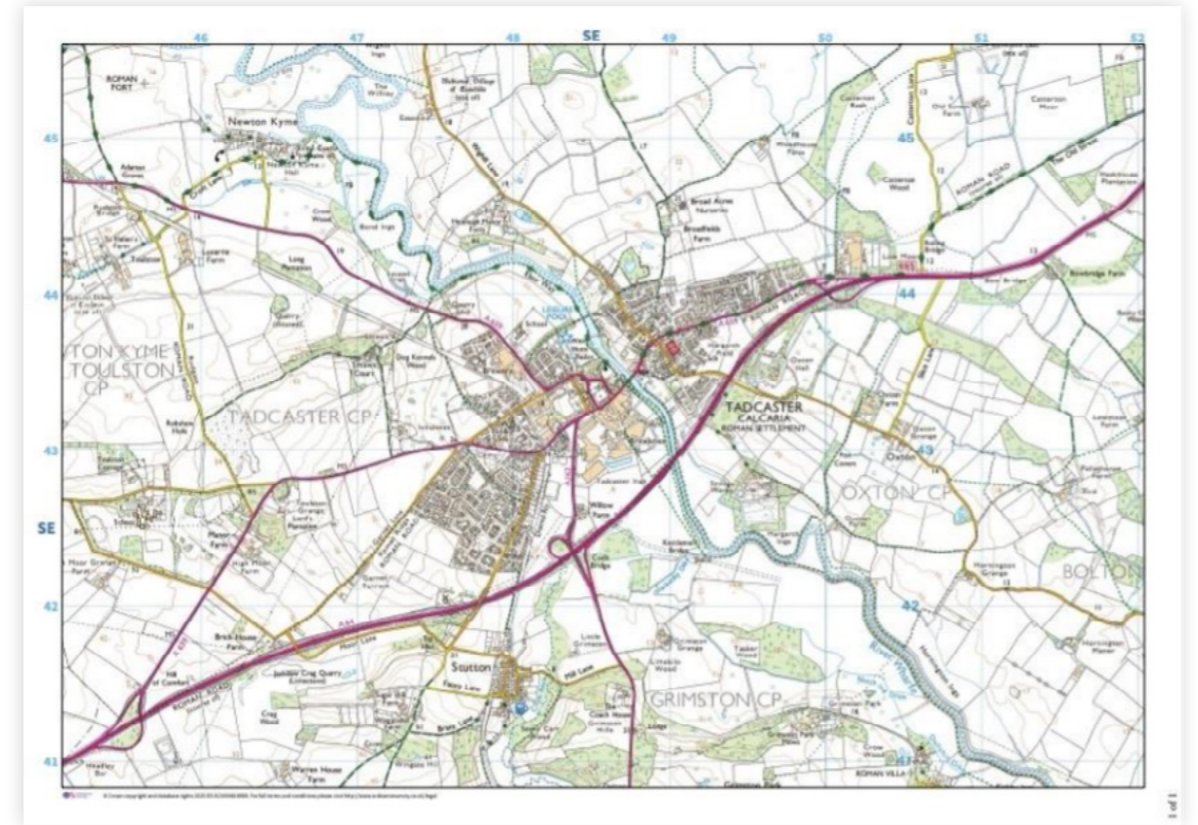


Figure 3: Map of Tadcaster. (OS Maps, 2025)

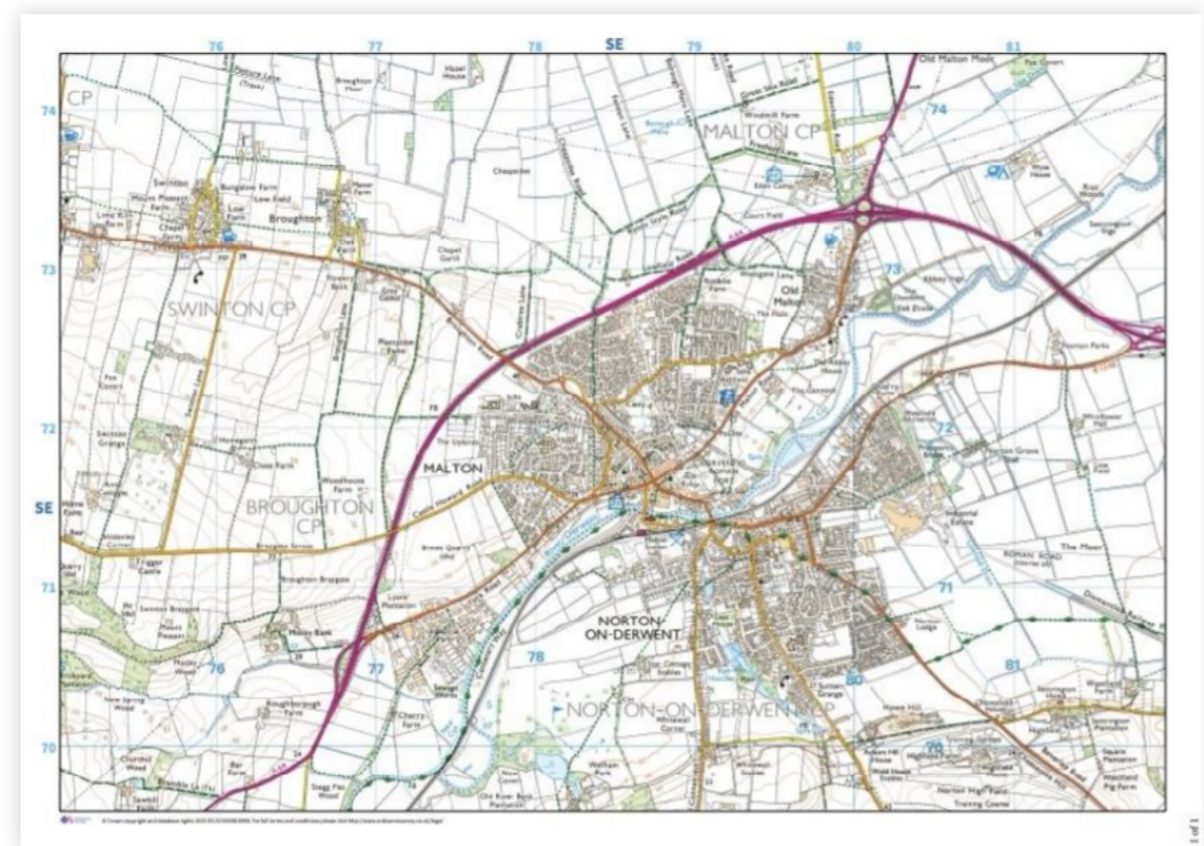


Figure 4: Map of Malton. (OS Maps, 2025)

Notably, the profile of concentrated land and property ownership is a characteristic shared by the two towns. In Malton, the [Fitzwilliam Malton Estate](#) (FME) reportedly owns about 60% of commercial property in the town and 50 residential units. Strikingly different, therefore, is the way dominant town landlords have shaped the identity and potential for new initiatives within the towns. Researchers cannot speak on behalf of whole townships; however, evident in the cultural and widespread community rhetoric is a stark difference in the relationship between those historically rooted positions of power (Samuel Smith Brewery, Tadcaster, and Fitzwilliam Estate, Malton) and the community-led, grassroots groups. More specifically, the impact of the quality of relationships held between those with positions of historical power and those interested in community-led circular economy development.

Circular town initiatives in Malton and Tadcaster

This point is best evidenced in introducing the Malton and Tadcaster collectives, who are focused on the circular economy. Circular Malton and Norton CIC (CMN) is a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to transform its North Yorkshire market town into the first circular economy town. The group have made considerable steps in researching and modelling business and community engagement, including delivering over 50 community workshops, planning permission for a community anaerobic digester, and the

opening of a physical 'Circular Hub' in 2025. Malton have a positive and proactive relationship with the town's major estate and landowner, which has significantly shaped the pace and practical progress of circular town initiatives. Meetings held at the hub are regularly attended by members of the Fitzwilliam Estate team.

In 2023, 'Sustainable Tadcaster' (ST) emerged as a newly formed group led by members of 3 VCSE organisations (Tadcrafters CIC, [Tadcaster and Rural CIC](#), and Zero Waste Leeds). That year, they also submitted a successful application to the Institute for Social Justice's (ISJ) Community Research Grant Scheme (CRG). Aligning with their aim to encourage their community to adopt sustainable practices, ST asked for ISJ researchers to consider:

- A. What is already happening in Tadcaster, and what ST could do as a town which would best suit the community?
- B. What other 'sustainable towns' are doing – contributing towards shaping a learning resource that could be shared with other towns?

Over an initial 10-month project period, YSJ researcher Dr Vicki Pugh mainly focused on part 'A'. Pugh spent time in Tadcaster getting to know community members and the town itself. Walking tours highlighted vacant shops, pubs and political tensions over spaces across the town.



Figure 5: Circular Malton Hib, Malton, 2025



Figures 6 and 7: Circular Malton Hub, Malton, 2025



Figures 8 and 9: Unoccupied buildings, Tadcaster, 2023

In seeking views about the emerging Sustainable Tadcaster initiative, Pugh noted the repeated phrases and collective expressions of disempowerment and resignation to “nothing changes”. As one resident put it, stagnation was “The curse of Tad”. These sentiments were very much attributed to the impact of concentrated power – new initiatives were started, then shut down or too many barriers were presented.

Despite the prevailing sense of disempowerment and resignation, community-level, social justice-driven groups in Tadcaster continue to act – working within, under, and around the constraints of their instilled identity. For example, Tadcrafters CIC was founded in response to severe flooding. In 2024, the group made and gave away over 3,400 items worth over £24,000 and saved around 1 tonne (1000kg) of

fabric and yarn from landfill. Also, Tadcaster’s community hub building, The Barn, is a site of community resilience, young people’s provision and a hive (there is a real beehive on the roof) for cross-community activity. It is a powerful and meaningful place to be.

It is notable that the individuals driving Sustainable Tadcaster, as a newly established and emerging group, have had to work hard to push against this disempowerment rhetoric, as well as the very practical barriers a less engaged, and sometimes oppositional, landowner presents. It is within this context and against this tide that community leaders have developed a deep well of experience in making things happen against the odds and in novel ways.



Figures 10: Craftivist workshop at The Barn, Tadcaster, 2024

Bringing knowledge into the room

For CMN, they approached the ISJ initially in 2024 with hopes of sharing their ambitions to make circular town models, learnings and experiences accessible to a wider audience. For ST, this appealed in addressing part 'B' of their initial ISJ project questions: 'what are other towns doing?' and 'where do we begin?' Sustainable Tad leads did, and still do, bring different methodological and motivational starting points for the group. These individual interests range from focusing on 'small', household actions and behaviour changes that occur through acts like recycling and repairing, to tackling infrastructure and 'big' business. The question of where to begin – the who, the scale and the sector – is a dilemma shared by many well-intentioned 'sustainability' groups.

Evident in previous work with Tadcaster, and emergent through the workshop in this report, are the ways local groups in Tadcaster have had to work between the cracks of concentrated power, bringing unique, meaningful and important insights to the table. As previously stated, these forms of knowledge cannot necessarily be relayed in tidy models. Rather, much work goes on behind the scenes, in the business-as-usual of community provision.

Researchers at the ISJ then wanted to gently challenge the expectations that people bring into the room, to push against presumed forms and types of models that apply to circular town development. This acknowledges that individuals and community collectives should be invited to bring their practices, learnings and experiences from a range of sectors. In doing so, researchers hoped to break some assumed hierarchies of circular economy development – where 'successful models' can often be deemed the best form of knowledge exchange. Here, researchers hoped to consider the gains that can be made through less transactional, model-focused approaches and open possibilities for knowledge building through relational, iterative and cross-experiential interactions.



Figure 11: Exploring flood alleviation scheme at riverbank, Tadcaster, 2024

Partnership Through Play

The research team set a key objective to facilitate an exploration of what a good, effective 'partnership' between two localities should look like. We worked from the understanding that 'partnership' can and should look different in different contexts. It was important the partnerships would be structured by and in service to the people involved, as well as be supportive, relevant and achievable for both communities.

Following internal discussions, the idea of a workshop to bring together our established connections in Tadcaster with our nascent connections in Malton, along with key local and regional stakeholders, would be a sound first step towards nurturing a partnership between the towns and unpacking what we might collectively want to see from this collaboration.

Workshop design

The team were determined to draw out the extensive, experiential knowledge held by community agents and activists present on the day.

The workshop aims:

1. Building connections
2. Developing project ideas
3. Engaging strategic partners
4. Exploring funding opportunities

Our shared principles of workshop design:

- A. Partnership focused
- B. Experience-driven
- C. Playfully pragmatic

Participants

YSJ researchers identified key community contacts to invite voluntarily, as well as key contacts at the local authority level. Researchers encouraged the invitation to be shared with wider community members, with an initial aim of having 6-8 community members from each town in attendance. However, this proved challenging – the question of 'representation' is an important theme explored further in the workshop.

Present were:

- 3 x ISJ and YBS Facilitator-Academics (project leads)
- 1 x YSJ Student Researcher
- 1 x ISJ Director of the Institute for Social Justice
- 1 x ISJ Ecological Justice Lead
- 2 x Sustainable Tadcaster Leads
- 2 x Circular Malton Leads
- 1 x City of York Council Officer
- 1 x North York Combined Authority Officer

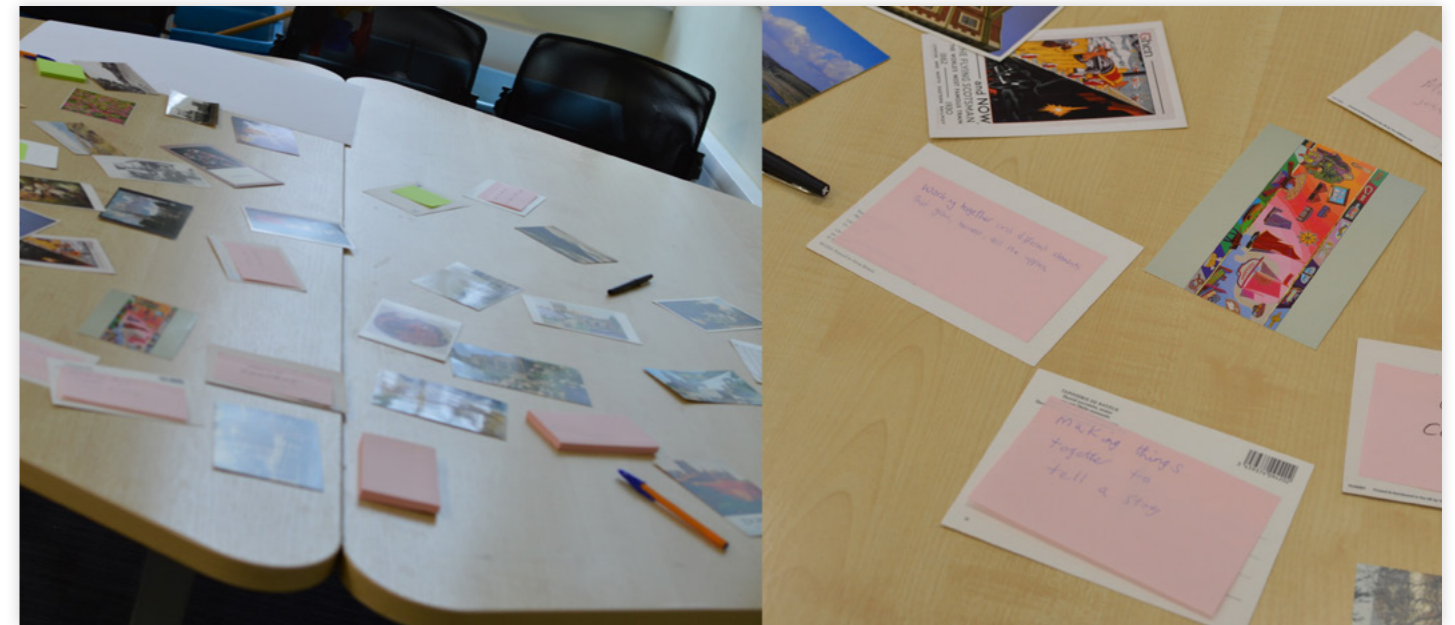


Figure 12: Icebreaker postcard abstraction activity

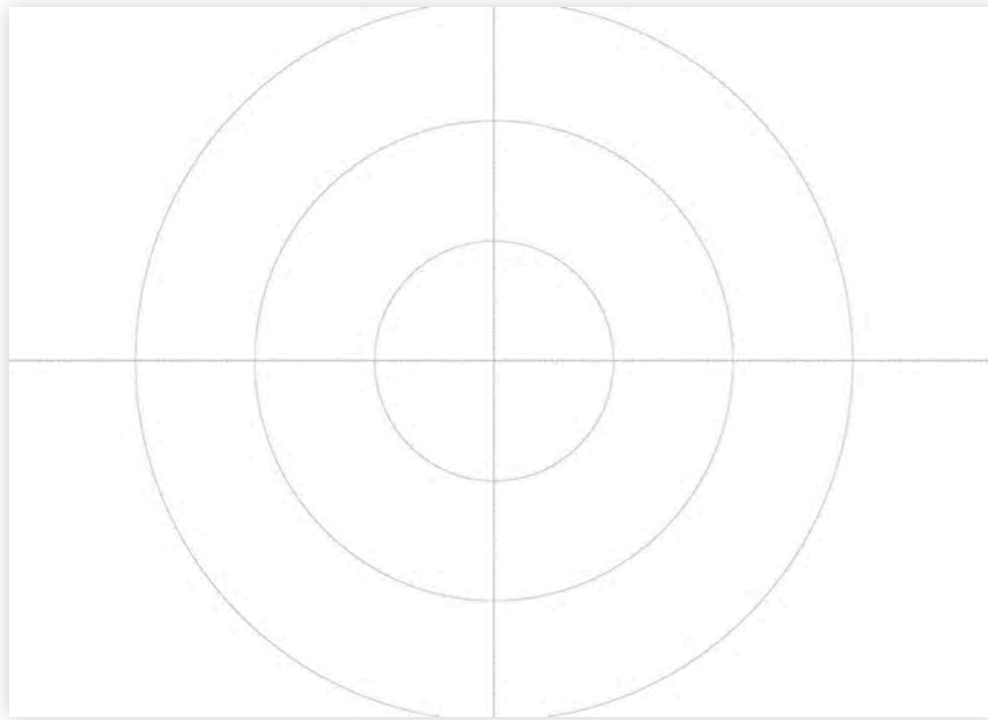


Figure 13: Activity 1 worksheet

On the day

Icebreaker: 'Pick a postcard'

Beginning the day, participants were invited to get to know each other better through a 'pick a postcard' icebreaker activity. Using an assortment of postcards, participants were prompted with a question and invited to pick an image that evoked an answer. Participants were then asked to write their rationale on a post-it and stick this to back of the postcard then invited to share this with the group.

Questions included:

- Which postcard represented how you feel today?
- Which postcard speaks to your idea of community / partnership?
- Which postcard speaks to an issue that matters to you?

Activity 1: Imagining and co-creating a North Yorkshire town

For the first main activity of the day, we wanted to facilitate space for participants to share experiences and visions playfully and collaboratively. To achieve this, we decided we needed to break the connection to either town. Instead, we created mixed groups focusing on an imaginary town 'somewhere in North Yorkshire' that could therefore have features drawn from either of the participating towns. Through this melding of Tadcaster and Malton, participants would develop an imaginary but very 'real' town that brings our shared values, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

Participants were assembled in small groups around activity tables and provided with a worksheet (Figure 13), coloured pens, and colourful wooden blocks. To keep track of the development of their towns, each group was asked to develop a 'key'.

Movement 1: Setting the scene [drawings and building blocks]

Involved participants deciding on the geography, topography, and landscape their town was situated in. Firstly, natural features and then moving on to identify preliminary infrastructure, including space for buildings, roads and railways, bridges, and other types of infrastructure.

Movement 2: Bringing the town to life... [drawings and building blocks]

Involved participants deciding what to include in and around the town, prompts included:

- What are the major businesses in the town?
- What is on the high street (if there is one)?
- What community assets are present (buildings, parks, etc.)?
- What leisure facilities are there?
- Where does the energy supply come from?
- How / where do people exist, function, live, and thrive in this town?



Figure 14: Activity 2 worksheet in action

Movement 3: Explaining your town... [post-its]

Involved starting to develop a narrative around the town, prompts included:

What are the...

- Challenges that are faced by or have been overcome by the town?
- Relationships, power structures, and dynamics?
- Values, beliefs, identities?
- Governance structures and processes – who and where are decisions made?
- What makes it a 'circular town'?

Movement 4: Sharing between groups...

Involved each group sharing their town, working through the various layers that make the town what it is and explaining why the group decided to design their town in this way. Further prompts included:

- Talk us through the story of your town
- Why did you make these decisions? With whom in mind?
- Did anything seem impossible?
- What seems achievable?
- How does this link to your town's values, beliefs and identities?
- Who has a voice? Who is left behind? How do they have agency? How does that connect to local authority and how does that connect to new combined authority? What changes do you want? How can we overcome resistance to change?

Activity 2: Partnerships (Past, Present, and Future)

For the second main activity, we wanted to get participants reflecting on the meaning and function of partnership(s), both individually and collectively.

Using cycles of individual quiet reflection and round-robin sharing in small activity groups, we used another worksheet (Figure 15) to guide participants through this activity.

We worked from 'past' to 'present' to 'future'. For each of these temporal layers, we asked participants to consider what enabled, limited, or was learned from their experience of partnerships. We encouraged participants to focus primarily on 'work' partnerships but to keep an open mind in case there were insights to be gained from other spaces and relationships.

For each temporal layer, participants were encouraged to consider:

- WHO... Who is here? Who isn't here?
- WHY... Should people care? Be involved? Invest time? Be motivated? Is this important? Does this have value?
- HOW... Are partners expected to behave? Do partners behave? Do partners 'bring it back to reality'?
- WHERE... Do we convene? Work? Play? Share?

Eventually, each group ended up with a worksheet (see example in Figure 16) rich with insights regarding what participants had experienced and learned from their past and present partnerships, along with a clearer picture of what they would expect and hope for from future partnerships through 'social contracting' – the exploration and articulation of the explicit and implicit agreements formed between participants, partners, and other stakeholders.

Finally, participants were asked to share with the room their reflections regarding what is a meaningful partnership to them.

Participatory research practice

To deliver this immersive event, the core research team positioned itself in several roles on the day. One acted as primary facilitator, setting out the activities, timing prompts, photographing participants in action, and eliciting insights at the end of rounds and activities. Two were embedded in the activity groups, acting as fully engaged participant-researchers. We also had the support of a 'student as researcher', who also joined one of the groups and engaged in the activities. In addition, we invited colleagues involved in other ISJ projects to join in when they had availability. To ensure all present were able to actively listen to the insights shared by participants in the summary rounds, we audio-recorded these parts of the event. Finally, a live event

	PAST	PRESENT	'SOCIAL CONTRACTING' FOR THE FUTURE
WHY			
WHO			
HOW			
WHERE			

Figure 15: Activity 2 worksheet



Figure 16: Output from Activity 2

illustrator was hired to capture the activities, discussions, and outputs – also providing an end-of-day summary to offer their perspective as a passive observer.

This approach enabled the team to draw upon multiple sources in reflecting on the event and pulling together our findings:

- Researchers' 'field notes' (in situ and reflective)
- Audio recordings of group activity summaries
- Audio recordings of individual end-of-day reflections
- Reflections from the live illustrator/illustration
- Photographs taken throughout the day

Findings and Discussion

Activity 1: Imagining and co-creating a North Yorkshire town

Imaginary Town 1

Group 1 envisioned a town with distinct zones for leisure, culture, industry, and green areas, all interconnected by cycle routes and bridges. They emphasised the importance of renewable energy, equity, and community participation. The group discussed the town's history of economic crisis and the need for a mixed economy and circular economy principles. They highlighted the importance of social integration and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Decision making about Imaginary Town 1 was conducted through collaborative discussion in a small group setting. Decisions about what should feature in Town 1 and why were made quickly through the consensus of the group. Clear, active communication between the group members was key to formulating decisions about the town with group members providing a brief rationale of why a decision was being made which led to group discussion. This ensured that the group was working together in a collaborative manner. Although after some discussion the group did make some minor changes to the town, demonstrating how flexibility and adaptability is key in partnership building. People were excited about the potential of a town starting from scratch, which led to some active, lively conversations occurring,

highlighting how partnership working is a dynamic process. Active questioning to the group by participants such as 'shall we include a river?' stimulated a shared discussion process on decision-making about the town.

The exercise showed the important role that geography, geology and landscape play in the formation of a town and how relationships are supported across a town. The discussions also highlighted how natural resources impact on the functionality of a town and partnership building. For example, a water source for the town was highlighted as key to the town's identity and establishment. Natural features were recognised by Group 1 as sometimes undervalued when considering the future of a town. The historical background to the town – as an industrial town - also played a key role in the formation of the town, its characteristics and narratives.

Workshop attendees imagined Town 1 spatially, splitting the town into specific 'zones' areas and spaces which had different functions within the town where change could happen – for example a cultural area, an area for industry and a central administrative area. These zones would be interlinked, following the concept of a '15-minute city' (Abdefattah et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2021), providing a strong sense of belonging and connectivity:

'A set of intertwined communities who've managed to drive transition so far'

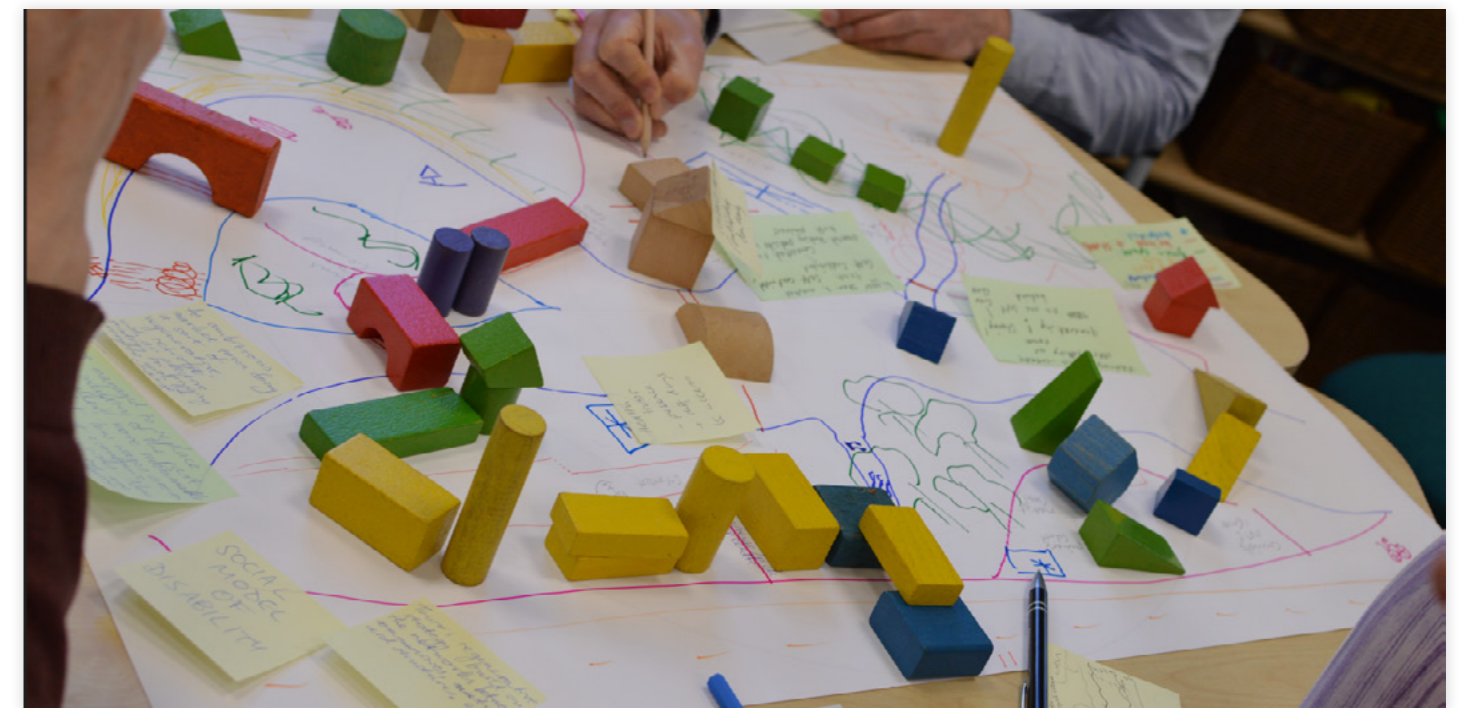


Figure 17: Group 1's imaginary town



Figure 18: Group 1 working on their imaginary town

Although no university was included in the design of the town, education was perceived as an important aspect of the town with certain 'areas' focussing on training and volunteering and bringing new skills into the town. The role of new technology was also highlighted as important to the development of the town.

Within this place-making exercise, attendees found considering the flows of knowledge and resource in Town 1 as integral to the way the town would work and the strength of the networks across the town. They wanted to see resource and knowledge sharing across these networks. Links with other external places were also important for the movement of resources and knowledge within a sustainable, affordable transport network including a transport focus on walking and cycling. The movement of waste as an energy supply for the town was also shown to be an important part of the circular loops of the town. With a history of old industrial heritage in the town, Group 1 wanted to see sufficiency instead of production in the new town which corresponds with current research on circular economics (Stahel, 2016).

Inclusivity, equity and accessibility were all mentioned by workshop attendees as prominent values which should be embedded into the culture of Town 1 and its circular economy. Furthermore, the group suggested that the town should be forward thinking, bold and innovative. The representation of these identities, values and ethics amongst young people was seen as critical to the future of the town, its vision and imagination. From a central perspective, attendees imagined the town having a long-term plan and a collective vision which would involve everyone in the town – 'no one being left behind' – considering how it can change, stay the same, adapt and evolve.

Decisions around visioning and strategic planning would involve a participatory democracy, grounded in the aforementioned strong community networks. One example given of this type of democracy was a co-creative, citizens' assembly. These strong community networks and connections were highlighted as an enabler of change in Town 1 and an enabler of a circular economy in the town. Change was also linked to the values and identities of those who lived in the town. It was also mentioned that not everyone in a town may desire transformation and change therefore, this needs to be recognised when envisioning the future of a town.



Figure 19: Group 2's imaginary town

Imaginary Town 2

Group 2 focused on renewable energy sources and the absence of roads within the town, promoting public transport and cycling. They highlighted the importance of community hubs and participatory governance. The group discussed the need for inclusivity and engaging marginalised groups. They emphasised the importance of making engagement attractive to young people and ensuring that all voices are heard in community planning.

Drawing on their shared experiences, the participants highlighted democratic deficits, energy sources, and river management as key areas for the activity. Participants quickly established a sense of 'we' and 'our town' – a collective investment in thinking about and striving towards a town with 'just' values.

The first step in creating this town was the inclusion of a river, right through the centre of the landscape. It was discussed as a fundamental feature, for wildlife, beauty and resources, whilst posing potential risk with participants calling upon future forecasting of climate change. The wider infrastructure and topography developed around the river, firstly in mitigating the risk of flooding with flood plains, and the welcoming of beavers as nature's river management system. Establishing the river prompted the sharing of

climate change risk discussion, exchanging knowledge acquired through professional roles in local government, that "they are going to be 25% fuller", and a shared consciousness about the future.

The group instinctively and swiftly situated the town as existing between a bigger 'city' and 'the sea'. This 'between' quality developed into a notion of a 'gateway town' – a site where locals and tourists experienced smooth transitions from city to bustling and circular town life. Each participant brought an ideal topographical feature, valued in their own real local vicinity, including mountains, meadows and forests.

'Traditional' forms of town infrastructure, such as Town Halls, acted as stepping stones for the group to challenge and reimagine what should and could occur in such community spaces. The group acknowledged the forms of 'democracy' deficits that such traditional buildings and proceedings hold. Alternatives were sought, such as community hubs that host citizen assemblies and better facilitate forms of community decision-making.

This collective approach to town management opened the group to discussions about the town's narrative – its history and heritage, which have shaped its contemporary priorities. The evolving account of the town's past included a former castle dwelling that was once home to the local lord. Today,

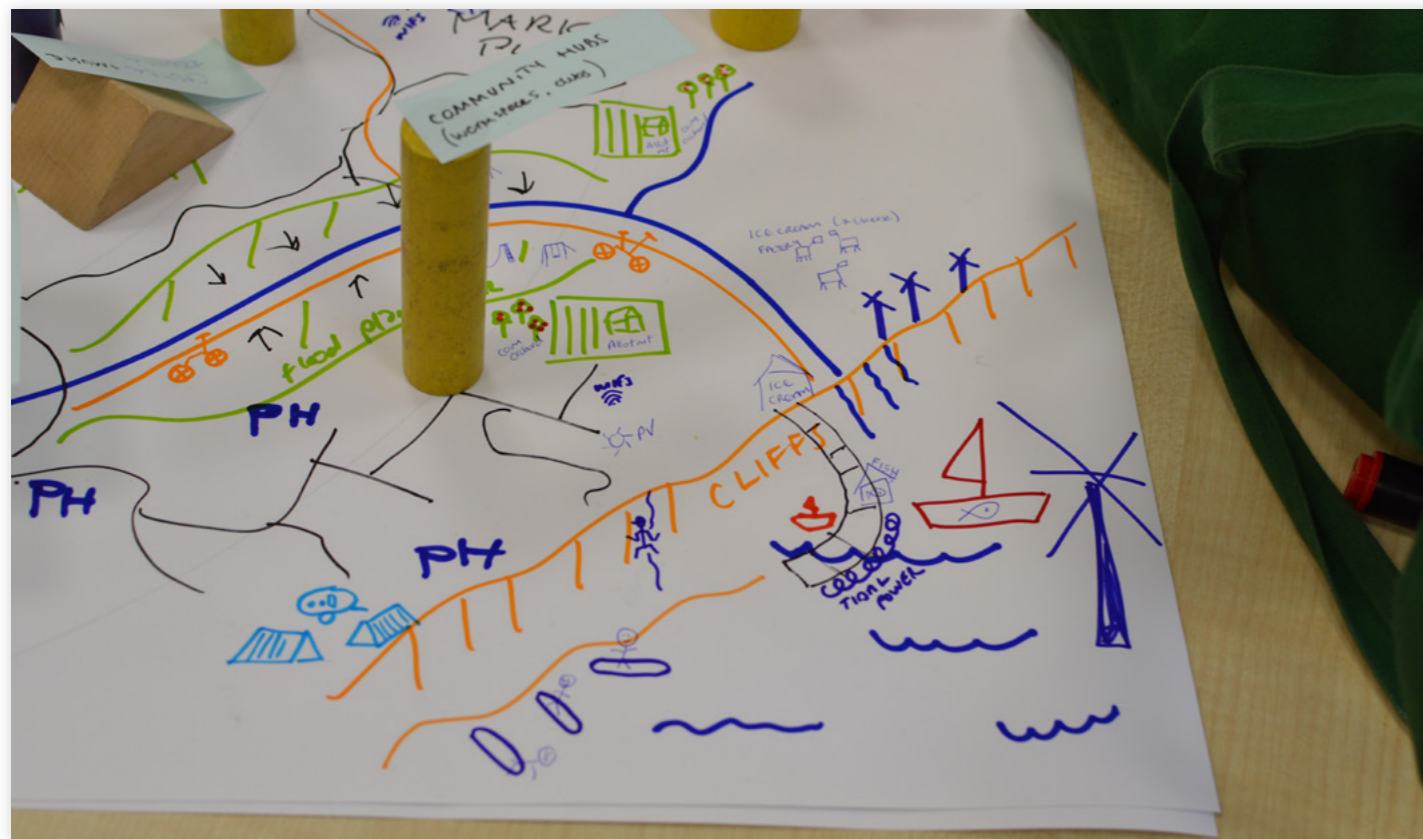


Figure 20 and 21: Group 2 working on their imaginary town



Figure 22: Group 2 working on their imaginary town

the castle serves as a symbol of reclaimed community arts, functioning as a live music venue and a source of tourism revenue. The playful nature of the task encouraged spirited conversations around significant political issues, such as dominant landownership and economic monopolisation. This included a shared aspiration for a mixed economy that would not depend on a single large employer, “whether that is a bacon factory or a brewery”. Furthermore, the group emphasised that the property landscape should reflect values, not merely legality, as the town was committed to mixed tenure and shared ownership.

‘Hubs’ were constructed by the group throughout the town as catalyst sites for addressing issues and targeting specific demographic needs. Youth provision was especially discussed, crucial for the well-being of the town’s local population, and to attract and keep people in the town, and avoid depopulation.

Each participant brought an alternative form of renewable energy, with discussion drawing upon each other’s experiences of small and large-scale infrastructure. This included sources that could be managed at the community level – an anaerobic digester. Also, larger-scale sources such as tidal power, geothermal heating and wind turbines.

The exercise elicited excitement at the freedom to build infrastructure from scratch and for the imagined geography to support multiple types of energy sources.

In discussions around renewable energy, the group demonstrated a high level of literacy and knowledge; participants did not need to ask each other for definitions or explanations, instead fluently sharing ideas. This use of shared language was further discussed as the group began to challenge ‘buzz words’ that inevitably crept into the town planning, such as ‘Net-Zero’. However, participants agreed that such words can be highly unhelpful and that creating the town’s unique aspirations was more meaningful.

The group exercised their imaginative right to radically rethink transport as roads were rarely discussed and were in fact actively built out of the town. Transport was dominated by cycle paths, trains and other public transport.

Waste proved to be a sticky issue, participants highlighted this as a particular challenge at local level, including asking the question, “Whose responsibility is it?” Waste, like energy, is one of those circular economy challenges that local responses can only go so far in dealing with – they require regional and national interventions, they require systemic change.

Four key insights

1. Motivations for Partnerships

- **Fear and ownership:** In the past, partnerships were often formed in response to negative events such as Covid or flooding. Fear was a driving factor, but there was also a desire to create a sense of ownership and improve collaboration.
- **Positive empowerment:** Moving forward, the focus is on positive motivations such as confidence, empowerment, and inspiration. Partnerships should be formed because people feel empowered and inspired by ideas, mentoring, and the potential for scaling up successful initiatives.

2. Inclusivity and Engagement

- **Engaging Young people:** A key challenge is making engagement attractive to young people, who often feel disenfranchised. Strategies to connect with young people and ensure their involvement are crucial for the future.
- **Marginalised groups:** Engaging marginalised and hard-to-reach groups is essential. This includes using social media and other targeted methods to reach these groups and ensure their voices are heard.
- **Balancing inclusion and momentum:** While inclusivity is vital, constantly expanding engagement can sometimes slow progress. To maintain momentum, it may be necessary to focus efforts on those already involved, ensuring that initiatives continue to move forward without losing energy or direction.

3. Responsibility and Participation

- **Shared responsibility:** Encouraging more people to take responsibility and get involved in community actions is important. This includes making it easy and simple for people to engage and participate.
- **Community spaces:** Utilising community spaces and groups to facilitate discussions and share ideas is vital. Multiple venues and platforms should be used to ensure broad participation.

4. Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency

- **Self-sustaining initiatives:** Ideal partnerships should be self-sustaining and not reliant on external funding. Building relationships and networks that can support ongoing initiatives is key.
- **Resource management:** Effective management of resources, including people and money, is crucial. Strategic choices should be made to prioritise initiatives that can make the biggest difference.

In summary, the vision for future partnerships is one of inclusivity, empowerment, and resilience. By learning from past experiences and focusing on proactive, community-led collaboration, there is a clear opportunity to build partnerships that are not only more effective but also more inspiring and enduring.



Figure 25: Site visit with YSJ Geography module, Tadcaster, 2024

Reflections and Intentions for Future Partnerships

On circular economy

The term 'circular economy' weaves together the full breadth of macro-environmental factors – political, economic, social, technological, ecological, and legal. Focusing on one locality, or in this case, a pair of localities, presents the opportunity to identify immediate, potentially impactful changes that can be made to improve and innovate the 'circularity' of the locus in question by tapping into a wealth of rich, contextualised knowledge and experience.

However, moving beyond these immediate gains and localised knowledge systems inevitably leads to confronting some big, knotty, sometimes uncomfortable, and often frustrating issues. To address existing challenges or foresee and plan for future challenges, we must find productive ways to work in, with, around, or, if needs be, in opposition to existing power structures and relational dynamics – whether this is between local residents and visitors, local, regional, and national government, or indeed those who own and control the land and capital and those who, to put it bluntly, do not. It is all well and good to bring people together to share, learn, and (re)imagine, but if power resides elsewhere, it can become difficult to see how this investment in time, energy, and creativity is going to get us anywhere.

Yet, these frustrations are valuable – they help us to discover, unpack, and come to terms with the realities of 'social justice', another term that interweaves a host of macro, even meta, concepts. In relation to circular economies, our participants liked the phrase 'ecological justice', because it was felt to be sufficiently integrative and active, underscoring the relationship between living organisms and their environment. We are one, we are networked, regardless of how much or how little recognition and emphasis we may choose to place on this inescapable fact.

Partnerships and relationships

So, if we want to imagine, create, and enable meaningful transitions toward economic circularity and ecological justice, to realise the transformation we believe to be possible, we need to build partnerships and relationships that are fit for purpose. This entails bringing together the willing and motivated, identifying and appreciating what already exists, and establishing a loose but relevant framework of shared values, ways of being, and ways of working. From here, it is possible to engage in building strategic partnerships across and with power, leveraging relationships, and mobilising for action.

However, given the tendency for power and material wealth to concentrate in the hands of those who already possess them, nurturing relationships and partnerships aimed at circular economics, civic wealth creation, and community wealth building requires particular attentiveness to how ownership and power shape decision-making. We must also remain conscious of the knowledge and immaterial power that social pioneers and community leaders accumulate – power they may be unaware of themselves.. Their wealth of experience can be both a boon and a barrier to progress and productive iteration. Questioning these dynamics and collaborating within existing power structures is sometimes awkward, often feels futile, but remains vital and necessary, however challenging.

Bringing people with us?

The willing, powerful, and strategic aside, the ends in sight for most involved are the benefits to be brought to the community, at whatever scale this is defined, in present and future. To gain recognition, traction, legitimacy, and maintain momentum, we must ensure there are spaces for others to get on board and participate. However, nurturing participants, community members, and citizens is much more complex than it first appears and is not always as comfortable to talk about as one might expect. We often find ourselves driving toward being inclusive, open, and embracing of new participants yet lose sight of and miscalculate the weight this can place on the people doing things – the fragile drivers of our precious momentum and the holders of such wealth in knowledge and experience that little might happen if we were to lose them.

Thus, we must strike a balance between being inclusive and pragmatic; growth alone is unsustainable. We need spaces and pathways for sharing the knowledge of working – or not working – with potential strategic partners, finding and navigating the funding, coordinating multiple projects, perhaps across multiple community groups, who to call at the local authority for this or that problem, which local businesses will give quietly and which will want recognition for their assistance.

So, how do we build opportunities for knowledge and the participation it enables to be shared without becoming exclusive, distant, or replicating existing or creating a new problematic structure of power and influence? Well, knowledge can be circular too; it yearns to flow locally, intergenerationally, across communities, and globally. Once knowledge can flow, we can work on nurturing the community agency and confidence to apply it. Of course, this is trickier than it first appears, and is a topic we could easily get lost in. We know there are dangers in over-simplification, reductive approaches, and undermining the energy and momentum we have established, but we still need to have on-ramps, pathways for engagement, and accessibility in mind, remembering who we are doing this for and who is not on the journey with us, yet.

It can make it easier to think of it as building blocks, sharing in manageable quantities of information, experience, and reflection. This protects both those sharing and those learning, sometimes these are the same people, making the process all the weightier and the need to adopt a measured approach even more important. What is abundantly clear is that there is no 'one model' or 'one size fits all' solution. Effective solutions depend on people and context, so sharing and learning need to remain flexible, reflective, and open to lived experiences beyond traditional 'sustainability' or 'social justice' frameworks.

The power of play

Play, albeit structured and purposeful, is a powerful mediator and moderator for this kind of productive, pragmatic relationship building. There is something quite special about watching a group of adults gradually lose themselves in an activity, especially one that removes at least some of the need to perform in their 'professional capacity'. Indeed, through play we can open space for individuals to embrace the multiplicity of roles and associations they have with a topic, theme, or location – as community members, parents, service users, and consumers.

As a methodological toolbox for running engagement, participation, and imagineering, our ISJ team are only beginning to get to grips with its potential. The playful, collaborative, and integrative approach we adopted enabled a heuristic switch from knowledge sharing to knowledge building. It also served to permit a certain amount of messiness that, in turn, facilitated the teasing out of deeper understandings and meaning from the individual and collective experiences of participants working between the cracks of concentrated power. Furthermore, we observed how this approach offered the freedom to 'move the goalposts', so to speak, in that the assumptions, expectations, and objectives we started the day with were not necessarily the same as those we finished with. This includes a shift away from 'model development' as well as our shared understanding of what knowledge and value look like in this context.

However, we also see some limitations regarding its role in getting us, communities, strategic partners, and stakeholders to where we want to be. The problem of originality stands out; we are not breaking new ground most of the time, perhaps ever. It is all coming back around; we are iterating, building, integrating, growing as individuals, and growing as communities. The other key issue is that it is limited by scale, despite being relatively cost efficient – a room, some paper and pens, some playful material (in this case building blocks), and sufficient refreshments to keep energy levels up for six hours or so, the most transformative experience is offered only to those literally 'in the room'. To be more inclusive and participatory, we need to find ways to open this up without losing the essential quality of the experience.

Our role

We entered this project with a sense of clarity about our role; one we initially framed as 'convenors'. This felt appropriate for a university working across multiple communities and stakeholder groups. It also helped to position us as researchers in a way that felt more neutral, perhaps even sanitised.

However, participatory research is rarely neutral. It is inherently messy, value-laden, and deeply involved. As we reflect on the day and the relationships that have grown, both individually and institutionally, we recognise that our role is more complex than we first imagined. Yes, we are convenors, but we are also facilitators, cheerleaders, occasional activists, and, often, perceived experts. Each of these roles carries its responsibilities – to the communities we work with, to ourselves, and to our institution.

None of this is particularly novel, but what has emerged most clearly is something more subtle, yet significant. The term we've landed on, 'contracting', captures the iterative, relational nature of our work. While we're hesitant to adopt 'contractors' as a label, the idea of contracting speaks to the need for ongoing negotiation: defining roles, boundaries, and expectations in ways that are responsive and grounded.

This concept is also tied to value; how our work creates value for those we engage with, for ourselves, and for the institution. Yet, we're aware of the tension here. 'Contracting' comes from a transactional lexicon, while our aspirations lie in transformation. This is a square we haven't yet circled, and perhaps never fully will, but acknowledging this tension feels like an honest and necessary part of the journey.

What next?

This is more than a summary; it is an invitation. An invitation to continue, to deepen, and to co-create the next phase of a partnership that is rooted in shared values, lived experiences, and a commitment to social justice. It is not a conclusion, but a stepping stone.

We find ourselves asking: what do we want to do next? And, more importantly, what do we want to do with others next? The day offered glimpses of possibility – ideas, tensions, and moments of clarity – that now need to be shaped into something more intentional. These insights will inform both the practical strategies and the ideological principles of a bespoke partnership. But we must resist the urge to overthink or over-engineer. The next steps should remain open, responsive, and grounded in place.

We are not seeking a perfect model. Instead, we are embracing the messiness, the playfulness, the uncertainty, and the iterative nature of co-production. What comes next must be shaped with the towns, not just within the university. It will require another phase of conversation, one that is open-ended, inclusive, and embedded – where roles and responsibilities are negotiated, rather than prescribed.

The concept of value remains central: how do we ensure that what we build together is valuable to all involved? And how do we do so without slipping into transactional modes of working, when our aspirations lie in transformation?

This is ongoing work. It will evolve. And it will require us to stay open to new ideas, new people, and new ways of working. The report, then, is not a blueprint or a model. It is a foundation, a bedrock, a springboard for what comes next.

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Photography

Photographs taken by researchers Owen Powell and Vicki Pugh.

