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Briefing Paper:
Co-production

An introductory guide to developing co-production in services and communities alike.

West Yorkshire
Violence
Reduction Unit

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Contents

Introduction

National policy, local strategies, and service designs often state the need to involve lived experience in the design and delivery of services using **co-production**. The term has become very popular but there is a wide range of ideas about what that means, with varying levels of lived-experience involvement and at different stages of the process.

Co-production means to produce together (though not necessarily 50/50). The aim is to make full use of lived experience knowledge in a way that does not squash, distort or simply take it. Whilst this is a brilliant aim, there are many barriers to achieving this outcome successfully.

One difficulty is that institutions and organisations already have systems in place which are well established and hard to change. These systems might even be responsible for some of the outcomes that are causing harm, especially the processes which disempower and stigmatise people.

Just because co-production sounds brilliant and important doesn't mean that now is the right time to embark upon the journey.

Who is this for?

This guide will explore the essential principles and guiding questions to help people think about, plan and deliver co-produced work. It will not provide a step-by-step guide to undertaking the task. There are further resources at the end which go into more detail about that.

This guide is aimed primarily at professionals/practitioners who are at the beginning of their co-production journey. The content will also be useful for everybody to consider, including people with lived experience who are leading a call to co-production.

Why to? (For organisations)

At the heart of co-production is the belief that people with lived experience hold the necessary insights and wisdom to make their lives better, but they are too often shut out of participating in the decisions which affect them.

Often the evidence that gets gathered to solve problems or design services fit within traditional ways of working and historic understanding of the problem and how to go about fixing it. Gathering the same sort of evidence generally leads to the same sort of result. And so gathering evidence in the same sort of ways (i.e. no co-production) may keep recreating inequality by extracting or ignoring the knowledge from those who have been disempowered. Co-production can change this!

Co-production has real, well evidenced potential to create something that works better for everyone

…We noted consistently that in the absence of co-production in some form, bad things happened. Agencies were less effective; accountability died; those most at risk got hit the hardest. Public confidence in efforts to address social problems waned. Dedicated professionals suffered burn-out, became cynical, focused on finding ways to blame their clients, and were reduced to semi-automated case processors. **Edgar Khan, 2000, 'No More Throw-away People'**

COLLABORATION AND CO-PRODUCTION

WORKING TOGETHER

TO SHAPE IMPROVEMENT IN PEOPLE'S LIVES

Co-production can bring about a reconfiguration of power dynamics through building authentic relationships between those with lived experience and those who have expertise in other fields. In doing so people have the opportunity to see each other's reality with humility.

Whilst co-production does have transformative potential for changing systems, the most important aspect of co-production is that the experience of the work itself should be of benefit to all involved, professionals/ practitioners and those with lived experience alike.

Why not to? (For organisations)

Institutional

Services often feel like their resources are scarce, that they have outcomes that are already defined, that they need to meet those outcomes within a time pressurised environment. Dedicating time to building relationships and learning in an environment without known outcomes can feel too time consuming and stressful. This can lead to co-production which is rushed and squeezed and not able to yield the maximum benefit.

Co-production is often framed as less valuable than 'work' and is therefore not designed-in to processes but instead seen as something to stick on.

…participation…was indispensable to getting real results, to maximising effectiveness, to realising the mission. At that point we said: if that is so, why are you merely calling it participation? Why aren't you calling it work? Why aren't you regarding the producers of that work as co-workers and co-producers? And why are you not building that Co-Production into your core operating system? **Edgar Khan, 2000, 'No More Throw-away People'**

Devaluing co-production is related to our economic mindset and how we measure value and efficiency in monetary terms. Services are often required to produce measurable outcomes and undertake frequent, rigid reporting in order to obtain and sustain funding.

Co-Production redefines the nexus between the two worlds, [market and non-market] … in order to produce a world that rewards decency and caring as automatically as it now rewards aggression, competitiveness and acquisition. **Edgar Khan, 2000, 'No More Throw-away People'**

As co-production cannot be measured easily in terms of financial gain, and as it is not valued as 'work' in the same way as other work is, it often gets side-lined or squeezed in without the time it needs to be done properly.

Personal Barriers

Embarking on co-production can be incredibly unsettling for individuals, especially those more used to formal meetings in office spaces and reading and writing reports as a way of generating knowledge.

If it feels scary, that's okay. If you can accept the feeling of vulnerability, then this will provide more opportunity for connection within the co-producing group. External facilitators are incredibly useful to neutrally guide a process if the methods feel uncomfortable.

Why not to?

So it might be that co-production isn't for you. If you're required to produce something very specific and have a tight timeframe, then there is an increased likelihood that the co-production process that you do undertake will be (and will feel to the co-producers with lived experience) tokenistic and actually produce a net harm.

Principles of Co-production

The foundations of co-production should be based around the principles of trauma informed environments.

- Trust and transparency

- Safety

- Collaboration and Mutuality

- Empowerment, voice, choice

- Cultural, historical, gender understanding.

These underpinnings ensure that a co-producing environment can be built in which dignity and equality are central. When these factors are present everyone, but especially people with lived experience, can feel more empowered to participate.

To turn these principles into guidance

1 Foundations
- Forget what you think you know.

- Know your power.

- Build the co-production community.

2 Interactions
- Relationships are everything.

- Co-production environments

3 Actions
- Methods and language

- Clear and transparent communication

- Mutuality and impact

Foundations
Forget what you think you know.

If you begin with a clear idea of the problem that you're out to address, you will not get the real value of the wisdom of lived experience. Your idea of the 'problem' may have been informed by powerful social and historical forces which have framed the *truth* of the matter in a particular way over many years. Meanwhile, other truths have been systematically silenced.

If you begin with your (even well evidenced) assumptions of what needs to be fixed, then everything will be filtered through this understanding of the problem. You will only get responses which address that particular framing.

In doing this you will miss all the things that will go unsaid and unexplored - these things will be different and very important in building a holistic picture.

This applies particularly to the design of peer research projects. What are the underlying assumptions of services? What motivates service user behaviour in specific situations? How can a 360-degree discussion of an issue help to arrive at a "better" question?

> There are various methods and tools to guide co-production in a way which keeps things open and not grasping for the answers. This will lead to a much deeper, collective understanding of the problem you are seeking to address. It will probably look different to how you imagined. But you need to trust the process and lean into the messiness in order to allow the varied and conflicting realities of people with lived experience to flourish.

Know your power.
In order to ensure the benefit outweighs harm, you should think about power imbalances before embarking on the work. This entails critical reflection on your own attitudes, assumptions and fears. You may need to reconfigure what you think about people's behaviours.

There is a power inequality between the person needing a service and the person who works for that service and technically has control over their access. This dynamic is set before the groups have come together and if left unchecked will manifest in the co-production process.

It should be clear that people with lived experience have a lot of power to tap into as well. What use is having a service without people wanting to use it? Their power needs to be harnessed!

Be honest about your own vulnerability coming into the process of co-production. If it feels unnerving, then that's a good sign. Being brave is essential, not optional to co-production. Failure is part of the process. This is about "failing early, failing often, and failing better" (Mark Crowe, Humankind). You can't measure that progress with traditional metrics.

Building the co-producing community
How will you get people passionate about coproduction? The people you are wanting to attract might already be disillusioned, difficult to motivate, and feeling irrelevant in the process because of their past experiences.

Services are a much smaller part of life than we might think. If working with other charities or groups, recognise they have different priorities beyond the project or research. Plan the times around what people are up to. **Building much more time into timescales ensures enough flexibility for it to be workable.**

Relationships should be built over long periods of time, and it should begin by asking the groups what they need/want. This should be part of the design, not an afterthought. Whatever is co-produced needs to be of value to people and communities. Design the aims together so that realistic expectations can be set from the outset.

Be prepared for the group to change. It is entirely normal for professionals to change roles or employers, go off sick or retire. The same is true of the co-production community. It is a more dynamic group than many others. Prepare for changes in the participants – both in terms of members and in terms of the members' situations and perspectives. Accept that the right group is the group of people that is there. If no-one turns up, are you doing the right thing?

Is there a way of doing this without you? Perhaps a person with lived experience can tap into their own networks and create opportunities for genuine collaboration with people they already know, ensuring you are not at the centre of the research project. Or perhaps you can tap into a group that already exists, who are meeting for something they are already passionate about. Be there with them and support it and while doing that spend a short time on this project.

Interactions
Relationships come first

Building trusting relationships between all members is absolutely paramount to the success of the co-production work, and this will take time.

It is vital that everyone involved is able to trust one another. That trust is gained through the building of human relationships which, in many cases, have developed into friendships. It is when stereotypes are left at the door, when everyone really listens and people are valued as people that we can seriously begin to tackle poverty.

We meet one another as human beings, not merely professionals or service users. As we do this, we will see more clearly the causes of poverty recognising that whilst they are systemic, we can find long-term solutions where we all flourish Poverty Truth Network.

Conversations must go both ways. Conversations aren't just interesting from a research angle but are vital to the formation of trusting relationships and of benefit to all involved.

We all benefit from feeling heard and seen. You cannot know another's experience if you do all the talking or jump straight to problem solving mode.

Just listening has a positive impact. Enabling people to have a voice is an empowering process.

Quality time spent together increases the chances that co-production processes will be of benefit to all involved.

Co-production environments

If you are organising the co-production process, ask yourself: will everyone thrive in this environment? Too often we have good intentions but then exclude most people by sitting down in a meeting room and writing a strategy or inviting people with lived experience to a board meeting.

Conducting co-production in a professional space - such as sitting in on meetings - is inherently disempowering. In order to come together on more equal terms requires an environment which is not in the professional comfort of the service and the systems it already has in place. If people feel comfortable, their strengths and capabilities are more likely to show through. Professionals/ practitioners might be used to working in formal environments, but it might not bring out the best in them too.

The co-produced work needs to be conducted in a neutral space, and attention should be paid to accessibility, time, and childcare as well as how comfortable people will feel there. The best thing to do is consider and design this working environment together.

Practical Considerations

When developing the co-producing environment it is worth deciding together the rules and parameters of your work together.

For example, if research is to be undertaken as part of the co-production, what are the ethical considerations that might need to be considered? This is new territory as the boundaries of professional and service user are blurred in co-production and the same rules don't necessarily apply.

How will you decide what constitutes 'risk' as part of your work together? For example, do you need to consider lone working protocols, or will that place undue barriers to participation and design out involvement? How will you balance risk against trust? Notions of what people can't/shouldn't do are often couched in stigma.

Actions
Methods of co-production
Co-production is an approach, not a method, founded upon creating safe and empowering spaces for wisdom to come together.

Use methods and approaches that enable everyone to share if they want to. It might be traditional to write and read reports, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest creative participative methods yield a wider range of knowledge and experience.

Not sure where to begin!? No problem: see the resources at the end of the guide for help.

Clear and transparent communication
Be realistic and manage expectations. If a service has initiated the coproduction work and built a co-production team, then be clear and realistic about the outcomes and impact of the work.

If there are restrictions and limitations on what aspects of the work can be co-produced, be very clear about that and what you are able to work on together.

People may have had a lot of experiences being let down by services, passed around people, and not able to access the help needed. Further experiences may compound this

feeling, so it really is very important that communication is good, and expectations are clear and co-defined.

> Language: pay special attention to language. For example, don't talk about 'hard to reach' people, often it is academics and service providers who are hard to reach. Labels can be shaming. See the West Yorkshire ATR Language Guide for more insight.
>
> If you use jargon and complicated language people will feel disempowered and they might not come back. Don't expect members to call you out on it (know your power)

Mutuality and Impact

Value the time and work of lived experience members as you expect yours to be valued. This should ideally be cash payment at the living wage but if vouchers have to be used instead (especially if cash would affect benefit payments) communicate the reasons for this. Vouchers can be disempowering as it may play into stereotypes about who can be trusted with money.

Here is a useful resource for navigating the [payment conundrum](https://www.scie.org.uk/co-production/supporting/paying-people-who-receive-benefits#measures) (https://www.scie.org.uk/co-production/supporting/paying-people-who-receive-benefits#measures)

Be an advocate for change by using your power to support others. Provide a platform for the co-production team by crediting contributors in anything written and tagging relevant groups on twitter etc.

Share the learning and impact. Provide updates on how the research is going, its outcomes and impacts. If people are giving up their stories they want results (but be clear and realistic in your expectation setting).

Resources and Inspiration

So, you're ready to embark but you've not been given much to go on! This final section is full of links to resources which will provide practical guidance as well as examples of where co-production has hugely impacted.

Examples of Co-production

> **Lived experience led: The Poverty Truth Commissions**
>
> *Nothing about - without us - is for us*
>
> *The Poverty Truth Network is made up of a dozen commissions and growing. They believe that meaningful progress towards overcoming poverty will be made when those who experience poverty are central to the development, delivery and evaluation of solutions.*
>
> In Leeds, their approach has been as follows:
>
> Engagement: Initially the experts by experience meet for 3 or 4 months to get to know each other, learn about each other's stories, agree the issues they want to focus on and then decide what stories they want to tell the city. They are then joined by the civic & business Commissioners to whom they tell their stories. Their experience becomes the evidence the Commission works with.

Exploration: working with the questions, 'What do I see? What do you see? Now what do we see?' They begin to see the city through each other's eyes and experience.

Experimentation: from these new perspectives Commissioners are encouraged to improvise on a 'risk small, fail early, learn quickly' basis. Rather than coming up with THE PLAN TO SOLVE ALL POVERTY IN Leeds, they ask, 'what might happen if we just tried doing this a bit differently?'

Embedding: the final stage (that has no end!). How can what has been seen, heard and learnt, be embedded in organisations, behaviours and cultures to bring about lasting change?

Another organisation which has built strong relationships between commissioners, service providers and people with lived experience is the **Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network.**

Other examples of successful lived experience forums and networks include **Revolving Doors Agency** who have active forums across England which bring together people with experience of prison together with commissioners.

Whole-system redesign: May Day Trust

The May Day Trust used to be a fairly standard housing provider. But now they model a "person-led, transitional and strength-based system alongside people going through tough times and to build a movement of people and organisations to change the current deficit-based systems". This change didn't happen overnight. It required time to listen to people experiencing support systems and you can view their research here (https://maydaytrust.org.uk/wisdoms/)**.**

Further Resources

Guidance on co-production

[Breaking down barriers – Co-production | SCIE](#)

[An Appreciative Model to Co-production](#)

[MEAM resources: Getting started with co-production](#)

[Co-Production Toolkit | Homeless Link](#)

[https://www.wypartnership.co.uk/application/files/6416/5104/5038/West_Yorkshire_Trauma_Informed_Co-Production_Guidance_April_22.pdf](#)

[Paying people who receive benefits: Co-production and involvement | SCIE](#)

Further reading

[What is the value of co-production?](#)

[Coproduction, shit life syndrome and finding ways of making together | The New Mental Health](#)

[No more throw-away people : the co-production imperative | WorldCat.org](#)

[The SAGE Handbook of Action Research](#)

[Co-production and Participatory Research](#)

Methods

[Creative Research Methods - A Practical Guide, By Helen Kara](#)

[Three Approaches to Participative Inquiry | Peter Reason](#)

[Introduction to co-production and participatory research Workbook](#)

[Examples of co-production in social care | SCIE](#)

Language

WY-ATR - [West Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership and West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit (westyorkshiretraumainformed.co.uk)](#)

Lemkes, A. (2023), Briefing Paper: destigmatising services (forthcoming), West Yorkshire VRU/ Humankind.

How it fits within West Yorkshire

[ATR-TOC-Trauma-Informed-Community-Action-Collective-DRAFT-Nov-22.pdf (westyorkshiretraumainformed.co.uk)](#)

[https://www.wypartnership.co.uk/application/files/4516/5158/8338/Warren_Larkin_Becoming_a_Trauma_Informed_System.pdf](#)