



A Meeting of Minds:

How co-production benefits people, professionals and organisations

Insights and inspiration from five strategic investments in England



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Executive Summary

The National Lottery Community Fund has made significant, long-term, strategic investments in five programmes to address some of the challenges and transitions people face in their lives. Fifty-eight local partnerships across England have worked closely with the people their services are intended for, to design and deliver their work. This report looks across all five programmes to examine how this commitment to co-production has worked in practice.

In the past, services and programmes were often developed and delivered without meaningful input from the people they set out to help. But there has been a growing realisation that this can make services impersonal and inflexible.

Taking part in co-production can have a powerful impact, increasing self-worth and confidence. It has provided people with valuable experience and skills, as well as supporting them towards goals like becoming more connected with their communities. For many, recognising personal experiences as a strength rather than a thing to be fixed or treated has been life-changing.



We've learned that valuing lived experience can make services and activities a better fit for the people who use them. They have told us that it helps make services more accessible, authentic and responsive to their needs, but that are also more human.

For staff, co-production can mean being open to developing a wider skillset and different outlook. It's about facilitating, rather than leading, as well as being more able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. We've seen that co-production has helped professionals to reflect and think about their role and approach in new ways, and reinforced and refreshed their passion and motivation for their work.

Our programmes' experiences of co-production have informed, shaped and improved practice and policy at local and national levels. Partnerships have trained frontline workers, influenced how public money is spent through joint commissioning, and informed thinking and local strategy development. They've also inspired others by showing the difference meaningful co-production can make.

Asking people what they want or need from a service and then working with them to implement it seems like the obvious thing to do. But we have also heard that it's not necessarily the easiest, especially when working with limited time and resources, and within established systems, practices and cultures.

What's significant is that it shows people that you are committed to working for them and with them, rather than 'doing to' them.

You can maximise the benefits in the following way:

- Ensure the process is fluid and ongoing. Co-production is not a one-off activity and needs to be embedded from before the project starts to after it finishes. But the way it is done and the level of involvement depends on the people you are working with, and what they are ready for.
- Co-production isn't something that you can get right, or wrong. It's something that you develop, refine and improve, as you go. Be reflective and committed to a mind-set of continuous improvement. Check in with people to see what they think, and act on their feedback.
- Stay fresh, open, and welcoming. Don't rely on the same people to contribute, but continue to encourage new people to join in, to invite fresh perspectives and keep things focused on them.
- Recognise that there's a role for everyone and develop a culture where it's ok for everyone to challenge, ask (difficult) questions, and discuss contrasting views and experiences. Be open and honest about expectations and realities. Get buy-in from top to bottom, and set out with the right mind-set and behaviours. Sharing power and ownership of your project, and viewing lived experience as an asset, are fundamental to making co-production meaningful.

The National Lottery Community Fund wants people to be at the heart of everything we do. Co-production is one way of doing this. But it's not simply about handing over responsibility to people. It's about people and professionals working with each other's strengths, and using evidence, to create better services. By learning from their experiences, projects and services can work towards finding the right balance, where lived experience and professional knowhow combine to create the best solution for those involved.

We're often asked what evidence there is to show that involving people in the design and delivery of services leads to better outcomes. We can't provide definitive answers but here we offer an idea of what co-production can look like, what it can achieve, and how it can feel for the people involved. We hope it will be useful for practitioners, funders, or decision-makers involved in or planning co-production activity or user involvement.

“At the beginning I knew it was important because it was the right thing to do, but now I feel like I can't do it without them [the young people].”¹

Programme lead, HeadStart Blackpool.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the partnerships and people who have taken the time to share their experiences with us. And to our colleagues for being patient with requests for information. We hope our report sheds some light on the hard work you all put in to make these programmes work.

Introduction

At The National Lottery Community Fund, we believe that people understand better than anyone else what's needed in their communities. By listening, collaborating and funding great ideas, we help people and communities thrive.²

We award thousands of grants to good causes every year, from community centres and local activity groups to strategic partnerships aiming to tackle some of today's biggest challenges. Through our funding, we have a unique platform to listen and bring people's ideas to life, enabling their voice to be heard and supporting them to have greater influence and say over their lives.

This report focuses on practice and learning about co-production from our strategic programmes – five of our biggest investments in England. Fifty-eight partnerships deliver services across the five programmes. These are led, in the main, by voluntary and charitable sector (VCS) organisations, working with the public and private sector.

Our aim here is not to offer an academic evidence review, a how to guide or a co-production manual. We want to show what co-production can look like, and the positive impact it can have for individuals, professionals, and services.

We also want to showcase ideas, examples, and inspiration for people considering their own approach to user involvement or who want to do more to support co-production in their own organisation.



Talent Match

The five strategic investments

- **A Better Start**, helps families improve the life chances of children aged 0-3.
- **HeadStart**, gives young people aged 10-16 support and skills to cope with adversity and do well at school and in life.
- **Talent Match**, tackles youth unemployment.
- **Fulfilling Lives**, improves the lives of people facing multiple disadvantage (a combination of mental health, homelessness, drug or alcohol use or offending).
- **Ageing Better**, reduces social isolation among older people.

See **Strategic programmes at a glance** for more information.

A note about language

Many different terms are used to refer to the different actors and processes within co-production. These include: service users, clients, beneficiaries, people with lived experience, experts by experience, service providers, (service) user involvement, community participation, and more.

Some people dislike some of these terms, because they can feel impersonal or imply an unequal distribution of power. They may also fail to recognise the strengths people bring or suggest that only a certain degree of involvement is desirable.

In recognition of this debate, our preferred terms in this paper are co-production, and people with lived experience, or just people.

Our definitions

Here's what we mean when we refer to these terms in our report:

Co-production: creating, delivering, improving and evaluating services jointly with people who will use them and stakeholders like local authorities, charities, frontline staff, funders, or academics.

People with lived experience: people with knowledge and expertise derived through their personal experience of a particular situation. This could be as broad as being a parent, or more specific, such as having experienced homelessness or loneliness.

Partnerships: the 58 partnerships funded to implement their programmes' activities in their local area.

What do we mean by co-production and lived experience?

There is no widely agreed definition of co-production,³ but it can broadly be understood as, “co-creating services, involving service recipients in different stages of the process, including planning, design, delivery, and audit of a public service.”⁴

Co-production is more than just consulting or informing people about decisions. It means including and enabling their involvement. This can be by sharing power to decide how money is spent, or how services are commissioned; or an equal voice in designing a service – what is available, where, and how.⁵

Think Local, Act Personal is a partnership spanning health, social care and government. They describe co-production as, “not just a word [...] not just a concept, it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.”⁶

A useful reference point is **Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation**.⁷ It sets out how and where power is held when decisions are made. It shows different levels or rungs of user involvement, with informing people at the lower end, through to full citizen control. This suggests a clear hierarchy of participation.⁸

More recently, an evidence review of co-production in mental health services suggested turning the rungs of the ladder into a more fluid pathway, noting that, “the most advanced stages of the pathway represent a much deeper level of service user involvement that shifts power towards people.”⁹

Elements of co-production

There's no single right or wrong way to implement co-production.¹⁰ But there are a number of elements that can be used to identify true co-production. Across the literature, a number of different sets of principles have been set out.¹¹ One of these comes from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), which sets out four principles, as follows.

Equality – recognising that everyone who takes part has equal importance and brings assets, like skills, abilities, or time, which must be recognised.

Diversity – making sure that no one is excluded from co-production.

Access – making sure that everyone can fully take part in co-production, in a way that works for them.

Reciprocity – everyone should get something out of taking part.¹²

Importantly, co-production doesn't mean forgetting about evidence in favour of personal opinion or preference: the views of users, professionals and findings from evidence all need to be balanced.¹³

The term lived experience is often used in practice but less so in the literature we've looked at. Where it is used, there isn't a single agreed definition.

We understand lived experience to mean, "knowledge and expertise derived through first-hand, direct experience of a particular situation or condition."¹⁴ For co-production to work, what's important is that this lived experience is recognised in a positive light, as a strength, rather than as a need or a deficit.

There is a growing acknowledgement amongst charities and public services of the importance of including lived experience in service design.¹⁵ Valuing personal knowledge and expertise equally helps identify solutions to social issues. This can help make services and activities a better fit for the people who use them.

But it's reported that people with lived experience are still viewed by much of the social sector as, "informants, rather than change-makers and leaders of change."¹⁶ This means that organisations are working at the lower levels of user involvement, along the lines of, 'you said – we did', rather than working together in genuine partnership to better understand and implement their ideas and suggestions.



What do we know about the difference it makes?

Much of the existing evidence about co-production comes from health and social care and the wider public sector. Advocates of co-production in public services suggest that it can:

- Make services more relevant, effective, affordable, and sustainable.¹⁷
- Make providers more accountable to their users and encourage collaboration between providers.¹⁸
- Avoid the need for specialist interventions¹⁹ and improve outcomes to reduce costs.²⁰

In health, co-production includes involving patients in their own care. This has benefits like helping people to make better decisions and choices, and increasing their capacity to manage their own health and wellbeing. This kind of co-production, when individual service users are able to control their experience of a public service, can be referred to as **user empowerment**.²¹



Ageing Better

Our focus in this report is co-production that involves **user participation**.²² Across our programmes, people plan, deliver and improve services so that they are more effective in meeting the needs of current and future beneficiaries. There are also individual benefits to taking part, including:

- Increased self-esteem, confidence, and wellbeing.
- Improved social relationships and sense of belonging.²³
- Help to move towards achieving the intended outcome(s) of the service, such as employment or better health.²⁴
- Peer support networks.²⁵
- More positive attitudes towards services because of an increased sense of ownership.²⁶

Staff working with people with lived experience also benefit. Many increase their knowledge and expertise, as well as building greater confidence in their work as a result of co-production.²⁷

Evidence-based practice, or simply the right thing to do?

There isn't a lot of hard evidence to show whether co-production makes a difference to the effectiveness of different interventions. Most of what's available looks at the outcomes for individuals, or the process itself.²⁸ This is partly because it's difficult to measure the overall value and contribution of a practice that usually evolves as it progresses.²⁹ It's also hard to distinguish or attribute impact to a specific action – was it the act of co-producing a service that made it effective; how it was implemented, or something else entirely?

Many charities and public services, including The National Lottery Community Fund, take it as a given that involving people with lived experience³⁰ is best practice. We, and others, are passionate about its potential and by contributing stories and insights aim to inspire others and build a knowledge base that includes a wide span of proportionate evidence.

Building this shared understanding of the difference co-production makes, as well as the potential pitfalls and challenges to avoid, will help create a body of knowledge that others can draw from and add to. It's especially important to address concerns. For example one evidence review highlighted that co-production may have some negative outcomes for individuals (“increased feelings of pressure, strain and frustration”), professionals (“differing in their acceptance of co-production”) and in terms of efficiency for public bodies, policy and services (“lack of time to implement”).³¹ We believe these factors are not inevitable or deal breakers, but recognise that higher standards of evidence might be required, to convince decision-makers, commissioners, or the health sector where evidence-based practice is an essential.

As a funder we encourage our grant holders to learn as they go, work to continuously develop and improve their practice and to be open and honest in sharing mistakes and false starts as well as their success. This report is our own first step towards collecting our findings on co-production and the difference it makes, as a way to encourage further debate and discussion across the sector.



A Better Start

Co-production across our strategic investments

The five strategic investments are run by cross-sector partnerships, driven by the voice of lived experience. Over a decade we're giving more than £500 million to 58 partnerships, to find innovative ways of dealing with challenges across the life course.

These investments present a unique platform to try out new things, test, and learn, because of the scale of funding and time invested in them, which includes national and local evaluations and support to gather and share learning. From the start, there was an expectation that beneficiaries would be meaningfully involved in co-producing the programmes, and their activities and services. Partnerships have been able, and encouraged, to adapt and fine-tune their co-production work along the way.

We recognise that this level of support isn't common, and that we have a responsibility to share learning as widely as possible for the benefit of the wider sector, where time and resource is a more significant challenge.



How have these programmes been co-produced?

The co-production of these programmes can be grouped into five broad areas, which we describe in more detail on pages 11-13:

1. **Design** – the programmes, projects, and activities.
2. **Decision-making** – governance, commissioning, funding, and recruitment.
3. **Delivery** – services and activities, outreach/engagement, and specific roles like volunteers and peer mentors.
4. **Research** – evaluation, peer research, quality assurance.
5. **Voice** – Awareness-raising, advocacy, influencing, media.

Others have also recognised this multi-faceted nature of co-production. SCIE for instance distinguishes between co-design, co-decision, co-delivery and co-evaluation³², and Governance International's Co-production Star toolkit³³ sets out a cycle of four co-components: commission, design, deliver, and assess.

Many of the examples we've looked at fall under more than one of these areas. This is because different components of co-production are interdependent. They are not necessarily separate activities and may run at the same time or one after the other.³⁴

Figure 1. Co-production across the strategic investments



Co-design: influencing what a project or service should look and feel like.

Co-delivering: people with lived experience doing things, delivering activities in a voluntary or paid capacity.

Decision-making:

Governance – making decisions about how the project runs as part of a formal governance process.

Co-commissioning – commissioning / procuring a delivery contract or making funding decisions.

Co-research: people with lived experience undertaking research and evaluation.

Voice: giving people with lived experience a say or influence on wider services, issues or policy.

Design

People with lived experience have worked with professionals to inform the design or adaptation of the strategic programmes, and their services or activities. This includes:

- how programmes should feel
- what they should provide
- how, when and where they should work
- who should be involved

“The most successful form of co-design has been during delivery. Once participants have experienced the service in action, they are often in a better position to engage in co-design. It also means that a broader range of voices can be heard, over and above the limited number that can be reached during pre-delivery consultation.”³⁵

**Programme manager,
Brightlife Cheshire (Ageing Better)**

Decision-making

Across the strategic programmes the views of people with lived experience are being heard and acted upon, and they have equal value to those of other stakeholders.

“HeadStart always makes sure that my thoughts about decisions they are making is being heard.”³⁶

Young person, HeadStart Newham

Decision-making includes:

Governance

Each partnership has a governance structure as a condition of their funding. All have developed ways of sharing formal decision-making and governance, aiming for people with lived experience to have an equal seat at the table in this.

“Our approach has always been to put young people at the heart of the project, to treat [them] as equals as ‘experts through experience’, to listen and respond to their voices, for young people to be part of the decision-making process at every level.”³⁷

Programme manager,
Talent Match Black Country

Commissioning

Many of the partnerships contract out elements of their work. Co-commissioning activities can include designing service specifications, assessing bids and applications, and taking part in selection panels.

“Their efforts have made a big contribution to this commissioning process and will hopefully lead to an improved choice of residential rehab providers for Bristol service users to support them in their ongoing recovery.”³⁸

Commissioning officer, Bristol City Council

Recruitment

People with lived experience have taken part in recruitment exercises and decision-making, from drafting job specifications to interviewing candidates. For instance, young people sat on interview panels for HeadStart staff and the partnerships told us that they’ve recruited different candidates as a direct result.

Micro funding

This is a way to fund small projects, designed and delivered by the community. Partnerships have provided funding for a range of grassroots projects, with decisions made by people with lived experience. It has given them a chance to share their ideas but also to follow through and fund them.

“Without young people’s input, feedback and influence the funding decisions made would have been completely different and perhaps not as beneficial as we think to unemployed young people.”³⁹

Programme manager,
Talent Match Middlesbrough

Delivery

People with lived experience have contributed to service delivery in many ways. They may undertake specific tasks or roles in a voluntary capacity, such as producing outputs like toolkits, running marketing campaigns, delivering training, or meeting and greeting others at events. Some might hold a paid role, working alongside professionals, such as peer mentoring. Others have been taken on as apprentices, giving them an opportunity to learn on the job while ensuring the voice of lived experience is incorporated into all aspects of delivery.

“Within the project – having individuals that are very open about their lived experience as colleagues is very positive. [...] Having people who are ‘out’ and open encourages a positive environment as a workplace – you can’t underestimate the value of that, it’s helping us to develop as a project.”⁴⁰

**Programme manager,
Fulfilling Lives South East.**

Research

People have worked in partnership with professional researchers, for example assessing the effectiveness of services. This has included developing research specifications, methods, and tools, evaluating services and helping to make research findings easier to understand. When researchers work together with people with lived experience, it can add, “a human angle to the sometimes impersonal evaluation.”⁴¹

Voice

Participating in co-production has given people a voice for their community. They have raised awareness of issues that matter to them by speaking up at partnership forums, running campaigns, developing information materials, and attending parliamentary events.

“I want to be a voice for the community that we serve, bringing to reality the views of the community, showing what is really happening and to positively challenge the assumptions of others.”⁴²

**Parent champion from the Lambeth Early
Action Partnership (A Better Start)**



What difference does co-production make?

Our grantholders tell us that co-production is making a difference, to people, professionals, and stakeholders involved in the programmes and beyond.



Ageing Better

Benefits for individuals:

- feeling valued and empowered
- improved confidence and a sense of purpose
- supporting outcomes like employability and wellbeing
- social connections and peer support.

Benefits for professionals:

- better understanding of lives and experiences of people they support
- greater job satisfaction
- a chance to think differently and question established practice.

Improved services:

- more authentic, credible, and human services
- more engaging, appealing, accessible services and products
- more responsive, relevant and useful service offer
- ownership among users means they champion the services.

Influencing beyond the programme:

- giving practitioners and services a more user-focused approach through training and support
- co-production adopted more widely, inspired by the partnerships
- better designed, more informed and compassionate local practice and policy
- national and international interest.

How has co-production benefited individuals?

The literature suggests that co-production benefits people through improved self-esteem, sense of belonging, social relationships, and confidence.⁴³ Our programmes have found this too. People have told us that taking part helps them in a number of ways.

Feeling valued and empowered

We know that in the past, services were sometimes developed and delivered without involving the people they were intended for.⁴⁴ Being asked to input into how services are run is a new experience for some and a powerful gesture.

People have told us that it may feel daunting at first, but can make them feel valued, empowered, and satisfied with their achievements. For many who take part, co-production feels great.

“It makes me feel good that others may have interest in what I have to say.”⁴⁵

Young person from Talent Match Middlesbrough

Being listened to, and heard, is one of the key reasons it feels good. A volunteer from Fulfilling Lives South East described her experiences: “Talking to these top commissioners [...] and they’re sat listening to us. It’s massive for me. [...] They were asking for our input, like ‘How do you think this would work?’ or ‘What do you think would work better?’ [...] I have found my voice and it is being heard.”⁴⁶

Getting involved, doing something good, and helping others can bring satisfaction. For some it’s a way to make good use of their time and give something back; to feel a valued and useful member of the community. Many people say that volunteering and helping out with Ageing Better’s services to improve social

connections has helped to prevent them becoming lonely themselves. So far, over 13,250 older people have volunteered and supported their peers across the 14 Ageing Better areas.⁴⁷

Co-production often provides an opportunity to do something new, in a different environment, with different people. This is one of the reasons it can feel unnerving at first and shows why support from others is an important ingredient.

A parent representative on the evaluation steering group for the A Better Start programme, described a mixture of feelings when she first joined: “For me, it was an opportunity to get involved in very high level discussions that I would not otherwise have ever been able to do [...] The first time I attended an evaluation steering group meeting I was nervous. I didn’t know what to expect, but it sounded grand and professional. Also, I knew that I would be the only parent representative there. But the coproduction lead at LEAP (Lambeth Early Action Partnership, A Better Start) had invited me, and I knew she had faith in me, and really I felt honoured to be asked. So I went.”⁴⁸

Confidence and motivation

Asking people what they think, or for their input, can increase self-worth, help them to gain a sense of purpose, confidence, and capability. Some people may come into co-production with the confidence to hit the ground running and appreciate an outlet to use their skills, or the chance to act as a role model. But for people who are trying something for the first time, it can be a real eye-opener to know that their opinions and contributions matter. “Already my confidence has increased massively; the buzz I get from actually having a voice that is listened to and not just heard is better than anything I have ever experienced in my life.”⁴⁹ Ambassador, Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead

Effective co-production is based on the principle that people are assets. A major part of working with people with lived experience is seeing them as more than their situation and valuing their skills and strengths. This brings purpose and self-belief.

“When I came into Fulfilling Lives as a volunteer the acceptance within the project really helped me, the belief in me, the being able to see my skills when I couldn’t see them anymore and help me to develop those. I was going and doing things and it was enjoyable and people were listening to me and people were valuing my contribution. So I found that I had purpose and that I started to believe in myself again, through their belief in me.”⁵⁰

Volunteer, Changing Futures Birmingham (Fulfilling Lives)



The partnerships have created safe spaces where people can build their confidence and competence in formulating and sharing their ideas. They’ve done this by giving time and a range of different ways to express themselves, creating an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and focusing on the positives – what can be done as opposed to what can’t be. This has led some people to move on to speak out and act independently of the programme. After participating in HeadStart Hull’s co-production activities, some young volunteers came up with an idea to develop their own wellbeing support materials that have now been distributed in local schools.

The anecdotal evidence we gathered through our work is backed up by findings from the Talent Match national evaluation. This found that young people involved in co-producing the programme or services had, “significantly greater improvements across all six dimensions of the My Journey⁵¹ scale” than those who weren’t involved in co-production.⁵² This includes confidence, setting and achieving goals, communication, managing feelings, working with others, reliability”.

As well as confidence, people have learned new skills and gained experience. These include communication, relationship-building, and team-working skills. A HeadStart volunteer from Hull, told us that taking part in co-production has given her, “a lot of life skills.”⁵³ Some have also gained insights into a working environment, or into aspects of programme management such as commissioning and budgeting. These skills have helped people with employment prospects, health and wellbeing.

Supporting overall outcomes

Taking part in co-production can help people move towards the intended outcomes of the service.⁵⁴ We think this is true across all five of our programmes. Working together, helping others and promoting change have helped people to improve their mental health, take a step forward towards employment, and overcome loneliness, for example.

“For me personally when I was a peer mentor [...] it was a massive part of my recovery to actually see the impact I was having on somebody else, seeing that light turn on in their eyes sort of thing and getting them to engage with services when they hadn’t done so previously.”⁵⁵

Peer mentor, Fulfilling Lives Birmingham



Fulfilling Lives

Moving towards employment and training through Talent Match

Data from the national evaluation show us that young people who were actively involved in the programme through co-production were more likely to move into apprenticeships / education than young people who were not involved (25% compared to 18%). They were also more likely to move into placements or volunteering (71% compared to 44%). Evaluators saw these as, “important steps toward sustained employment, particularly for young people who don’t have experience of paid work.”⁵⁶

A slightly smaller proportion were able to secure employment (39% compared to 42%). This is in part explained by the level of barriers to employment the young people in this group were facing than peers who weren’t involved in co-production. Evaluators concluded that, “involvement in Talent Match has in part acted as an important mechanism for supporting young people who are facing some of the most challenging barriers to labour market participation.”⁵⁷

Gaining new skills, confidence, and understanding can help people to build a more positive outlook. Seeing the impact of their contributions can also help people to feel a sense of hope for themselves and their community. An expert citizen from Voices of Stoke (Fulfilling Lives) said that his life had become “so much better” since becoming an expert citizen on the programme. “I have achieved so much over the last 18 months ...for the first time in my life I am looking forward to the future. Now, I’ve been given the opportunity to share my story and experiences to help promote service change in the city.”⁵⁸

Social connections and peer support

Across our programmes, people who have been involved in co-production have made friends with their peers and found their support invaluable. This is particularly important for people who struggle to talk about the issues they are facing or don't have the support they need from family and friends. Peer support can also help people who find it hard to trust professionals or don't have the confidence to speak up in meetings. They help each other navigate unfamiliar processes and complex language too.

Members of Opportunity Nottingham's expert citizens panel (Fulfilling Lives) told us that having a network they can go to for support, and who they know will always be there for them whatever happens, is an additional benefit of getting involved in co-production.⁵⁹

Many of the parent representatives on the partnership board of Better Start Bradford already had the skills needed to take on their role but needed help with building their confidence. The team encouraged buddying and have developed a strong peer group network. They use a WhatsApp group to ask each other questions they might not feel comfortable to ask during board meetings.

How has co-production benefited professionals?

Partnerships tell us that through working alongside people with lived experience, their staff have gained a better understanding of the people they are supporting.

For some, this can be a reminder of why they started out in their profession and brings a new sense of job satisfaction. The community engagement officer from Lambeth Early Action Partnership, LEAP (A Better Start) explained, "The practitioners at LEAP really bought into it. The ones who've been part of it have come out rejuvenated – I see the excitement and the passion – this is [...] what I signed up for."⁶⁰

Working with people with lived experience has helped staff to think differently, identify new ways of doing things and question existing practices. This has helped them to focus on people rather than processes and, where possible, tailor the support they provide, making services fit to people, rather than expecting people to fit the service.

The evaluation of Changing Futures Together in Birmingham (Fulfilling Lives) noted that, "PMs [peer mentors] advocating on behalf of the client and challenging traditional service protocols has given permission for LWs [lead workers – professionals] to do the same, and they too are now employing similar tactics to create system change. [...] they are willing to assert the rights and needs of the client over their professionalism, even if this means demanding a particular service to meet with clients' needs."⁶¹

“The members of staff that have worked with the project consultants will take that experience with them. [...] They will be much more receptive and open.”⁶²

Programme manager,
Fulfilling Lives South East

How has co-production improved services?

Insights from lived experience have made services and activities more authentic and human. We've seen that people who have lived experience of an issue are more in tune with what their peers will respond to and can add credibility and authenticity to practitioners' perspectives or existing evidence.

“Parents just ask really great questions.”⁶³

A representative of Blackpool Better Start

People and professionals delivering services together

Birmingham Changing Futures Together (Fulfilling Lives) has a dedicated team of lead workers (professionals) and peer mentors (people with lived experience). They work together to support people to navigate services and manage the issues they face relating to homelessness, offending, addiction, unemployment and health.

They spoke to us about the process of integrating people with lived experience alongside professionals delivering frontline services.

There were a lot of challenges and personality clashes in the beginning, “but as the [...] office stands today it's a lot richer, more diverse, can connect clients and greet them in a very different way, because our experts and peer mentors have brought a very different dynamic. It's made us a much more approachable service – the culture is a lot richer.”⁶⁴

People with lived experience bring real passion to their work, resulting from a desire to create change for people who are going through issues they themselves have experienced. They may be able to reach people who might usually avoid engaging with services by meeting them in different places, or offering a more approachable face.

Talent Match's evaluation found that, “Young people's involvement improves service quality [...] the voice of young people has informed the development and delivery of provision across Talent Match areas and has enhanced the experience of and impact of employment support for all Talent Match beneficiaries.”⁶⁵

How services feel

Talent Match Northamptonshire consulted extensively with young people and heard that what was being delivered was actually less important to them than how it was delivered and by whom. Young people explained, “how they seemed to be given the same initiatives over and over again and they go round and round and get nowhere, so it became apparent that they didn't want more of the same, they didn't feel engaged with employment services, or didn't feel helped.”⁶⁶

When people are involved in co-delivering services, they can feel make things feel very different. They bring empathy and understanding of the circumstances faced by the service user. Family mentors in Small Steps, Big Changes (A Better Start, Nottingham) deliver activities according to a manual, but adapt their approach based on their understanding of what the family they are supporting needs each week. The programme manager reflected, “It's not the manual, it's how you implement it.”⁶⁷

Co-delivery can also help to reduce the stigma associated with using a service. The person with lived experience may become a role model for the person they are working with, showing them that a way forward can be achieved.

“The PM [peer mentor]’s self-disclosure on addiction made the client sit bolt upright and it gave the client hope. The PM has been clean for three years so it gave the client something to think about – the client doesn’t know anyone who isn’t in addiction.”⁶⁸

Lead worker, Birmingham Changing Futures Together (Fulfilling Lives)

What services offer

People with lived experience offer constructive challenge that can be used in a positive way, pushing professionals to think beyond existing ways of doing things. People interrogate professional assumptions and ask questions others might not be comfortable to raise, or even have thought about. These might be simple practical things that can easily be overlooked when designing a service.

Small Steps Big Changes (A Better Start, Nottingham) found co-designing a Cook and Play service with parents challenged the assumption that they needed an expensive crèche for children, while the parents attended cookery workshops. Parents told staff that they didn’t have anyone to look after their children while they cooked tea at home, so the project redesigned the service with a safe, observable place for children to play, significantly reducing costs.

Outputs, like information or training materials, which are produced with or by people with lived experience can be more appealing or accessible. This might be in terms of the language, design or format of the output, or the way it is delivered. HeadStart Hull assumed that young people would want to use digital channels for their awareness-raising campaigns, but young people said they also wanted traditional formats like leaflets, because they had limited data packages on their phone contracts or SIM cards.

Making research accessible

People with lived experience can bring energy, empathy, and credibility to the research process. Peers may feel more comfortable opening up to someone who has experienced something similar.

But we need to remember that all researchers bring different perspectives and potential bias to their work. By recognising this and using a multi-disciplinary team of people with lived experience, professionals, and researchers, programmes can conduct research that mitigates these risks.

West Yorkshire Finding Independence, WY-FI (Fulfilling Lives) brought people with lived experience together with the University of Sheffield and the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) coalition to do research into preventing homelessness.

They told us that working in this way meant that they produced a better final product. “The entire process and output would have been completely different without their involvement. It would be unrecognisable.”⁶⁹

This was achieved by building solid foundations. The staff held early meetings with their university partner, which allowed members of their experts by experience network to talk about their role. Developing an understanding of the space in which each other works, and good personal relationships, helped build up credit for times when they anticipated things might not run so smoothly. WY-FI staff helped to ensure some continuity, when the peer researchers involved changed over the course of the project.⁷⁰

Ownership and advocacy

Co-production gives a sense of ownership of the final product. People are more likely to champion and promote the activity or resource within their local community, which may increase take-up, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Blackpool Better Start invited two local mums to help adapt an existing programme to meet the needs of their community. As a result, they had a real investment and commitment to making the programme work. The mums championed the service and helped to generate referrals. The project manager said, “informal discussions about the programme from parents who are invested can really help improve referral pathways.”⁷¹



HeadStart

Parents keeping things honest, real, and community-focused

Better Start Bradford's partnership boards have equal representation of parents, grandparents and other stakeholders such as authorities and charities.

The programme lead told us that parent representatives' input to the board discussions is different to stakeholders' because, “they are much more likely to be attuned to the service delivery than the big grand ambition stuff.”⁷² They've encouraged the board to be more flexible and push the limits to make things happen.

Parent representatives suggested that the project needed an additional specialist role for community engagement. They wanted to give engagement equal status within the programme and recognise that services need input from the community in order to be effective. This post is now in place.

Stakeholders have found the experience to be very positive, leading them to champion this way of working in the development of new family services for Bradford. The programme director told us that having parents (and grandparents) on the board, “keeps us honest, real and community-focussed in everything we do.”⁷³

Creating ownership through co-production can help when things get difficult. People with lived experience are able to show that decisions have been made with and for the community. Ageless Thanet (Ageing Better) told us that their user panel, which is made up of older people with relevant lived experience, is a real asset because it means that delivery partners and partnership staff are now answerable to the people the partnership aims to support.⁷⁴ When they had to terminate a delivery contract, the local authority and press wanted to know why. The user panel was able to front queries and provided credibility to the decision. They were able to offer reassurance that this wasn't a top-down decision but had come from older people themselves.



Influencing beyond the programmes: practice and policy

Programme teams told us about a growing national and international interest in the way they have been working. People from the programmes have directly influenced policy and services, helped change attitudes, and introduced co-production in other areas; others are providing inspiration for the future.

Local practice and policy

The partnerships have supported and enabled people with lived experience to inform, shape and improve wider services, practices and strategies in their local areas, including how they are delivered and configured. They have done this in several ways:

- By **co-designing and delivering training** for frontline staff, volunteers and decision makers, to give them a greater, more real and up-to-date insight into the lives and experiences of people who use their services. The experts by experience from Fulfilling Lives Newcastle and Gateshead won an award for their role in co-designing and piloting a training package for mental health and emergency service professionals.⁷⁵
- They have inspired and enabled **public services to adopt a more user focused approach**. Torbay's local Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) agreed to give two seats to representatives from Torbay Elders Assembly (Ageing Well Torbay). This has encouraged others to follow suit, including the local Mental Health Development Panel. Jobcentre Plus in Middlesbrough have established a service user group as a result of the engagement and feedback from the youth panel of Talent Match Middlesbrough.

- They have encouraged **collaboration across the public, third and private sectors**. Better Start Bradford's partnership board includes representatives from the voluntary sector, local authority and the public sector. This was in recognition of the value each brings to the table, "The voluntary sector organisations said they wanted a joint structure, with local authorities and the public sector because both are needed for sustainability. It was not from a deficit thinking [...] but from a recognition of what [the public sector] can bring to the table."⁷⁶
- They have worked with authorities and partners to **recognise a range of different kinds of experience and expertise, including work, voluntary and lived experience**. NHS England are working with Birmingham Changing Futures Together (Fulfilling Lives) to review staff bands, grades and qualification requirements and create progression opportunities for people who don't have formal qualifications.⁷⁷
- They have informed and shaped the **design and improvement of mainstream services in cities**. In Stoke, the local authority commissioned Voices of Stoke's expert citizen group (Fulfilling Lives) to run a series of workshops with people with lived experience to inform their specification of their community drug and alcohol service. The expert citizens are now part of the procurement panel.
- They have **co-created service standards** that describe how users of services should be welcomed, treated and supported. Staff and expert citizens from Opportunity Nottingham (Fulfilling Lives) have worked together to establish a standard for interaction with, and support for, people with multiple and complex needs. It's now part of new service contracts and commissioning arrangements with other providers.

- They have influenced and contributed to **wider funding decisions in cities** across England. In Leeds, the representatives of Time to Shine's **Older Peoples' Board**⁷⁸ (Ageing Better) sit on tender panels for the city council and review all paperwork to make sure it is age-friendly.
- Fulfilling Lives partnerships have informed and shaped **local policy** including co-designing a new Homelessness Charter with Manchester Council, and reviewed access to primary healthcare for people experiencing homelessness in Stoke.

It's not just public services that benefit from the insight of lived experience. Young people from Talent Match have been commissioned by employers like Centrica, Bupa and Unilever to review their recruitment, employment and training practices. They've cut out jargon from their job adverts, improved their recruitment videos, and done some myth-busting about employment of (young) people without work experience. The young people's leadership group for Talent Match Cornwall advised their council on redesigning its services and are paid by local company Ginsters for consultancy work on youth employment.



Ageing Better

“Being able to literally sit with politicians on a normal level, in the same room, is something that does not happen every day. But by enabling a space for politicians to listen to us, understand us and then respond to feedback regarding homelessness and the delivery of services we can hopefully influence change.”⁷⁹

Fulfilling Lives Bristol

“If I’d have gone to the local authority on my own I wonder whether this would have got off the ground – but [they] met with [the young person] and [...] made it happen.”⁸⁰

Programme manager, HeadStart Blackpool

“I have learnt that young people are a rich source of enthusiasm and brilliance.”⁸¹

Director for Children and Young People Services, Kent County Council

“Capturing these stories allows us to bring the clients’ voice into spaces in which it may not usually be found (i.e. conferences, learning events). This makes it accessible to individuals who may not have the resource to engage with clients on a daily basis and allows the client to share their stories, thoughts and ideas in a way which promotes the service user as an expert of knowledge and experience.”⁸²

Fulfilling Lives Camden and Islington

National and international interest

Partnerships are influencing and generating interest at national and international level. The Fulfilling Lives National Expert Citizen Group (NECG) is made up of 24 individuals with lived experience of multiple disadvantage. It has worked with government departments and provided evidence for the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Multiple and Complex Needs, which led to the People Powered Recovery report.⁸³ The NECG has demonstrated that the voice of experience can cut through stigma and standard methods of practice in order to keep the end user in focus.

Talent Match Humber and The National Lottery Community Fund shared experiences of co-production with delegates from across Europe at an event co-organised by the European Commission and the employment ministry in Luxembourg. Participants were surveyed about their views on co-production at the beginning of the event where 69% were in favour. This grew to 86% after they heard a young person speak about their experiences.

Small Steps, Big Changes (A Better Start) have had interest from the Australian government, Ireland and Scotland to replicate and learn more about their Small Steps at Home programme delivered by their Family Mentors.

Our learning about co-production

We have set out our learning in three sections:

- overarching learning and important principles that support meaningful co-production
- what you need in place to create the conditions for co-production to work well
- practical ideas and inspiration for how to put co-production into practice.



Fulfilling Lives

Important principles:

- share power responsibly
- adapt to your context and community
- commit to the changes you need to make
- be in it for the long haul.

The essentials:

- time and resources
- include everyone in the conversation
- look after your people.

Practical tips:

- Get the basics right.
- Nourish relationships.
- Embrace diversity.
- Keep people interested and engaged.
- Be clear about boundaries and limitations.
- Don't set people up to fail.
- Recognise people's contributions.
- Things can go wrong... so be prepared to reflect and make changes.

Overarching learning

Share power responsibly

Co-production isn't about putting people with lived experience in charge. It's about combining their perspectives with those of practitioners who understand how to deliver services and navigate wider systems, alongside evidence of what works.⁸⁴

Professionals who traditionally have held responsibility and decision-making power have to explore appropriate ways to give away some control, while offering support where people need it. This process of balancing lived experience and professional skills responsibly is important. Without it, there's a risk of going to extremes where ideas are ignored at one end of the spectrum and all ideas are taken on board without question at the other.

“Often young people and professionals misinterpret the concept and adopt a full youth led approach or only consult with young people after decision-making for verification. From our experience, this approach is not productive in achieving aims, can be costly, and often disengages partners and young people, as progress is slow and disjointed. We have learned that the best outcomes come from decisions made together, or decisions that have been made in direct response to young people's experiences.”⁸⁵

**Programme manager,
Talent Match Humber**

Sharing power responsibly might also mean saying no or challenging back, when ideas or suggestions can't be taken forward because of time or resource constraints, or because there is evidence to show they aren't effective. It's important to recognise that accepting and managing differences of opinion is part of the process. “Don't be afraid of the challenges – it's going to be challenging,”⁸⁶ reflected colleagues from Fulfilling Lives South East.

We know that everyone involved in co-production should feel a benefit and that it's about collaborating for a shared purpose.

“David [peer mentor] is certain that it's the unique mix of these two things [personal lived experience and professional skills] that makes WY-FI Navigators different from some other workers. David says that though, ‘having life experience is really useful, it's not always the answer to everything [...] before you walk in and start challenging services it's really important to understand how they function and why.’”⁸⁷

WY-FI, Fulfilling Lives

Adapt to your context and community

What co-production will look like for you inevitably depends on what you are trying to achieve and who you are working with. It isn't as straightforward as simply replicating something that others have co-produced, or the processes they used.

You need a clear purpose. Be willing to invest time and resource into developing co-production processes and activities to meet your aims and that are appropriate to your own context and your service users. It's crucial that everyone signs up to this collective aim.

Think about the most appropriate ways to involve your users. This might mean operating on different rungs of the **ladder of participation**,⁸⁸ and starting simply. What's most important is that people's involvement is meaningful and not tokenistic. Tokenism can be asking people for too little too late, but also asking them to promote a service they've had little involvement in developing. It can also be carrying out a consultation, without then working together to interpret the responses and how they should be acted on.

Remember too that people will want to get involved in different ways, from light-touch inputs like jotting their ideas on a postcard to more demanding and time-consuming contributions like sitting on a decision-making or governance board. Some may want to stay with you and get involved in new or additional activities as their confidence grows, so don't forget to think about opportunities for progression, for those who want them. Others may want to do one or two separate activities then stop.

This was a powerful learning point for the representatives of Talent Match Northamptonshire, who explained that how people want to be involved, is as important as it is to examine what they want from the service: “[If we were doing it all over again we would] listen more to how the user wishes to be involved [...] we made the mistake of trying to design the mechanism for ongoing user input which didn't work.”⁸⁹

Remember to reflect on how you are doing, including checking in with people to see what they think, and make changes and improvements as needed. Staying fresh, open, and welcoming will encourage new people to join you. And remember that co-production is about the journey you take together, not the final destination.



Ageing Better

Young people creating opportunities for their peers

New-U (Talent Match) is a pilot project, created by young people who wanted to do something for their local community. Based in a shopping centre in Norwich, it provides opportunities and access to inexpensive work clothes for young people. In principle it's a clothes shop, but you swap or borrow the clothes, rather than buying them.

There are two things that have made New-U's co-production work. Firstly, it offers a flexible and supportive environment. Secondly, there are lots of different roles and diverse ways that young people can get involved in leadership, design and delivery. These include joining the youth forum that came up with the initial idea; becoming a youth advocate and referring and supporting others into the programme; taking on work experience, or just attending workshops. Everyone who gets involved has a chance to say how they would change things and what should stay the same.

Some of the adaptations that New-U has made in response to young people's feedback are:

- Creating new leadership placements that allow young people to lead on all aspects of organisation and planning of events.
- Allowing greater flexibility in work placement times, after participants identified social anxiety about travelling as a major factor in including young people from outside of Norwich.
- Running a series of shop events that have increased footfall and offered valuable new experience.

"Thank you to New-U for letting me grow my confidence enough to apply for jobs, go to interviews and realise that I wasn't alone. ... There aren't many places asking for the youth's opinion so it's really refreshing that New-U do!"⁹⁰
Molly, Talent Match participant, now in a retail job.

Commit to the changes you and your organisation need to make

A genuine commitment to co-production means adapting your culture, mind-set and ways of working. Being prepared to make mistakes, learn, and improve as you go is essential.

Organisational culture and existing practice might be a barrier, especially if sharing power and decision-making is a new way of working for you or your partners. It's important to have buy-in at

all levels, including senior management. If people aren't willing to be open, honest, and share the full story, co-production won't achieve its potential. This means thinking carefully about how to create safe spaces where people feel able to talk openly. Individually, everyone needs to be flexible, responsive, and pragmatic. Being open to thinking differently is important, as is being ready for your own views or preferences to be put into the mix, but not necessarily taken forward.

Everyone's opinions and suggestions have to be heard and respected, and professionals may need to move out of their comfort zone and positively consider unconventional suggestions. This can be difficult at the start, but can be powerful for everyone involved, including a manager from HeadStart Hull who reflected, "sometimes we thought things might not work but had to go with it."⁹¹ For everyone, it means being committed to working together as equals, and ready to listen to, respect, and take on board others' views and suggestions.

"At project board meetings there is no condescension from managers towards the young people. They treat us as adults... Everything [we] say is listened to and we get recognition for the things we achieve."⁹²

**Volunteer, D2N2 Nottingham
(Talent Match)**

Be in it for the long haul

Co-production isn't a one off piece of work. You can't involve people at the start of a project and then say it's done and finished with. Good cooperative practice has to be nurtured and built on as your knowledge and experience matures. Our partnerships found that their approaches to involving users evolved over time as they improved their understanding.

For longer-term projects or programmes, different people should ideally get involved at different points in the process. If the same people are involved throughout, there is a risk that the authenticity and challenge that comes from being fresh to the activity will be lost. A project can become over-reliant on a small group of people. Cliques may develop. Or people may focus in on single issues from a purely personal perspective rather than seeing the bigger picture.

Making it work: the essentials

This section outlines our learning around how to put co-production into practice. We start with some things that you need to have in place to create conditions conducive to co-production.

Time and resources

We are not the first to say this, and it may seem obvious, but without sufficient time and resource to do the job well, co-production will not fulfil its potential, and at worst, could do harm. The manager of HeadStart Hull reminded us that, "it takes twice as long as you think it will."⁹³

Working beneath the surface to ensure the conditions are favourable for meaningful co-production is important. It's more likely to be successful with dedicated people to develop and support it, as well as time and money. One Talent Match project said if they were doing the project again, they would have allocated a role to support young people engaging in the governance board.⁹⁴ But the manager from HeadStart Blackpool made it clear that, "if it's going to be programme-wide then everyone has to take responsibility."⁹⁵ This means that while having staff with specific responsibility for co-production is important, they shouldn't be seen as working on this on their own.

Implementing co-production can demand new skills of everyone involved. Think about how you can support people with lived experience to be successful through training, briefings, or putting them in touch with others. Ageless Thanet (Ageing Better) worked with the procurement department at one of their corporate partners to provide practical support to older board members involved in commissioning. This included a mix of training sessions and practical work, like adapting existing scoring scales.

Skills can be taught, but confidence needs to be nurtured. For instance, traditional governance structures and perceived power dynamics can be daunting for people who haven't been involved in similar roles before. They may need support to feel confident to bridge the power gap. This is why it's important that people with lived experience are prepared before taking part in decision-making and are aware of who's sitting around the table and why.

Support can mean formal training but can also be soft, informal pastoral care, such as making sure people with lived experience have someone to talk to. Ageless Thanet's user panel had governance training and also less obvious support such as assertiveness sessions to build individual confidence. Governors also benefit from soft support from the partnership team; there has always been someone to help the older people's panel, explain processes, and answer any queries or worries. With

this support, the governors have grown in confidence and taken ownership of the partnership. They now chair wider governance meetings (instead of the partnership manager).

“Everyone on the panel is exceptionally capable, nothing that we've done is beyond any of them. But people being people they lacked confidence and actually having someone to say ‘no, of course you should be here’ or ‘you are right, you made that point the other day with this result’ and giving them that confidence and building them up was key.”⁹⁶

Programme manager, Ageing Better

Creating employment for people with lived experience

Fulfilling Lives South East has created two paid roles for people with lived experience: consultants and assistants. They run action groups made up of volunteers with lived experience. The groups identify and propose solutions to gaps, barriers, and issues with systems and services.

Employing and working with the consultants has been a positive learning experience for the Fulfilling Lives team. With support from their human resources (HR) colleagues they've made a number of changes to meet the needs of people with lived experience in the workplace.

The length of their contracts was changed from 12 to 18 months, because one year wasn't sufficient to gain and establish the professional skills to move onto further employment.

An engagement and development role was introduced to give consultants and assistants additional on-site support at key points – during induction and the first few months – and also in the last few months to prepare for moving on.

Consultants and assistants are encouraged to share aspects of their health and wellbeing they may need support with. A wellness action plan is established to help them to stay well in work and identify, early on, any additional support they may need.

There are early indications that this is working well and providing a unique pathway into work for people who have experienced multiple disadvantage. Almost two thirds – 12 out of 19 – of consultants whose outcomes are known have moved into paid employment after leaving the programme.⁹⁷

Include everyone in the conversation

Language can create barriers between people. Using complex terminology, jargon, or acronyms can make it hard for people to understand and contribute. Projects need to make sure everyone is using a common language from the start, for instance by clarifying what is meant by words like outcomes and evidence. It's also important to listen carefully and respond appropriately. HeadStart Hull's programme manager told us, "Don't make assumptions about what you think they mean – don't do the consultation and then run off and do it yourself."⁹⁸

Materials and conversations along the way should be accessible for everyone. Papers must clearly explain terminology that could be confusing. Some of our partnerships have used engaging ways to alert people to jargon, such as HeadStart Blackpool's bell that anyone can ring when they come across a term they haven't heard before. Better Start Bradford told us that they use a squeaky rubber duck, not just for people to say when they are confused, but also for others to alert for jargon when they see blank faces around the table.⁹⁹

Sometimes language may need to be reframed, to avoid alienating or labelling people. This includes the way people's communities or local areas are described (avoiding terms like deprived for instance), and the names given to the services developed.

Look after your people

When you involve people with lived experience, remember that this expertise comes from their daily reality, and they may still be experiencing the challenges and situations that you are seeking to learn more about. You have a responsibility to care for them and ensure that you put the basics in place, so they are not set up to fail.

Support for people with lived experience may mean going over and above what you give to your employees as standard in terms of both professional and pastoral care. For example, people with lived experience who volunteer as peer supporters may find themselves in situations that bring back their own experiences, or they may need time to adjust to a formal work setting. This may mean clearly agreeing on the behaviour, boundaries and timekeeping you expect, and being equally clear about their expectations and how you can support them.

Changing Futures Together Birmingham (Fulfilling Lives) gives its peer mentors the same formal support and supervision as its other employees. They are also entitled to up to five hours a week of dedicated support or supervision from Birmingham Mind.¹⁰⁰

You must also be careful not to put people in situations that might be uncomfortable or difficult, and take account of professional boundaries. During the development of the Small Steps Big Changes (A Better Start, Nottingham) family mentor scheme, team members considered whether families would be happy to receive support from, and share personal information with, someone who lives in their neighbourhood. They thought about whether they might feel uncomfortable sharing personal information with someone they could meet in the street or the supermarket. In practice, they found that this was one of the strengths that makes their service different. Family mentors are a friendly face from the community, which people say helped to break down barriers. But it was important to take this consideration into account and find out from families whether it was working.

Pay attention to where you run your services. People with lived experience who are involved in co-delivery or research may find that revisiting locations or experiences can be difficult. You must also be clear about governance or legal requirements, like conflicts of interest, confidentiality and safeguarding. Where people or stakeholders have links to, or represent, organisations that might want to deliver services for the partnerships, this also needs to be managed effectively.

How you can do it

As we've shown, co-production is a fluid process, so there's no recommended approach. Here we share insights about what has worked well for our programmes.

Get the basics right

A few basic things can help co-production to go well: location, food, and making it fun! These things may seem obvious or even unimportant, but they put people at ease and make them feel more included and confident, which helps build positive relationships.

Good food and friendly faces

Ageing Well Torbay (Ageing Better) asked 400 older people, "what helps you to age positively?" to identify their partnership's priorities.¹⁰¹ They did so by chatting to people in busy shopping areas, where a sofa and board were set up to generate awareness and ideas. The team then developed ideas through 20 'Food for Thought' focus groups in friendly, welcoming venues like cafes.

They had an in to local communities through their existing 15 **community builders**¹⁰² who had gained trust and made connections. Each community builder suggested the best place to hold the focus group and distributed personalised invitations. The partnership also went to five established groups to reach other people and held sessions in a sheltered housing scheme, a care home, and a mental health project.

Volunteers co-facilitated the sessions and welcomed people with good food and friendly chats. People were asked the same 10 questions across all sessions. Their thoughts were captured verbatim on post-its by staff/volunteers acting as impartial scribes. This allowed the team to cluster emerging themes

for each session and overall. People who weren't able to attend could use freepost burning issue postcards from libraries, or contact the team by phone, or email.

People gave insight into what would make a difference: information, housing, transport, support, access to the environment and social activities. A report of the findings was shared with people who took part, and the wider public. It was also shared with Torbay's Health and Wellbeing board and informs the area's work to become age friendly.

The priorities also shaped the focus of Ageing Well Torbay's Innovation fund, where a panel of older people decided which projects to fund from a £150,000 commissioning process.

Many people who took part also saw themselves as an untapped resource who could support their peers with tasks like simple DIY, gardening, shopping, household chores or driving people around. This has since been co-produced into a peer-support service. This level of open consultation took a lot of effort and time but has been worth it because of how it has empowered local people.¹⁰³

Formal meetings can be intimidating, boring, or off-putting, so be creative. Find a balance between what you must achieve and adding an informal feel to the meeting. Getting people involved in fun activities that they enjoy can build trust and make them more comfortable to give their views. The programme manager from Talent Match New Anglia told us, “simply asking opinions in a formal/semi-formal environment is not conducive to getting the best from young people. Now we hide consultation in fun activities.”¹⁰⁴

Age Better Sheffield’s team joined in baking and craft sessions and got their hands dirty on allotments to build trust with residents when co-designing their loneliness toolkits. Their manager told us that, “it’s so important for us to get out there and have those conversations.”¹⁰⁵

Nourish relationships

Building strong and authentic connections is at the heart of good co-production. As Jean, a member of the older persons’ panel from Leeds (Time to Shine, Ageing Better) says, “it’s about relationships rather than services or doing to.”¹⁰⁶

Creating ways for people to get to know each other, alongside their involvement in your work, helps forge relationships. It can also help to level the playing field between people with different skills or from different professional and personal backgrounds.

“It’s not about people sitting in a room talking, it’s about young people saying ‘so you’re a director of the NHS, let me shadow you, let me see what you actually do, let me understand why you’re on our steering group’ and really getting to understand what people’s roles are.”¹⁰⁷

**Programme manager,
Talent Match Humber**

It’s important to create the right environment where people can be at their best. Taking time to understand who’s who and what brings them to your work helps unlock what matters to and motivates them, and helps others understand their point of view.

Simple measures like giving everyone a name badge, having someone to meet and greet people, using ice-breakers, covering people’s travel costs and offering free tea and coffee go a long way to make people feel welcome and included.

Remember your staff are people too. We heard that professionals may fear that inviting people with lived experience to get involved in delivering work is a risk to their own jobs; that lower-paid staff or volunteers are being brought in to replace them. Introduce volunteer or peer support roles with careful, sensitive reflection on how the positions will complement each other, and work out clear protocols that set out clearly what is in and out of scope for each position. Don’t forget to build in time for people to get to know each other before they start working together to deliver services.

Don’t forget your partners too. Projects told us that the process of getting people with lived experience involved in research, for example, can sometimes need a bit of support.

Embrace diversity

Co-production works best when the people involved represent the diversity of the community served by your project; people can have lived experiences of the same issue that are very different.

You may need to dedicate time to building up connections and trust as a foundation for co-production, especially if you don’t have a track record of working with some marginalised or excluded communities, or people who have negative perceptions of public services.

You may not know how to find people who reflect all parts of your community or have tried things that didn't work and feel you have run out of ideas. Depending on the issues you work with, you may also find it a challenge to find people with lived experience who are doing well enough to engage, or who have the capacity or confidence to participate actively.

Finding the right people

Ageless Thanet (Ageing Better) wanted to avoid the usual suspects and get authentic representation for older isolated people of Thanet in the decision-making for their partnership.

They advertised across traditional and social media, stating that they were looking for people to lead, design and shape their £3 million bid. The adverts asked for people aged 50 plus and explicitly stated the partnership aims to combat loneliness. A range of life experiences, including personal experience of isolation and loneliness, were valued more than examples of being on boards or business experience. The project manager wanted healthy debate and conflict to get the project to the right place. Eight governors with a range of life experiences and direct experience of loneliness and isolation were recruited.

Everyone has put time and effort into making the project governance work, and the governors have received formal and pastoral support. The project manager told us that the panel, “absolutely stepped up,” that they were, “eminently capable – irrespective of background,” and that staff and stakeholders were, “blown away” by the levels of insight and professionalism shown by the older governors.¹⁰⁸

Others have almost certainly found ways to reach people who are underrepresented in your work, so be active in seeking out people you can learn from. Finding a trusted partner organisation, working with community representatives or people with professional skills and knowledge can be a bridge to working directly with people with lived experience, as can employing people from the community. It's ok to start out by working with people who aren't from the community if they understand it and represent people's views with integrity. Challenge yourself to continuously build on and diversify your approach.



Fulfilling Lives

Engaging young dads early on to get them onside

A **Game of Two Halves** is a parenting programme for young dads who have experienced violence or other traumatic events. It's part of **Lambeth Early Action Partnership, LEAP** (A Better Start).

LEAP asked the St Matthews Project, a grassroots charity offering football groups and wider support to young people, to help recruit participants. Six young dads agreed to take part. None of them had had taken part in any parental support or group work before.

The St Matthews founder explained the purpose of the work to them first, to get buy-in before they met the LEAP team. He then arranged a meeting between one of the dads and the LEAP manager. Making this connection broke the ice and gave LEAP validation with the dads.

The LEAP manager took the dads out for a meal at a local restaurant, as he wanted an environment that was more relaxed and neutral than a children's centre, office or clinic. Sharing and engaging them in the vision for the programme over a meal got the core group on side and committed to working together.

Over two meetings, the dads highlighted the need for support to build positive relationships with statutory services. The themes they identified informed both the content and the format of the programme.¹⁰⁹

Make sure people don't lose interest

Demonstrate to people that they have an important role. The first job for the older people's panel at Ageless Thanet was commissioning delivery contracts. The programme manager described this as, "a powerful statement of intent,"¹¹⁰ which was key in cementing a sense of purpose for the group. The director of HeadStart Blackpool also talked about the powerful moment when young people learned that they had the power to influence decisions. "That really lifted the room – what they had said had really had an impact on the programme."¹¹¹

Keep people with lived experience regularly informed about the outcomes of their work and show they are being heard and respected. This can help sustain motivation and engagement. It's not co-production if people are asked for their views and then hear nothing more about what happened.

People should be involved throughout to make the best use of their experiences and skills. This means not just asking for their inputs, then putting them into practice on your own. Similarly, asking people to present the findings of work they haven't been involved in, such as research, is tokenistic.

Peers making research different, collaborative, and relevant

When **WY-FI** (Fulfilling Lives) worked with Sheffield University and Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) on a study into preventing homelessness, it was different to previous research projects they had carried out. This time, their experts by experience were involved in the whole research process. They helped to agree the research area and questions, design the methodology, conducted interviews, helped to analyse data and propose recommendations. They also presented findings of the research at a launch event in 2017.

WY-FI Managers said that “[previously] there has been a risk of putting them [peer researchers] on the stage at the very end to endorse something they have had little actual involvement in”. In contrast, for this piece of work, they felt that “if they [the peer researchers] hadn’t been involved, it would have been less different, less authentic, less relevant.”¹¹²

This doesn’t mean that people have to be involved in every task. Keeping people informed shows them what happens as a result of their inputs, but also means that they can dip in and out of the activity according to their interests or skills. Ageing Well Torbay had previously agreed with the council that their consultation on priorities for older people would inform the local Positive Ageing Strategy. This meant they were able to say to local people, “what you think is really important, you know what will work for you and people like you. We promise that something will happen with it.”¹¹³

Apply this principle to other stakeholders too. Partnerships have told us it can sometimes be hard to get external or senior stakeholders to commit, and to turn up to meetings. Ageing Well Torbay used the potential of becoming accredited as an age-friendly area as a hook to get high-level stakeholders to attend a workshop. At the event, the team got each stakeholder to commit to working together and proactively followed up with their personal assistants or teams to confirm meetings and schedule follow-up conversations.

Regular, structured meetings can help to build engagement, energy and commitment to make things happen; some people will want to meet more regularly than you might anticipate. “People joined because they needed something to do, something regular and structured, so it became a very structured volunteering activity.”¹¹⁴

Be honest about boundaries and limitations

If it’s done badly, co-production can do more harm than good. If you take symbolic, rather than meaningful actions, people can quickly become disengaged. Young people from HeadStart explained that they work better when they feel valued, and that what they are looking for is to be part of a change.¹¹⁵

People may have high expectations of co-production so it’s important to manage these. Start out by being as clear as possible about what can and can’t be done. It’s important to commit to hearing and respecting a range of voices, but it’s also vital that you are honest about when and where some ideas may not be able to progress. If you have budget or time constraints, or some aspects of the work aren’t within your control, be upfront about this. Our partnerships have had to work carefully to explain the scope of what they can and can’t invest in, without turning off the people they are working with and for.

Similarly, if what you want from your co-production is limited, for example you just want a quick way to seek feedback on one element of your project rather than co-designing it from scratch, then say so.

It may be better to start small and increase people's confidence in your commitment to user involvement, than over-promise and then find yourself unable to meet people's expectations, leaving them disappointed or angry.

It's also important to pause and take stock of where co-production is among all the other demands on your time and resources.

“There's a tension between pushing the programme forward and making sure young people are involved in everything – we've had to stop and re-focus because it's easy to say but you have to keep it at the forefront of your practice every single day.”¹¹⁶

Programme manager,
HeadStart Blackpool

Don't set people up to fail

There's a fine line to tread between building capacity and overloading people. People from many different backgrounds will be interested in getting involved and will have different skillsets, competences, and motivations. Strike a balance between helping them to develop new skills and making sure you don't overwhelm them. For example, people hoping to gain experience to help them to find employment are likely to want to learn new skills. They won't just want to take on repetitive tasks like photocopying, but they also won't want to be overloaded, as this could make them lose confidence.

“We wondered if the bar was too high – but we wanted to be clear it is a proper job, so we didn't want to lower the bar, we wanted to make sure there were plenty of steps before someone gets there.”¹¹⁷

Programme manager,
Fulfilling Lives South East

Some of the expert citizen panels set up through these programmes are now becoming the go-to source of advice from people with lived experience. Each request for help needs to be considered carefully and it's important that the expectations and intended benefits and outcomes are clear. People shouldn't be asked to do more than they are ready for, or placed in an untenable position if the demands are too heavy. Opportunity Nottingham (Fulfilling Lives) oversee the work requested of their expert citizens, so that they aren't asked to do too much.¹¹⁸

Recognise people's contributions

“People need to feel valued and that they are getting something out of it.”¹¹⁹

Programme manager,
Fulfilling Lives South East

If people are putting their time, effort and valuable experience into making a service better, they should be recognised for it. This might be a payment, which may be essential for some people because without it, they couldn't afford to take part. For others a sense of achievement, or a simple thank you is enough. Partnerships have made a case-by-case decision on whether to charge for or pay for the inputs of people with lived experience, depending on who they are working with, the work they have done, and also on local practice.

Where co-production forms part of a journey towards employment, it can make sense to create paid roles to provide an opportunity for progression or a stepping stone towards a paid job. In contrast, some groups of people – for example older people – may want to give something back through their involvement in co-production and aren't necessarily looking for payment or career opportunities.

Whether you reward people or not, the input of people with lived experience is of immense value. It's always important to remember to acknowledge people for the work they do in an appropriate way. Say thank you, show that their input is appreciated and demonstrate the difference it has made.

Things can go wrong... so be prepared to reflect and make changes

We all know things can go wrong, even with the best of intentions and careful planning. Making mistakes is a normal part of any new process and this includes co-production. It can take time to understand the right format that works for everyone involved and you'll always find a way you'd do it differently next time.

Be prepared to assess how well things are going and make changes if needed. Don't be afraid to stop or change if things are no longer working. Processes need to evolve as the project evolves. Remember that things that look good on paper don't always work out well in practice.

“User involvement can have a huge and positive impact when approached in the right way at the right time, it's something we've only really gotten right through trial and error.”¹²⁰

Programme manager, Talent Match Northamptonshire

Young people as equals

Talent Match Humber, led by Humber Learning Consortium, set up a traditional governance structure for involving young people in decision-making, but it quickly became, “too big and too wide” with around 100 young people involved. The board had mainly attracted young people who had been to university or been employed before – who quickly moved on. Those that were left were young people facing additional barriers to employment, such as learning difficulties or hidden disabilities.

The project changed their approach and started to focus on this group of young people. This group formed People Against Disability Discrimination (PADD),¹²¹ which went on to become the steering group for the partnership.

They rethought their approach and shifted from a conventional model of governance to a truly embedded approach of working with young people as equals on every aspect of the partnership from governance decisions to delivery. Young people are more involved in ‘doing’, making decisions on the go and they have a range of pathways to becoming involved. Now, “it's embedded in almost the day to day operation of Talent Match, it is not a quarterly two-hour meeting with a set agenda with the same stakeholders around it. You have to have the power and the influence dissipated and spread as widely through everyone that's involved...”¹²² The programme manager told us, “To be honest it makes our job so much easier.”¹²³

Recommendations

Partnerships have told us that for them, co-production has been a positive experience. But we need more and better evidence to back up their perceptions of its benefits. The projects we've looked at were large partnerships with the money, time and the imperative to do this. So we realise it may be challenging for smaller projects with less resource, or a shorter timeframe to emulate. However, we believe that the learning from our partnerships is relevant and useful, whatever the size of project.

We all – practitioners, policy-makers and funders – need to think about how best we can assess and articulate the benefits and add to the growing evidence base.



For the doers – practitioners

- Do it for the right reasons. Don't go into it feeling like it's an obligation. Everyone needs to believe in it and do it, not just say it.
- Be open, honest and transparent. Take a no assumptions and no limits approach with both people and what they can or can't do.
- Get to know your people and make sure you're doing co-production at a level that's right for everyone.
- Be pragmatic – if you can't do gold standard co-production that's ok but be open and honest about your limits and barriers and involve people in agreeing how you will do it.
- Remember you're co-producing a service, not doing co-production for its own sake.
- Be flexible, ready to reflect and be challenged. Be equally ready to explain and share your own point of view and experiences.
- Capture learning as you go, work 'out loud' and proactively share what you are doing with others. Seek out people who you can work with, learn from, and share what's working for you, what hasn't gone so well, and why it's worth it.

For policy makers, commissioners and funders

- Support co-production by funding and giving services and projects sufficient time and resources to do it well. It can't be an add-on activity that isn't budgeted for.
 - Recognise your role in facilitating co-production opportunities and journeys. We too need to be flexible and open to change and challenge.
 - Be flexible and pragmatic. Don't hold projects strictly to what they said they would do at the outset. They won't know at the start what it's going to look like – both the process and the output. Provide support along the way.
 - Find a balance between giving projects freedom to develop as they go, and guidance based on learning from our and others' experiences. By its very nature, you can't prescribe what co-production looks like. Trust projects and the communities they work with.
- Encourage exchanges of experiences between practitioners, support related evaluation activity, collect learning and share it. Make links between projects and people with experience of doing co-production, and those who want to learn more.
 - Practice what you preach. Bring the voice of lived experience into funding, policy, research, evaluation and service design. Be pragmatic, recognise your limitations and work closer to the communities you want to work with.

Strategic programmes at a glance

A Better Start

- A ten year programme, 2015-2025.
 - £215 million for five areas across England.
 - Aims to support 60,000 babies and pre-school children through universal access to improved services and additional support for those who need it.
 - Managed by VCS-led partnerships.
 - Parents/communities play a key role.
-

HeadStart

- A five-year programme, 2016-2021.
 - £59 million for six areas across England.
 - Aims to test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing.
 - Managed by multi-stakeholder partnerships led by local authorities.
 - Young people at the heart. Schools, parents and communities play a key role.
-

Talent Match

- A five year programme, 2014-2018.
 - £106 million for 21 areas across England.
 - Targets young people furthest away from the labour market and addresses barriers to employment in ways that meet needs and aspirations of young people.
 - Managed by VCS-led partnerships.
 - Initiated by, designed and delivered with young people.
-

Fulfilling Lives

- An eight year programme, 2014-2022.
 - £112 million in 12 areas of England.
 - Aims to improve the lives of people facing multiple and complex disadvantage (a combination of mental ill health, homelessness, drug and alcohol issues or a history of offending) by connecting them to more joined up services.
 - Managed by VCS-led partnerships.
 - Expert citizens improve the design and delivery of services.
-

Ageing Better

- A six year programme, 2015-2021.
- £78 million for 14 areas in England.
- Aims to improve social connections for older people and challenge wider, negative narratives around ageing.
- Managed by VCS-led partnerships.
- People aged over 50 drive decision-making, governance and co-design and deliver project activities.

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