

Co-Production – working together to improve homelessness services

Coproduction and commissioning

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Produced by

The Innovation and Good Practice Team and Expert Link

With thanks to

Our contributors and everyone who has contributed to coproduction in commissioning

Published

April 2018

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Introduction

One of the challenges of commissioning in a co-produced way is that there is no consensus about what is meant by 'co-production'. There are different elements of co-production including co-design and co-delivery and all parties need to be clear what they are aiming to achieve.

It is also essential that commissioners are honest about their limitations. If you already have a set idea about the services you will commission, then consultation is only a token. This can lead to people feeling let down, if this is not clear from the outset. However co-production is not having one service user forum on board or having one paid representative – it involves having a range of conversations with different people throughout the process.

Co-production in commissioning is always a work in progress – there is always more that can be done and new ways to approach it.

Fundamentally, co-production in commissioning requires a culture shift – listening and interacting with people using services and professionals must be a fundamental and continuous part of the process.

A few thoughts on co-production and commissioning:

- "Good commissioning starts from an understanding that people using services and their carers and communities are experts in their own lives and are therefore essential partners in the design and development of services. Good commissioning creates meaningful opportunities for leadership and engagement of people, including carers and the wider community, in decisions that impact on the use of resources and shape of services locally" University of Birmingham, 2014
- Co-production is a way of working that involves people who use health and care services, carers and communities in equal partnership; and which engages groups of people at the earliest stages of service design, development and evaluation. Co-production acknowledges that people with 'lived experience' of a particular condition are often best placed to advise on what support and services will make a positive difference to their lives.
- The fact that social needs continue to rise is not due to a failure to consult or conduct opinion research, or even a failure to find enough resources. It is due to a failure to ask people for their help and to use the skills they have. This is a key insight from the idea of co-production. Co-production theorists suggest that this is the forgotten engine of change that makes the difference between systems working and failing. Stephens, Ryan-Collins and Boyle, 2008
- "Co-production is not just a word, it's 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."
Think Local Act Personal (2011) Making it real: Marking progress towards personalised, community based support, London: TLAP.

How to co-produce commissioning: ideas and tips

There are many factors that are important to a co-produced commissioning. Here are a few that we think are central:

Cultural shift for commissioners

Co-producing commissioning requires continuous listening. It is time-consuming and changes the nature of the commissioning process. Typically, you will need to start earlier (around 12 months ahead) to give time to consult people thoroughly. You need to continue listening after the service is commissioned and create or be part of numerous ways to get feedback and discuss that with services. You will need to think creatively about who you will be talking to and how you will have those conversations.

You also need to be ready to learn. There is no point listening if you aren't prepared to learn from what you hear and make changes in response to that. This requires the team to have a culture in which listening, learning and iterating is a core part of the process. This culture is essential to incorporating co-production.

This means that you need to put resources aside to ensure that staff have the time and capacity to engage with people. This can be challenging but it is essential to make this space wherever possible.

It is also important to promote a culture of risk awareness in order to foster an environment where innovative, co-produced practice can thrive and risk aversion practices are discouraged.

A keen awareness of the market and the ability to utilise co-production to shape that market is also essential. It is important that Commissioners recognise local assets, consider a strengths-based asset approach in local communities and work collaboratively to build new partnerships.

Regular reviews or audits are essential to ensure that the aims and principles of co-production are embedded and the social, environmental and well-being outcomes and added value can be measured and continually assessed.

Political buy-in

All council officers are ultimately there to do the work of the political administration. It is therefore essential to have political commitment to co-producing services and, as the commissioner, you may need to broker this. Political members (Councillors) are answerable to their constituents so the sponsorship of constituents is important too.

It doesn't always occur to people that co-production is an important part of designing and delivering successful services. You may need to make the case for why co-production makes services better. You may need to be a continual champion of this in order to make this a priority. It helps to get the local voluntary sector and other partners on board too, to increase the number of voices who are supportive. This requires ongoing networking and a commitment to ensuring co-production is a continual part of the agenda.

Clarity of purpose

You need to have a clear idea of what co-production is, how you will resource it and how much it can influence your commissioning process. Generally people will be happier to participate, if they understand how their feedback will be used.

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Be clear about how you are using peoples' input to inform your commissioning. Be clear with your team about how much of their time, you can realistically expect to be spent listening and talking to people using services and with services about how this will affect the process.

There are always limits to what can be changed so be clear about these from the outset. There will be budget limitations and there may also be certain things that will have to be part of any service that is commissioned. There will be other aspects, however, that are changeable. You will also need to reach some form of consensus, so there will be some ideas that may not make it into final recommendations. You will also need to be clear about who is making the final decision, if that is not happening by consensus. People will understand this – however if you are involving people in consultation, you do need to ensure that their feedback has some influence or you risk frustrating people further.

There is a clear responsibility when working with people who have experience of using services that you don't leave them feeling ignored or let down. Being clear about what you are aiming to achieve and the impact of their involvement will help you to avoid this.

Having diverse conversations

Most services have a user group or forum that can give feedback. However, these groups may only represent one viewpoint. If you continually talk to the same group, you may find that this isn't inclusive of the full range of people who use services. Your aim with co-production is to talk to as many people as possible (including those who don't currently use services).

You will need to have conversations in different ways and locations in order to include as many people as you can. Your aim is to triangulate voices and reach a consensus. Sources can include:

- Surveys
- Working groups including lived experience and professionals (covering general issues or focused on specific topics)
- Separate meetings with groups of people with lived experience – sometimes several different meetings to include as many groups or different types of people as possible
- Attending existing meetings of user or recovery groups
- One to one meetings with people who may not attend a group or service
- Running drop-ins at services or dropping in on a more casual basis
- Shadowing people or professionals for several days to get a clearer idea of how things work and what people want
- Conversations with second or even third parties – people can relate the experiences of others who you may be unable to reach – this cannot replace first-hand experience but can also be rich data.

You will also want to include people at various stages of the activity so that they are part of the process from start to finish. There may be meetings that don't include professionals or conversely people with lived experience. Some Boards, for example, may not be willing to include lived experience – if that is the case then be honest from the beginning that some meetings will not be inclusive and ensure you capture lived experience views and information on that topic elsewhere.

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It is important, however, that inclusion happens at every stage and not just in the early stages and that lived experience is not excluded from the decision making process.

It is also important that conversations continue to happen after services have been commissioned. Make sure that the commissioning team are connected to any groups or forums that discuss service provision so that you are continually hearing feedback about services. Continue to have a presence at services between commissioning cycles where possible so that you have some awareness of what is being delivered and what is being said about those services. You should also try to have conversations with non-commissioned services and smaller services such as soup kitchens who may hear a different perspective. Listening to feedback and discussing that feedback with services should be a continual process and a key part of the work of the team.

Commissioning co-production into services

Once you have co-designed what services should look like, you will need to ensure that co-production and inclusion form a key part of service design itself and have influenced the final specification prior to the tender process.

A requirement of any services that you commission should be that they get continual feedback from their service users – however most services will inevitably frame that feedback in a certain way (especially when they are out for tender). This again emphasises the importance of having conversations outside of services themselves. It is important to ensure through the contract management process that providers are not only obtaining feedback from service users and their wider social and professional networks but that the organisation incorporates their views and suggestions at all levels and can shape services accordingly.

As a commissioner, you also design key performance indicators (KPIs) for services. Designing KPIs is an art rather than a science – the aim is to ensure that the outcomes reflect what you are aiming for with your service design. Adopting a strengths-based approach and measuring qualitative data in conjunction with quantitative data provides an opportunity for Commissioners to gauge the impact of service delivery on individuals. What professionals measure can distort a service, particularly if only quantitative or indirect data is collected. So if your aim, for example, is for services to be person-centred, you need to design measures that enable the service to work in this way. When you design your KPIs considerable thought needs to go into doing this – this is difficult and a continual process of improvement.

In terms of social care the Care Act 2014 is an important piece of legislation that included the concept of co-production in its statutory guidance:

“Local Authorities should, where possible, actively promote participation in providing interventions that are co-produced with individuals, families, friends, carers and the community. Co-production is when an individual influences the support and services received, or when groups of people get together to influence the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered.” Department of Health, 2014

Tips on co-producing from other sources

The Story of Co-producing Leeds (CIMH 2012) gives useful tips about how to “get congruence between the street and the strategy?”

Centre for Innovation and Health Management, The Story of Co-producing Leeds:

- Start with listening
- Treat all people as assets – use everyone’s skills and strength to build services; provide opportunities for everyone to develop and grow
- Find out what we are ambitious for together
- Invest in the development of communities so they can be partners – encourage don’t judge
- Value and make the most of people’s expertise gained through experience – allow people to be who they really are
- “Do with not do to”. Challenge ‘them’ and ‘us’ we all need to be providers and users; ‘givers’ and ‘getters’
- Professionals, ask how you can help people help themselves
- Take time to get to know each other and find other people who could contribute – build social networks

Available from <http://www.cihm.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Story-of-Coproducing-Leeds-Dec-2013.pdf>

The National Co-production Advisory Group and Think Local Act Personal give these tips for co-production:

National Co-Production Advisory Group and Think Local Act Personal:

- Co-production must start as an idea that blossoms with everybody involved having an equal voice.
- Come to the table with a blank agenda and build it with people who use your service, their carers and families.
- Involve people who use services, carers and their families in all aspects of a service – the planning, development and delivery.
- In order to achieve meaningful, positive outcomes, everybody involved must have the same vision, from front line staff to management/board members.
- Start small and build up to bigger projects, letting people lead, not professionals.
- Acknowledge that a range of skills are needed for co-production.
- Recruit the right people that support co-production.
- People who use services, carers and families should be clear about what their expectations are and be fully engaged in the process.
- People who use services and their carers know what works, so you can't get it right without them.
- Don't take responsibility for solving every problem—allow the group to find collective solutions.
- Ensure appropriate and adequate resources are available to support co-production (participation fees, expenses, easy read documents and access needs).
- Ensure frontline staff have everything they need to for co-production, including time and flexibility.
- Ensure no one group or person is more important than anyone else. Everyone can contribute given the right support.
- It is important to have good facilitation and listening skills, and to reflect and act upon what is heard.

- Acknowledge and respect what people who use services, their carers and families say.
- Ensure everything in the co-production process is accessible to everyone taking part.
- Before you start the work, decide together how you are going to work and what will make it successful, then stick to it.
- Accept that sharing power means taking risks. Take a chance!
- Learn to share power. Doing things differently means we can work across a whole range of issues that confront us.
- Work with the group to support a clear set of identified values with a collective sense of direction.
- Don't use jargon or acronyms, plain English is better for everybody.
- Create the expectation that people who use services, carers and families will be involved in every aspect of service planning, design/development and delivery at every level.

Available from:

www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/assets/COPRODUCTION/1_page_profile_for_coproduction_2.pdf

Challenges to overcome

“Sometimes, public services will steam ahead with developing new services and land up with a list of formal services into which they shoehorn the public. Members of the public are frustrated that their local authority offers services that are seen as wasteful and don't offer simple things that they truly need. Many public services are still delivered from the perspective of single service deliverers. The leads to citizens experiencing multiple, fragmented approaches that can result in contradictory and conflicting interventions, poor outcomes for the service user and a waste of valuable resources and poor value for money” Wales Audit Office, 2014

Studies of co-production and commissioning warn against:

- Returning to 'status quo' – agencies may revert back to traditional roles and relationships with service users and carers, sometimes with best intentions but undermining the process
- Failing to invest time, expertise and commitment in the long term. Co-production cannot just occur at set times in the commissioning cycle, it should involve a new power relationship
- Co-production being “another job” for commissioners – it is the job.
- Being tokenistic – “It appears to me that the term ‘co-production’ has lost its way, becoming stale and jaded, but worst of all it seems that “co-production” is thrown around in abandon for the good and the great, making them feel good by ticking a box” (Ford, Expert Link, 2017). Another description advanced of tokenism rather than co-production is of the service user being invited to sit in the back seat once the agency has decided where the car is going.

Practice Example

The Jigsaw Recovery Project

“I adopted a co-production approach in Gateshead as part of the review and re-design of the supported housing services previously funded by the Supporting People Programme. At an early co-production event an impassioned Service User described his vision for the development of a new, peer-led housing support service aimed at vulnerable people who were offending or at risk of offending. The Service User had lived experience having previously been in custody and the proposed model was for all the support services to be provided by ex-offenders with similar lived experiences. The idea of incorporating peer-led, lived experience into the supported housing sector had been a key suggestion that emerged from the co-production process. This was coupled with my desire to promote a culture of risk awareness not risk aversion to help cultivate innovation in the market. Following further conversations with key stakeholders it was clear that there was a need in Gateshead for high quality, innovative services of this nature for younger care leavers with complex needs, including offending behaviour. This realisation was reached in part due to a partnership with key Managers within the Children’s Services Function who provided sufficient evidence and who were subsequently prepared to support and fund the project. An accreditation and contractual framework were completed and agreed prior to the commencement of an initial pilot programme. I am pleased to report that the project has gone from strength to strength with embedded co-production at the heart of their business.”

Carl Taylor – Commissioning Officer, Gateshead Council.

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What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless or live with multiple and complex support needs. We work to improve services and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

Let's end homelessness together

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