Adapting in Adversity: Addressing multiple disadvantage and co-production in Covid-19

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January 2021

1. Introduction

This paper addresses multiple disadvantage and co-production in Covid-19. It draws upon the experiences of Fulfilling Lives and Help through Crisis (HtC) partnerships and insights provided by the HtC Learning, Support and Evaluation (LSE) team. The aim of the paper is to promote thinking and discussions about co-production to address multiple disadvantage during Covid-19.

This paper is one of a series of 'Adapting in Adversity' outputs from the Fund's activity to bring together evidence, learning and insights about the Covid-19 pandemic from across Fulfilling Lives, Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) and HtC. These programmes support people facing severe and multiple disadvantages[1] who, due to pre-existing inequalities, are particularly at risk of experiencing the negative consequences, and wider implications, of Covid-19.

The remainder of the paper:

- summarises progress with co-production pre-pandemic;
- presents partnerships' experiences at the beginning of Covid-19;
- shares key learning from Revolving Doors about remote co-production;
- provides concluding comments; and
- links to resources.

2. Progress with co-production pre-Covid-19

The Fulfilling Lives programme has a National Expert Citizen Group formed of expert citizens with lived experience of multiple disadvantage who use their knowledge to improve the design and delivery of services available to them, collaborating with local leadership and decision makers across partnerships to create solutions that work for them. A key principle of HtC is to commit to supporting those who have experienced, or risk experiencing, hardship crisis, to have a stronger, more collecting voice to

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[1] People facing multiple disadvantage experience a range of problems including poor mental health, interpersonal violence and abuse, homelessness and substance misuse. They may also fall in the gaps between services and systems.

better shape a response to their issues. HtC partnerships all begin delivery of the programme at varying points on the 'ladder of engagement' (Think Local Act Personal). By the beginning of 2020, many HtC partnerships were engaging and involving people to shape services and have an influence; some were moving closer towards co-production and a smaller number were co-producing with beneficiaries (HtC LSE team 2020).

3. Partnerships' experience of co-production at the beginning of Covid-19

While there have been two examples of HtC partnerships being able to successfully involve beneficiaries with lived experience in steps to acquire additional funding and co-produce work relating to council tenant groups, some HtC partnerships were finding it difficult to incorporate co-production in their work when the pandemic began (Smeaton et al 2020). One HtC partnership described co-production activities as having 'ground to a halt' due to the time required to respond and adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic. Fulfilling Lives partnerships reported how engagement was mixed with some beneficiaries not engaging (Smeaton et al 2020). The following case study from Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind highlights some of the challenges to delivering co-production activities during the pandemic:

> The HtC project used a co-production approach to redesign a service user group in response to service design undertaken by the Local Authority. This group started in a local community hub in what is one of the most deprived areas of England. After testing the approach taken to how the group would operate, the volunteer members of the group were comfortable using coaching principles to support others and there was an increase in the numbers of attendees at the group sessions.
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> When Covid-19 began, prior to the March 2020 lockdown, a decision was made to stop the group due to vulnerability to Covid-19 of group members and their family members. While the HtC project continuously monitored the situation to enable the group to resume when possible, the move to remote service delivery and the closure of service and community spaces further impacted upon the possibility of continuing with the co-production activities planned with this group.
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> The lack of digital skills and digital access were also a barrier to the co-production activities continuing. Some of those involved in the co-production activities, and many of those they represent, do not have any type of phone, never mind a smart phone or other device to access the internet. In addition, places where they could access the internet were closed. Barriers to the digital inclusion of the group not only included access to devices but connectivity and the lack of digital skills.
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> As the pandemic continued, organisational priorities focused upon reopening the office, supporting staff to return to work and funded services. Restarting the co-production activities with the service user group has been considered but was assessed as too risky due to the volatility of the Covid-19 context in the North East of England. The HtC project continue to look for solutions to enable the co-production activities to resume.

4. Remote co-production

In response to requests from HtC partnerships requests for support, the HtC LSE Team provided a webinar in July 2020 to support remote co-production with beneficiaries. Revolving Doors, a consortium member of the HtC LSE Team, shared their positive experiences of delivering remote co-production activities (2020):

> Remote co-production can **be more inclusive and improve access for some** due to reduced costs and enabling those with anxiety and / or physical conditions to participate. Collaboration is beneficial because of the **ease of bringing those with lived experience together with policymakers**. Remote co-production activities are **more agile** and, as a consequence, **more can be done with less planning time**.

Alongside these strengths of remote co-production, it is also important to consider both the disadvantages and longer-term implications of remote co-production (Revolving Doors 2020):

> Remote co-production remains **inaccessible** for some and there is need to **widen accessibility** for those who are digitally excluded. There are questions about the **longer-term effects of working remotely**, the **sustainability of working via video** and the **potential for video fatigue.** Important considerations include **what is sacrificed by remote co-production** and **not knowing what those with lived experience think about remote co-production**. As video co-production does not work as well for problem-solving as it does for 'ask and listen' consultations, **what steps can be taken to improve remote co-produced problem-solving**?

5. Concluding comments

Covid-19 has proved challenges to delivering co-production activity. While remote co-production can work, and has strengths, the lack of accessibility for those who cannot be reached online highlights the importance of alternative approaches to co-production.

Given the recent emphasis upon remote co-production, there is merit in finding out what beneficiaries *really* think about remote co-production activities and using this insight to further develop remote co-production, and consider alternatives if beneficiaries articulate any alternative preferences to ensure their voices are included.

6. Resources to support with remote co-production

HtC Learning, Support and Evaluation Team. (2020) *Covid-19 Factsheet 2: Digital Inclusion*. Accessed on 17/12/20 at:
https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/Help-through-crisis/Help-through-crisis-digital-inclusion-factsheet.pdf?mtime=20200612141228&focal=none

HtC Learning, Support and Evaluation Team. (2020) *Covid-19 Factsheet 3: How to Effectively Engage with People Online*. Accessed on 17/12/20 at:

https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/Help-through-crisis/Help-through-crisis-engaging-people-online-factsheet.pdf?mtime=20200630144847&focal=none

References

HtC Learning, Support and Evaluation Team. (2020) *Working with beneficiaries*. Accessed on 17/12/20 at:
https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/Help-through-crisis/Help-through-crisis-working-with-beneficiaries-learning-paper.pdf?mtime=20200304095533&focal=none

Revolving Doors. (2020) *Help through Crisis Remote Co-production: Learning, Support and Evaluation Webinar*. Presentation delivered at webinar 15/07/20 and 16/07/20.

Smeaton, E. Boase, R. Cheshire, S. and Tinsley, L. (2020) *Adapting in Adversity: Delivering services to people experiencing multiple disadvantage during Covid-19*. Accessed on 28/09/20 at:
https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Adapting-in-Adversity-Full-Report.pdf?mtime=20200605140223&focal=none

Think Local Act Personal. Accessed on 23/09/20 at:
https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/co-production-in-commissioning-tool/co-production/In-more-detail/what-makes-co-production-different/