# Title

Professor Ashley Adamson: Reflecting on 10 years with Fuse - collaborations, risks, joys and friendships

# Speaker information

* Victoria Bartle (Interviewer) (Victoria)
* Ashley Adamson (Speaker) (Ashley)

# Description

In this special episode, host and Fuse Public Partner [Victoria Bartle](https://fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/meetapublicpartner/victoriabartle.html) speaks with [Professor Ashley Adamson](https://www.ncl.ac.uk/medical-sciences/people/profile/ashleyadamson.html) from Newcastle University as she reflects on 10 years of collaborations, risks, joys and friendships working as the Director of Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health.

# Contact

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Fuse Podcast: Public Health Research and Me

Transcript

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[Start of recording]

[upbeat electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:05]

00:00:05 Victoria Hello and welcome to our podcast, *Public Health Research and Me*. This podcast is led by public partners from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, and brings together the five Northeast universities of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside in a unique collaboration to deliver world-class research to improve health and well-being and tackle inequalities. Fuse is also a founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research. So my name’s Victoria Bartle, and I’m a public partner collaborating with Fuse on creating this podcast. And I’ve been involved with research from a patient and public perspective since I had to stop working in 2016 due to my own multiple long-term health conditions. But I really love being able to influence health and social care research, and I know that the input from every public partner makes research more focused and more beneficial to all of us. So today I’m going to be talking to Ashley Adamson, who has been the Fuse Director for the last ten years and has recently stepped down from this role. So hello, Ashley. Welcome. Thank you for joining us.

00:01:12 Ashley Hello, Victoria. It’s really good to be here.

00:01:15 Victoria Thank you. So to start off with, could you just tell us a bit more about your background and why did you initially get involved with research?

00:01:24 Ashley My first job, my first real job—obviously, we’ve all done other jobs that we’re perhaps not going to talk about. My first real job was as a dietician. So my first degree is in Nutrition and Dietetics, and I’m a state registered dietician and continue to be so. I worked mainly in London. And I enjoyed being a dietician. And I guess one of the things that I liked about it most was being involved with people, and real people and their families. But one of the things which—I suppose after a few years of doing that, I became a bit frustrated in that I felt that in nutrition and dietetics in an acute setting, what we’re doing is we’re spending our time sort of mopping up the floor, and no one’s turning off the tap. So we’re dealing—you know, there you’re seeing people with the consequences of their life circumstances, so people who have diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidaemia and other conditions. And I was a bit frustrated about that and was thinking about, “How can I go upstream and do a little bit more in terms of prevention?” At that time, there was—a post came up which is a research job, and it was to work in Ashington, Newbiggin and Morpeth, so Newbiggin-by-the-Sea.

00:02:45 Victoria Lovely. [chuckles]

00:02:47 Ashley And it was to work with eleven to twelve year olds, and it was a dietary survey of eleven to twelve year olds that had been done ten years earlier. And it was looking at how diets had changed over that ten years, and I really enjoyed that. I’m still getting people in contact, but I felt I was finding out things that were important and that would be useful and that could help shape policy and make a difference. And that work became my PhD. I went back to—and it’s a series of studies called the ASH11 studies, and I went back to work in community dietetics for a little while and worked again in schools and promotion of breastfeeding and so forth. And then I was lucky enough to get a post in public health and nutrition here at Newcastle University. So that is now thirty years ago. This is my thirtieth year at Newcastle.

00:03:44 Victoria Wow! So you’re settled here now? [laughs]

00:03:47 Ashley I only got here—I only came for two years. It’s been a great time. And, obviously, lots has happened in that time.

00:03:54 Victoria Yeah. Fantastic. So, like I said in the introduction, you’ve been the Director of Fuse for the last ten years.

00:04:03 Ashley Yeah.

00:04:03 Victoria So could you tell me what your proudest achievement or moment from being with Fuse has been?

00:04:10 Ashley So I took over as Director in 2014, and that was from Martin White, and so that’s now ten years ago. And I guess—there’s two things. First of all, one of them is that Fuse is still here because that was never a given, and you described right at the beginning that we’re a fairly unique collaboration and remain a unique collaboration of universities and local authorities and voluntary sectors across the Northeast. And there aren’t many examples of those universities working together, and I think we’re the only one of all of the universities working together. So the fact we’re still here is—makes me feel really proud. I think the other thing is—and the two are not unrelated—is in 2012, and again in 2017, but again in 2022, Fuse needed to reapply the membership of the School for Public Health Research. So in 2017, and again in 2022, I led that application for Fuse to be a member of the School for Public Health Research. 00:05:12 We have been successful in that. That brings massive opportunity for all of the researchers across Fuse and in the Northeast to get involved in the research of the school, which focuses on health improvement—public health/health improvement. And then from 2017, I was appointed the national Director of the School for Public Health Research. Others will have heard me say this before, but I do think that one of the reasons that I was approached to be the Director in 2017 and was successful in being reappointed in 2022 is the work that we do, the collaboration that we do so successfully across Fuse. And one of the key factors for the School for Public Health Research is fostering that collaboration. So I think, you know, our track record and what we’d achieved in Fuse was no small part in me taking on the Directorship nationally and retaining that in 2022. So that takes me through to 2027.

00:06:22 Victoria [laughs] That’s amazing. And looking—as a public partner, you kind of don’t realise how much funding impact research and how the length of time that you get funding allocated for, and then you’ve got to try and get in again and get more funding and stuff. And it’s this continual cycle—

00:06:40 Ashley Yeah.

00:06:41 Victoria —where you’re kind of battling with the system to make sure you’ve got enough money to do what you want to do. And the fact that Fuse is still here after so long, it’s a massive testament to how well you all work together and got all of that funding, so—

00:06:56 Ashley It is. And being part of the school gives us access to that funding. And, of course, you need that research funding, not just to do the research but to keep the researchers and grow that capacity and allow the skills to develop in the region. And that’s—you know, it’s helping people to develop their careers and to—and their skills in research, for which we all benefit.

00:07:20 Victoria Yeah.

00:07:20 Ashley But to do that, we have to have continued funding. And it gives us an opportunity to collaborate with people across the other members of the School for Public Health Research, which—you know, this school is the areas of excellence of public health research across England, and it’s great to be a part of it.

00:07:39 Victoria Yeah. That’s fantastic. Thank you. So just looking—[chuckles] going from the massively positive to the slightly negative, is there one thing that you wish you’d been able to achieve during your time at Fuse?

00:07:51 Ashley Yes.

00:07:52 Victoria Well, that’s lucky. [laughs]

00:07:55 Ashley [laughs] So I’m massively proud of everything that we have achieved in Fuse over the last ten years and before and the opportunities for people that we’ve created. But, originally, Fuse was set up as—we had funding from the UKCRC for five years and then tapered funding for the next five years.

00:08:15 Victoria I’m putting my hand up. Can you explain what a CRC is?

00:08:18 Ashley It was a—it’s a fund—it was a funding body.

00:08:21 Victoria Right. Okay. Thank you.

00:08:22 Ashley A research funding body.

00:08:23 Victoria Fab. Thanks.

00:08:24 Ashley And what they did was they set up some centres—funding was available, and people bid for that funding for capacity building.

00:08:32 Victoria Right.

00:08:33 Ashley So it wasn’t to do research. It was to build capacity in public health research.

00:08:38 Victoria So you mean like training new researchers and getting programmes and projects and stuff?

00:08:44 Ashley So with that first lot of funding, which we got in 2008, and that was the beginning of Fuse, so we came together to bid for that money. There were PhD studentships. There were post-doctoral posts. There was funding for those. There were lectureships. There were senior lectureships, and there was a readership. So each of the then five members of the school had positions in that, and we had a cohort of PhD students. Now, some of those PhD students and people who were appointed to those lectureships are in really senior positions and still with us in the Northeast. So Amelia Lake, who’s a prof at Teesside, she had one of the posts that were funded in that way as a lectureship. Steph Scott, who has a lectureship now, did her PhD within Fuse. There are many such examples. We had that funding for that capacity building, and that allowed us to develop the skills from which we were able to get membership of the school. 00:09:49 What I wish we had been able to do, and I think remains an ambition, is to bring in some further funding for Fuse for that capacity building, particularly PhDs and early postdocs. We’ve got some of that through the School for Public Health Research but not on the scale that we had when we had that core funding for capacity building. So to get funding for a doctoral training programme, for example, or to be part of a doctoral training programme, and to have some funding to build capacity and fund those posts. So Fuse has been able to be sustained by the generosity of our member universities, which allow us to have wonderful people like Ella Anderson, Mark Welford, you know, Laura Ritson, and also our AskFuse, so Lesley Haley and Peter van der Graaf. Without that generosity of the universities, we wouldn’t be able to have that. But I wish we’d been able to get more funding to continue that pipeline in a bigger way with more ambition. We’ve done it, but we could do more.

00:10:59 Victoria So I cut this question out, but I want to ask you now. With Sheena taking over from you, is that kind of the piece of advice that you’d like to give her? Or do you kind of see her moving in a different direction?

00:11:11 Ashley I think it’s for her and Fuse now to create their own ambition.

00:11:15 Victoria Mhm.

00:11:16 Ashley I still think it would be a massive thing, and I hope that it can be achieved. I guess the advice I would give Sheena is Fuse is such a valuable, important partnership. So much can be achieved, but it’s also—you know, there’s so much fun that can be had with it. So you can achieve so much, and that brings great joy. So I think, you know, have fun, take some risks would be advice.

00:11:47 Victoria I think that’s great advice just for life.

00:11:49 Ashley [laughs]

00:11:50 Victoria Have fun and take some risks. I might put that on a sticker on my fridge.

00:11:53 Ashley [laughs]

00:11:54 Victoria That sounds amazing. [chuckles] You mentioned the School for Public Health Research. You obviously hold and have held a number of really influential positions in the research infrastructure. So can I ask you now, like, how do you see them all linking together? And what are you most keen to kind of focus on moving forward?

00:12:13 Ashley I suppose there’s two parts to this. There’s one—there’s sort of—I’m still getting—I’m still involved in public health nutrition research. We might come onto that. But through the leadership of Fuse and then the School for Public Health Research, also we have PHIRST Fusion, which is in partnership with Queen’s University, Belfast, Edinburgh and Glasgow universities and with Sheffield. And that is about doing evaluations of innovations in public health that have been led by local authorities. So that very much fits with what we’ve learnt through Fuse, and it builds on that, so that—these are called PHIRSTs, and they’re ‘Public Health Intervention Responsive Study Teams’.

00:13:02 Victoria [laughs] Well remembered.

00:13:04 Ashley Yeah. They’re NIHR funded. So that PHIRST, I think, very much builds on what we do in Fuse anyway. The School for Public Health Research is very much about public health improvement and with partnership with local authorities and voluntary sector, so builds more on what we’ve learnt through Fuse. And then the—I suppose the other sort of main thing which I’ve recently taken on is that NIHR, again, have invested in a specialist centre for public health research for research support. So there’s always been the RDS, Research Design Service, which is now called Research Support Service, but there’s an investment of thirty million in supporting public health research outside of the NHS. So it very much fits with what we’ve done, and here in Newcastle, we have a specialist centre for public health, which was—the large part of that funding, twenty two million of that, is in the Northeast, but to deliver a service nationally. 00:14:09 And that’s to help researchers, right from the people who’ve done lots of research and design research, and they know what they’re doing, just need a bit of advice, to people who ask the question, “What’s research, and how can I get involved?” It’s right the way through that. And I think that brings massive opportunity and does fit with what I’ve done and what I’ve learnt. So I think that’s how I piece them all together. I don’t know whether that makes a coherent story, but that’s how I tell it.

00:14:39 Victoria No, it does. That was—yeah, it was really clear, and it nicely moves on to my next question as well. So the public health research, obviously you’re trying to get that implemented as quickly as possible so that it can benefit people. So can you tell us a bit more about how you’ve managed to get research implemented so that it can actually get put into practice and help the people that it’s meant to be helping?

00:15:04 Ashley I mean, I can give you a couple of examples of where that’s worked and where I feel that I have made that impact in my work personally. But I think, generally, for message, in terms of how that pathway to that, is about asking the right question. So working with people in practice and the public to find out what’s important, working with them to answer the question, to design the research and answer the question, and then working with them to disseminate that and get it to the right places and help interpret the findings. So I’ve had many opportunities to do that, and I think that has been very valuable. And it’s something that we’ve emulated within the School of Public Health Research as well. But thinking about that final push to impact as well. Now, from a personal perspective—I think I’m going to go back—right back to when I said my PhD and this study that we did around, over time, how children’s diets have changed. And that was data collected in—I did my PhD in—1990 I collected that data. And there’s a lot of the people listening here who’ll go, “I wasn’t even born.” However…

00:16:12 Victoria I was. [laughs]

00:16:15 Ashley [laughs] So I did that—started that work in 1990, and it had been previously collected in 1980, again in 2000 and again in 2010. And they were PhD students that I supervised. And it’s just been completed in 2022. There was a reason it wasn’t done in 2020. Can’t think what it was.

00:16:33 Victoria Well, no. That’s been blocked out of my mind. [laughs]

00:16:38 Ashley [laughs] But that is a very important series of studies. And, actually, we’ve just had—last week, the person, Rebecca McIntyre, got her PhD last week on that project, so it’s—that’s great. What that work has done and—was—influenced school food policy, the school food plan and also the implementation of the universal free school meals. There were many other factors, but that research evidence that we had on what difference school food policy can make to children’s diets, and food at lunchtime in schools, and throughout the school day had an impact on, now, the universal free school meal policy. So I’m very proud of that.

00:17:20 Victoria So you should be.

00:17:21 Ashley Yeah. And it—

00:17:22 Victoria That’s phenomenal. Like you can see the impact that that has on kids and, like, how much it’s needed in schools. Like, especially these days as well when people don’t have enough food to feed their families. And you’ve got breakfast clubs and free school meals and making sure that it’s nutritionally good.

00:17:41 Ashley Yeah. And, you know, it’s not perfect, and there’s more that can be done. But I think that the importance of food at school was really clear from the work we did, and also the impact on inequalities. And that, actually, you know, there are some children who rely on that school food more but are also influenced by peers and can get a good part of their nutrition from the school. And some children rely on that as their main meal of the day, so it’s really important. So I’m very proud of that. I did work on front of pack, you know, your traffic lights that you have on packaging. I did some work on that. And I’ve recently been doing some work with the National Child Measurement Programme, which is the programme which measures all children in schools between four and five and ten to eleven, looking at how we might be able to support parents who get that information in the best possible way. And that’s going to be implemented in the National Child Measurement Programme, so I’m really pleased with that—

00:18:42 Victoria Oh, wow!

00:18:43 Ashley I guess the other thing which I would just like to highlight is that, you know, all of these things in the research, it’s—some of it’s serendipity and having the window open for when you’ve got the best evidence. So you need to do all of that really good work, really robust research and have the evidence, and then sometimes that opportunity just opens. So it—the school food policy was very much that. The other thing which I am really proud of is the work that I was able to get involved in with the Hairy Bikers—who were ‘The Hairy Dieters’. And there was a series of programmes called *The Hairy Dieters*, and Dave Myers and Si King were a pleasure to work with. We did a series of four programmes along with my colleague Roy Taylor. And that series of books—the first book, *The Hairy Dieters*, I had a phone call whilst I was on holiday to say that their recipe book had just knocked *Fifty Shades of Grey* off the top of the best sellers that summer.

00:19:46 Victoria That’s absolutely phenomenal. That’s—you must have been—did you go and jump in the pool or something? [laughs]

00:19:52 Ashley [chuckles] I was so—I was really—so that’s something I’m really proud of. It had massive impact because people still talk about those books and use those books and how it helps them. So, I am really proud of that. And, Victoria, with permission, I’d just like to take a moment…Because I am sad today because we’ve just heard that today Dave Myers, the Hairy Biker, has passed away. So I do just want to take a moment to acknowledge him and Si King, and to send my condolences to Dave’s family but also to Si, who’s lost a partner. And, you know, the two of them together, what a team and so much fun. So I’m just—I’m thinking of them today.

00:20:38 Victoria Yeah. I’m so sorry about that. I can only imagine. Like, just from the few chats that we’ve had, the impact that they both had on you was quite clear and so phenomenal, and the work that they do is brilliant.

00:20:52 Ashley Thank you. Thanks. And I think what they show is that actually you can get serious messages across with a lot of fun, and people listen.

00:21:01 Victoria Yeah. And that’s kind of where Fuse shines as well. If you look at all the creative outputs and things and doing things slightly differently, it’s….

00:21:11 Ashley Yeah, it is. And this example—the podcast is an example of that but animations and stage productions and lots of different ways of getting messages out that people can—real people can really engage with.

00:21:24 Victoria Yeah, absolutely. So moving on to the next question. Because this is like a public involvement-led podcast, how do you feel that public involvement has impacted and benefited with your work? Like both with Fuse and in your wider career.

00:21:41 Ashley So I guess for Fuse first, this is something that over the last few years we’ve been working really hard on, and it’s been brilliant to have Ella join us and to really help us build on their public involvement work. I think Fuse in the past has always done really well in practice partners and working with people and local authorities and others, but we really needed to bring in public involvement. Why does it matter? And what difference does it make? I’m going to go right way back to the beginning when I said, you know, when I was working in the NHS as a dietician, talking to people and understanding people’s lives, and then tailoring the messages to what people really need in order to help them in their current situation. So you might have—you know, you think this is the perfect thing that everybody should be doing, but the reality is that it has to be—it has to relate to people’s lives, and make a difference, and be doable and all of those things.

00:22:46 Victoria Because we’re all so individual. Like, something might work for you, and I might just be like, “I can’t get my head around that. I don’t know why.”

00:22:53 Ashley Absolutely. And I think that the public being involved in research helps keep our feet on the ground. It keeps it real, and it makes you think, “Well, actually, how is this going to make a difference?” And sometimes members of the public can ask those difficult questions, and we do sometimes—you know, people in research do sometimes talk a bit of a foreign language.

00:23:17 Victoria Yeah. [laughs]

00:23:18 Ashley You’ve asked me about acronyms and things already in this podcast.

00:23:23 Victoria You mentioned something, like, was it dietics or something?

00:23:27 Ashley Dietetics.

00:23:28 Victoria Yeah. What does that mean?

00:23:30 Ashley Well, dietetics is just the appliance of nutrition to medical conditions.

00:23:37 Victoria Oh, right. To medical conditions. Oh. See, I didn’t know that.

00:23:40 Ashley Usually, but not necessarily. So, you know, you might be working in community, or you might work—be working in schools, but a dietician, rather than a nutritionist, tends to work with—it might be people with inborn errors of metabolism, right to people with diabetes, or people who are looking to lose weight, or promoting breastfeeding. But it’s like speech and language therapy, like podiatry, occupational therapy, et cetera. Dietetics is an allied health profession to medicine. And dieticians will work in hospital or in community, and their job is to tailor what might be ideal advice for somebody in terms of their condition to what the circumstances is for that person. So that’s what a dietician does, generally, in the NHS. But, you know, I operate at that public health level and still consider myself doing that applied nutrition work. 00:24:40 So I guess that’s where the public and members of the public in Fuse, in my research, just make sure that you are answering and producing evidence that actually can make a difference, either to service delivery or to people’s lives. Because that’s what applied research is about, and that’s what we do. So I think members of the public hold the mirror up to say, “What’s that? What does that mean? So what, and why should I care?”

00:25:20 Victoria That’s another one that needs to go on the fridge.

00:25:23 Ashley [laughs] And there has been—within my own research, for example, when we were recruiting for a study, and we had all of these resources, and we weren’t getting good response. And we had two members of the public who were part of our advisory board, and they said, “Let me have a look at them,” and it made such a difference. We increased our response rate because they edited our materials just to make them more accessible.

00:25:53 Victoria Yeah. It’s amazing, like, what a small piece of work can have such a big impact. Like just changing a few words or changing the format or something can make it miles more accessible or understandable or whatever.

00:26:06 Ashley Absolutely. So that was, I think, you know, one particular example where it was really helpful. But I think, you know, across Fuse, the impact of what the public members have contributed has been huge. And, again, I’d like to thank Ella Anderson and all the public members in Fuse for the work that’s been done.

00:26:25 Victoria Thank you. [chuckles] So to kind of sum all of this up, then, if you had one message for our listeners to take away from today, what would it be?

00:26:37 Ashley I think if you think you might like to know more, or you’re wondering whether you should get involved, get involved. Everybody can make a contribution. You have to be realistic about people’s time, capacity and everything else, but—and I—from here, I mean members of the public but also researchers, people who think they might like to get into research, all of those things. I think if you are interested, learn more and get involved. The other thing that I would say is if you are not sure, ask. Because there really is—and I know a lot of people say this, but I really do believe this. There is no such thing as a stupid question.

00:27:29 Victoria I totally agree with you because I’m always the one with my hand up going, “What does that mean?” [chuckles]

00:27:33 Ashley And that—and how else do we find out?

00:27:35 Victoria Exactly. I’d much rather ask a question than not know.

00:27:39 Ashley And sometimes when you ask a question, it makes the person saying these things think more and learn. So, yeah, get involved and ask questions, and yeah, just—and go for it.

00:27:57 Victoria Well, we’re going to put all of those things onto stickers so that you can be handing them out to everybody.

00:28:03 Ashley [laughs]

00:28:03 Victoria Thank you so much for your time today, Ashley. I’ve really enjoyed it. It’s been amazing speaking to you. And best of luck in everything that you’re going to do now that you can focus on other things and not Fuse. Yeah.

00:28:17 Ashley Other things. Well, thank you, Victoria. Just before—I do really want to say thank you to all of my Fuse colleagues across the Northeast and beyond. The Fuse core team but all my Fuse colleagues. Because it—I can’t believe it’s been ten years, actually. But there has been—yeah, there’s been challenges, of course, there always is. But what does make it possible and also really enjoyable is the people, and what a pleasure it is to work with people. So thank you. I’m not going away. I’m still a member of Fuse. I’ll be watching. I’m here to offer, but I’m not going to be sticking my oar in.

00:28:55 Victoria Yeah. [laughs]

00:28:55 Ashley This is now over to Sheena.

00:28:57 Victoria You might be asked to stick your oar in, you never know. [laughs]

00:29:00 Ashley Well, you know, people know where I am, but it’s over to Professor Sheena Ramsay and everybody else in Fuse, and I know the next ten years are going to be glorious.

00:29:10 Victoria Absolutely. Thank you so much, Ashley. So if you’re a fan of our *Public Health Research and Me* podcast, please subscribe on your preferred streaming platform. [upbeat electronic music fades in] Let us know how we’re doing with a rating or review, and share with your friends, family, colleagues and networks. So thank you so much, and we’ll see you next time. [music fades out]

[End of recording]