# Co-production
## A Time to Shine toolkit
## January 2021

## Who has developed this toolkit?

The Centre for Loneliness Studies, a research centre based at the University of Sheffield, developed this toolkit. It was created from research carried out by Louise Whitehead, during her doctoral studies, which explored the co-production of services for older people who are lonely and/or isolated. The research was conducted in collaboration with the Time to Shine (TTS) programme in Leeds (led by Leeds Older People's Forum and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund) which aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation in later life. The research explored how co-production worked across the TTS programme. Several groups contributed to it, including: The National Lottery Community Fund; the TTS Core Partnership Board, and older people who were experiencing isolation and loneliness.

# Contents

## Part one: an introduction to co-production

## Part two: understanding and doing co-production

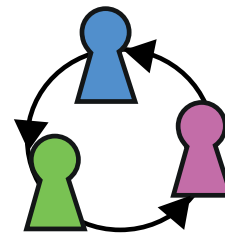# What are the aims of this toolkit?

This toolkit supports people interested in any or all stage(s) of the co-production cycle. It is linked to a series of activities, delivered by a trainer, designed to help people think about how they might prepare for, plan, do and review their co-production journey. The toolkit is also useful as a stand-alone document, without the associated training, as it provides a good overview and highlights key things to consider. Opinions and ideas from people involved in the research are quoted throughout the toolkit.

The first part explains the philosophy and principles and explores what is required for successful co-production.

The second part considers some important questions to help you embed co-production into the way you work or live your life.

# Part 1: an introduction to co-production

## What is co-production and who is involved?

Co-production is a way of seeing the world which stems from the values of those involved. It includes an understanding of how power operates for individuals, groups, organisations and society.

Co-production is also a method of engagement and communication. These values and understandings build the foundations so that co-production can take place.

People taking part in the co-production journey are referred to as 'stakeholders' in this toolkit. They might include:
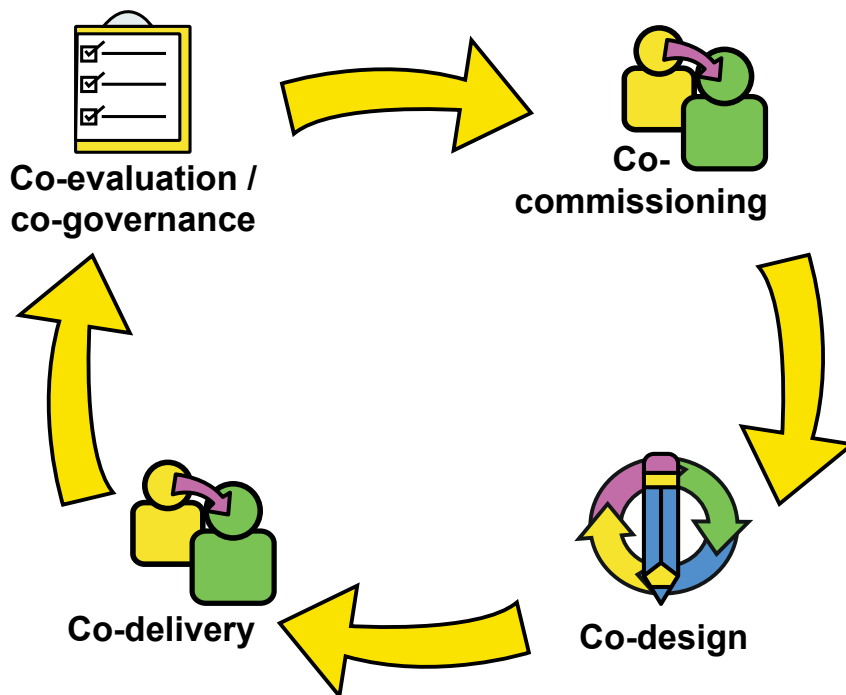
- People who use a service
- Volunteers
- People who are not yet using a service
- Friends and family
- Local communities
- Third sector organisations
- Paid staff
- Organisations delivering vital local services, such as transport companies
- Statutory organisations, such as the NHS and local authorities
- Local businesses
- National funding bodies
- Government departments

Co-production uses the strengths, skills and abilities of all people involved. It uses local resources to respond to the needs of local people and recognises that all participants are equally valued.

"They are listening, everything that is happening is what people want, people are coming up with ideas, they are being acted on. I have worked with many groups [in the past] where things are just put on."

# The cycle of co-production

It is generally accepted that co-production activity centres around a cycle, as the diagram below illustrates. Co-production can start at any point in the cycle and can take place at any or all of these stages. Time to Shine aimed to co-produce with older people at every stage of the programme.



**Co-evaluation / co-governance** → **Co-commissioning** → **Co-design** → **Co-delivery**

# Why co-produce?

> "Co-production has its challenges and can be a hard thing to achieve. On the plus side the benefits for organisations and individuals are significant and well worth the effort. "

**For a service provider, co-production can:**

- Value the human right for people to have a say in the design and delivery of services that they use
- Give people a voice
- Improve services through actively including a diverse range of voices, skills and experiences in planning, delivery and governance
- Lead to creative local solutions and asset-based approaches which connect services to existing community networks
- Improve satisfaction with services; participants in the research said co-production should be a gold standard because they valued the approach
- Improve morale if managers, staff and volunteers feel they are genuinely including their service users' views

**For service users, co-production can:**

- Provide opportunities for people to influence the services they receive
- Support people to feel heard and included so that they can facilitate meaningful changes
- Offer opportunities for people to get involved in stimulating activities, have diverse experiences and try something new
- Enable people to use existing skills and develop new ones
- Create space to meet interesting new people, for example people from different ages and backgrounds or people they might not normally meet in day-to-day life
- Foster new social networks
- Help people to feel valued and respected by offering opportunities to 'give something back' to services and communities: this is often given as a reason for taking part in co-production
- Facilitate a range of outcomes including improved health and wellbeing, reduced loneliness and isolation, and improved self-esteem and confidence.

**How do people feel without successful co-production?**

Where co-production is not attempted, or the attempt is not genuine, there are potential negative effects and consequences:

- Service users feel excluded and powerless
- Services are not tailored to the needs of those who use them
- People are not committed to or invested in the service
- Opportunities are missed for people who enjoy this type of activity
- Services lack credibility
- A negative impact on staff morale
- There is a risk to the reputation of a service or organisation
- A lack of diversity risks excluding communities of interest

"One volunteer remarked that her feedback on the project's new activity timetable was ignored and the wider group was not consulted on how this may impact on their activities. Feeling listened to and valued was important to the volunteers. Another volunteer described feeling as if they did not have the authority to feed back to project workers on what could be improved, and that their work was "all set out, and I'm behind the scenes."

# How to use this toolkit:

This toolkit aims to support people and groups interested in starting a journey of co-production. The toolkit is based on research on co-production with older people experiencing isolation and loneliness. Sometimes specific examples are included, but the principles are transferable and useful to anyone thinking about how to do co-production.

Part two of the toolkit focuses on understanding and doing co-production. It is primarily designed to be used by a trained facilitator to deliver a training workshop, which includes information and a suite of practical activities. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this has been adapted to an online platform (Zoom) as well as face-to-face sessions.

The activities in the training workshop are designed to help individuals and groups prepare for, plan and do their co-production journey. The activities help people to:

- Develop their skills, knowledge and confidence in their co-production journey
- Embrace the values of co-production
- Navigate any challenges and think through some of the issues
- Work together more effectively

The toolkit and activities can be adapted and tailored to different contexts, used as a whole or in parts, in any order.  How you use them depends on your aims, needs and where you are in the co-production journey.

The toolkit can also be used by organisations or individuals interested in co-production **without** it being linked to formal training or to the suite of activities. This is even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic as resources or opportunities to deliver a formal training session may be limited for the time being.

# Part two: understanding and doing co-production

## 1. Defining co-production for your context

There are lots of different interpretations of what co-production means. As co-production can be applied to such a broad range of contexts, the term co-production is often used interchangeably with, for example, partnership work, user-involvement and working together.

It is difficult to be specific about what co-production looks like in each individual circumstance. This is because co-production can be used in different ways, in a wide range of situations. It can range from a few people co-producing care arrangements for one person, through to a wide range of people involved in co-producing country-wide methods for delivery of goods and services.

It is hard to agree on a definition of co-production because if the definition is 'too tight', it limits possibilities for creative work. Still, if the definition is 'too loose', it becomes difficult for people to understand what co-production is. It can be challenging to know what to include as a co-production activity, and why it is different from other types of work.

Everyone must begin by agreeing on a shared idea about what they mean when they talk about co-production. We know that co-production becomes more difficult if those who are involved don't have the same ideas about what co-production should include.

Agreeing on a statement about what co-production means in your context is essential. This helps to make the process clearer and fairer because everybody knows what to expect from each other and the co-production journey.

For example, the definition of co-production developed by Louise Whitehead during the research for her doctoral studies is:

"Co-production is both a paradigm and method. The paradigm is based in a renegotiated, more equal relationship between services and those who use them, which takes account of power relationships. The method of co-production centres around co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation with a range of stakeholders, one of whom should be those who use the services. It uses creative methods of engagement to harness the skills, knowledge, experience and strengths of those involved with benefits for individuals, groups, organisations and the wider community."

The following practical activities link to this section of the training:

**Activity 1: What do you know, and what do you want to know, about co-production? Setting personal goals for the training**

**Activity 2: Defining co-production**

## 2.  Co-production values

"It helps people who use the services to be actively involved in their service"

## What do we mean by values?

Co-production is built on and driven by the values of those who take part. Values are fundamental to the way people live their lives. They influence what people think is important, and they affect how decisions are made. In co-production, personal and group values steer the direction of work and influence decision-making. It is therefore vital that stakeholders have a conversation about their individual and group values, so they understand their influence. The most common values driving co-production are:

## Empowerment

Empowerment is an important value driving co-production - in the research, participants described empowerment as doing things **with** people rather than **for** them. Service users can be empowered to participate in services, whether that be through co-commissioning, co-designing, co-delivering or co-evaluating/governing, or at every stage. Successful empowerment both creates opportunities for people to participate, and removes any barriers that prevent their participation. For example an organisation may establish a steering group to co-produce services and offer free transport to the meetings for those who require it.

# Equality

Equality is central to the practice of co-production and it is important that everyone is involved as an equal participant. Using the word stakeholders to describe everyone involved in co-production is one way to promote an equal relationship. This removes any underlying hierarchy from words like 'manager' or 'volunteer' or 'community member', 'user' and 'funder'.

Despite the best intentions, different stakeholders may hold different power and influence which needs to be explored and sometimes challenged. To enable equality between stakeholders, some may require different types of support to help them to take part on an equal footing to their peers in co-production. For example, a community member with little experience of formal meetings may need support to feel confident contributing their opinion. Likewise some stakeholders may need support to relinquish some of their power to others.

## Recognising and using the skills, knowledge, and experience of everyone involved

"I'm one of the lay ministers at the church that [the project] meets in and I think it's also quite important that I did work for many years as a dentist in the village. I'm saying those things because it shows the contacts that I've got within the local community already which were really important in the setting up of [the project]."

A core value of co-production is recognising that everyone has strengths, skills and experiences that they can contribute. This is sometimes called an asset-based, or strengths-based approach. When designing or delivering a service, we usually value 'professional' skills such as knowing how to organise services, being responsible for budgets or being a good manager. Co-production places value on a wide range of skills and experiences, including those that people get through professional roles but also those that they might get through other ways. For example, a co-production approach values lived experience of loneliness, knowledge of the local community or a person's unique perspective on a social issue.
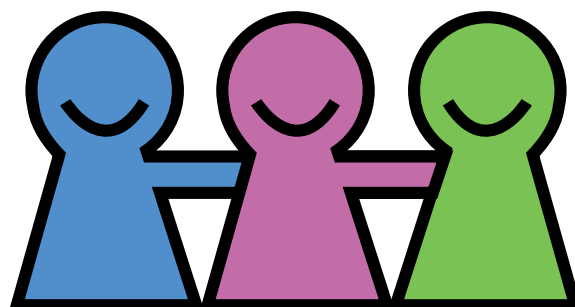
## Commitment to the journey

Saying you are going to 'do co-production' is often the easiest part of the process. Whilst co-production can be straightforward, obstacles and challenges will also arise. The journey of co-production is not linear, and will often go up and down through easier and harder parts. It is important to commit to seeing co-production through, even if there are obstacles or the process feels difficult. Once the process has started, co-production should not be taken away if problems arise. Commitment to co-production throughout the journey honours the right for communities to have a say in services that they receive. For example, if the co-producing group disagrees on an issue, rather than one stakeholder taking charge of the decision-making as an easy solution, creative solutions should be found to resolve the issue, even if that is more time-consuming.

## Rights and responsibilities

Co-production is a rights-based approach which says that communities should have a say in how services are delivered.  However, not everyone will want to get involved and co-production should respect individual preference. With rights, come responsibilities, and it is important for committed stakeholders to contribute where they can. However, the level of responsibility that individual stakeholders have will need to be negotiated. Whilst employees of organisations are paid for their time, volunteers give their time for free. Volunteers should be encouraged to take part but, if for any reason, such as health or other commitments, they have to take a step back, that decision should be respected. Creating a flexible space for participation is particularly important for volunteers who live with physical or mental illness, disabilities, or have caring commitments. Stakeholder organisations have a responsibility to support volunteers and service users to stay involved at whatever level they can, to provide appropriate and accessible opportunities, but not to create a 'tyranny of participation' where people feel pressured to take part.
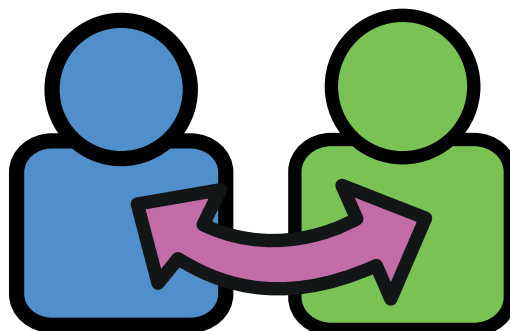
"The benefit to me is knowing that I am helping people who's a lot worse off than me: I say worse off in one way, not money-wise but in health and movement and stuff and I enjoy it, I don't mind helping anybody.

I hoped it would be a two-way street, I'd get something out of it, and they get something out of it and I do.

I think befriending or doing things like volunteering, sort of that purposefulness really kicks in with the emotional loneliness. You hear people saying 'I don't feel useful anymore' or 'you know I used to do this' and it's about how do we get that sense of purpose back, what was it that you enjoyed doing that once gave you that?"

## Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a core value of co-production. Reciprocity means that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between stakeholders. Co-production should create benefit for all stakeholders involved and should not just meet the needs of organisations or projects. Stakeholders invest time, emotion, energy and sometimes personal resources to the co-production process. It is important they also get something back. Stakeholder organisations with paid staff are rewarded financially for their contributions to co-production, so it is important that volunteers also feel rewarded for their time to ensure that the relationship is equal. Sometimes unpaid stakeholders feel that being heard, valued and respected, and having genuine influence over services, is enough to feel rewarded for their time. Another way to build mutually beneficial relationships is to develop stakeholder strengths, skills and assets throughout the co-production journey. This can encourage people to feel more confident and capable to do things they haven't done before, and more likely to become involved in other future activities. For example, our research showed that older people learnt transferable skills through the co-production process that helped them to solve other problems in their lives, such as loneliness and isolation. One further way to build reciprocal relationships is for organisations to ensure they provide meaningful co-production activities that stakeholders enjoy.

# Risk-taking, experimentation or 'test and learn'

Co-production means being open-minded to new ways of working and decision-making. Sometimes co-production has been described as a 'messy' approach. This is because there is no guide book for different stakeholders which shows them how to come together for the first time. Sharing power and decision-making means changing behaviours, and sometimes this feels risky for organisations as outcomes can be uncertain and different. To fully commit to co-production and learn new ways to work, organisations have to be willing to experiment and take risks, which also means things can go wrong. Often these risks pay off and projects are successful, but ideas may also fail, and that has to be accepted as part of the process of learning new ways to work.  In our research, the Time to Shine programme committed to using a 'test and learn' approach for co-production. Stakeholders were encouraged to experiment with new approaches and this created a culture where organisations felt comfortable taking risks to learn to work in new ways without the pressure of getting everything right first time.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 3: Exploring your values**

# 3.  An inclusive approach for successful co-production

Successful co-production relies on making sure a diverse range of people and organisations are involved in the journey. There are two main reasons for this: 1) including a wide range of stakeholders means everyone represents their interests in key decisions which affect everyone, and 2) involving lots of different organisations and individuals means that you have a good range of skills, knowledge, experience, and resources to contribute to successful co-production.

To develop an inclusive approach for successful co-production, you will need to think about:

- ✓ Which stakeholders are important to include.
- ✓ What skills, experiences, knowledge and resources you will need.
- ✓ How to include a wide variety of stakeholders.
- ✓ What resources stakeholders will need.
- ✓ How to keep stakeholders interested and involved.

These next sections explore each of these questions.

## Which stakeholders should be included?

A wide range of stakeholders who have an interest in the focus of the co-production journey should be invited to participate. This ensures that a diverse range of interests and perspectives are represented. These may include:
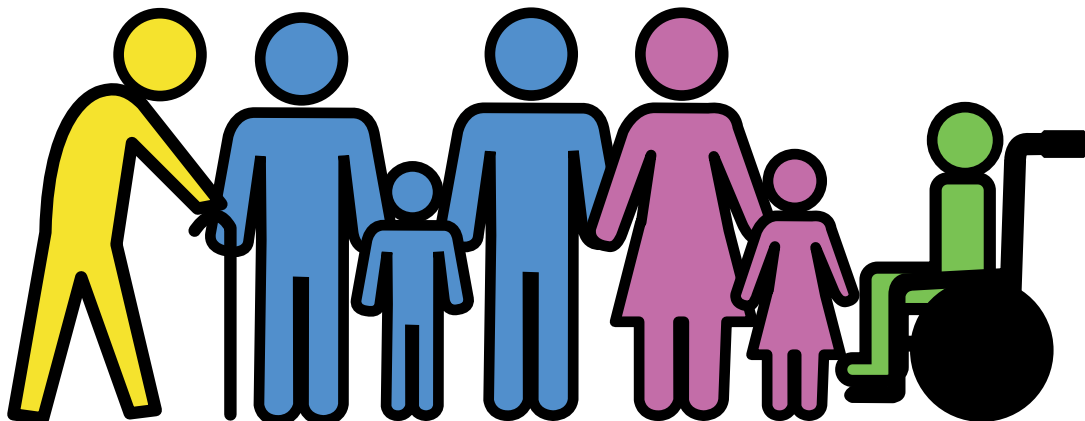
**Individuals:**
- People already using existing services.
- People who could use services in the future.
- Local community members.
- Families, friends and carers of people who use services.
- Anyone interested in tackling the issue the co-production journey is focussing on (for example, isolation and loneliness).

**Organisations (or their representatives):**

- Voluntary sector organisations.
- Organisations with statutory responsibilities such as local authorities and the NHS.
- Organisations responsible for local infrastructure, such as transport companies.
- Evaluation organisations.
- Local or national campaigning organisations, such as Centre for Ageing Better and Campaign to End Loneliness.
- Government departments.
- Funding organisations.
- Local businesses such as care homes or home care providers.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 4: Identifying stakeholders for co-production**

# Asset mapping for co-production

"Though the language we use does seem to be moving more towards assets and strengths and recognising the strengths of individuals…I know I'm guilty of [using] the buzz words and [formal] language and not really thinking well, exactly what does that mean? Am I living those words?"

Co-production is more successful when lots of different stakeholders are involved. This ensures a good range of skills, knowledge, experience and resources are available. These are sometimes called 'assets'. Each individual stakeholder, whether it be an individual or organisation, will have a unique set of assets, and it is important that stakeholders recognise their assets. By doing so, the group can understand the assets they have, and identify what additional assets they might need, for their co-production journey. Sometimes people may need help to recognise their assets. It is common for people, particularly if they have not had a professional role, to undervalue what they have to offer in a co-production journey.

The different types of assets are explained below, with examples from the research:

- ✔ **Knowledge** – this is any information that will support the co-production journey, including specialist knowledge about the problem the co-production process is seeking to address, or information about systems or evidence that can support decision-making. For example, in the research, the Campaign to End Loneliness could contribute previous research and specialist knowledge about loneliness.

- ✔ **Skills** – this includes any skill that can support the co-production journey, including meeting facilitation, being a good communicator, writing reports or problem solving. For example, in the research, some community members had excellent communication skills and were able to encourage older people to join the co-production journey.

- ✔ **Experience** – this includes any wisdom gained from experience that will support the co-production journey, including experience in a professional role or lived experience of an illness or difficult life challenge. For example, in the research, older people who were lonely and isolated used their experiences to shape services, and professionals with experience of budgets and accounting managed the funding.

- ✔ **Resources** – this includes any resources, such as money, paid staff time and community spaces, that can support the co-production journey. For example, in the research, some organisations could host meeting spaces by sharing their community spaces.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 5: Mapping your assets**

# What supports stakeholders to become involved in co-production?

> "That challenge of how do you explain to people in co-production settings that there are wider structures and systems beyond the room that they're in that mean that we can't do everything we want and that there is a limit to our ability to change things. You know, as [our] funder, the government tells us what to do and we have to do what the government says. That doesn't mean we don't want to do things that might conflict with that, it means we can't."

Co-production is more successful when a wide range of stakeholders are involved. However, involving a wide range of relevant stakeholders may require some preparation and planning to support them to be included. This section considers the different needs of organisations and individuals.

## Organisations

Organisations, such as local councils and third sector services, funders or government agencies, are often very keen to become involved in co-production. They are usually well placed to participate in co-production activities as they have systems in place to attend meetings, and the skills required to contribute to decision-making. However, attention should be given to ensure that all organisations can be involved in the appropriate ways for them. For example, organisations with fewer resources may not be able to attend every meeting, or may not be able to host a meeting or co-production activity. Innovative ways to include the voices of all interested organisations, such as asking for contributions by email, Zoom, video, or pictorially could be considered.

# Individuals

Individuals may need some additional support to help them become involved in co-production, particularly to ensure diverse representation of the community. Our research shows that when opportunities for people to participate in co-production are advertised, those who respond tend to be highly skilled professionals or retirees who are very comfortable joining a steering group. The opportunity appeals to them as it looks similar to their working environment, often in health, social care or academia, and they feel comfortable taking part. They often enjoy being involved and are engaged in multiple projects across the same organisation, meaning their voices are heard on several forums. Their involvement and skills are valued, but they may not always be representative of the broader population, for example of older people in the area.

Groups who have previously been less likely to be involved in co-production are those who are also vulnerable to wider social inequalities. Under-represented groups may include people on lower incomes, carers, people who are not online, those living with disabilities, mental or physical health issues, people from diverse cultural backgrounds or from LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender) communities.

Our research showed that older people who are lonely and isolated may not participate in co-production for the same underlying reasons they became lonely. For example, if a person does not feel confident meeting new people, they may be less likely to want to participate in a meeting about service design.

The research found there are some successful strategies for involving a more diverse range of stakeholders, which include:

- Developing a co-produced strategy for recruiting a diverse range of community members to become involved. If there are groups missing from the co-production journey, target recruitment at these specific groups. One strategy is to link into individuals' existing connections in their neighbourhood and communities. In our research, older people who were already involved in co-production helped to grow a network of more diverse representation.

- Begin any co-production process by finding out what strengths and skills people have, but also ask people what they might need to help them to take part. People may struggle to participate in co-production if they face barriers such as poor physical or mental health, mobility issues, or caring responsibilities. It is important to work with people to overcome these barriers and provide flexible and creative options so they can take part. This will help create a person-centred package of support to help individuals participate.

- Think about the language used to recruit and involve people on the co-production journey. Using 'professional' language, acronyms or buzzwords can put people off becoming involved if they think the activity is not for them. Be careful to avoid words with negative cultural connotations, or words that create stigma, or might offend stakeholders, or put them off. People with lived experience or community knowledge can help develop inclusive and engaging ways to talk about difficult issues. Co-production activity should aim to use inclusive language that empowers and supports people to feel comfortable and engage with the process.

✓ People may feel excluded because they have never been involved in a similar activity. For example, where there is a formal business process and a chairperson or where meetings are held online over Zoom. Offer time, support and training to empower people to feel comfortable and confident to participate. This might involve explaining what organisations can and cannot do, the parameters the service works within, what certain words might mean and how meetings work. Alternatively, it might involve offering different types of activities where people feel more comfortable.

✓ Use a wide range of creative communication approaches. Co-production often takes place within forums or steering groups, but not all stakeholders will be comfortable with these. Other ways of involving people include informal meetings, art-based activities and walk and talk groups.

✓ Some people don't want to commit to a formal co-production process. Informal chats, questionnaires, telephone calls, Zoom chats, comments boxes and monitoring attendance to assess how much activities are enjoyed are all ways to gather feedback. All are good methods to use when co-producing with groups and individuals.

There are several strategies here that will help involve a wide range of people in co-production. It is important to develop a varied and inclusive environment to represent diverse voices, otherwise co-production replicates, rather than challenges, these processes of exclusion.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 6: Developing ground rules for inclusive language**

# What resources do stakeholders need?

One of the most significant challenges for supporting and maintaining stakeholder involvement is resources. Co-production requires resources to support it. One of the central tasks for stakeholders is to map and understand the resources available to them, and know how to access them when they are needed. Some of the resources co-production may require are:

- Access to paid staff to support co-production.
- Access to volunteers to support paid staff.
- Resources for advertising and marketing to involve people in co-production.
- Support, training and development opportunities for stakeholders.
- Access to suitable venues that are accessible to all stakeholders.
- Availability of suitable transport, particularly for people with disabilities or mobility issues.
- Funds for expenses so that unpaid stakeholders are not out of pocket for participation; these can include costs of transport, refreshments and lunch.
- Community engagement activities and opportunities.

# What works to keep stakeholders interested?

Once stakeholders are engaged, it is important to maintain their interest in co-production. In the beginning, people may be excited by a new project or challenge, but this can quickly subside. Groups who are co-producing should think about how to sustain interest from all their stakeholders.

We have identified factors which help to keep stakeholders involved and help ensure success of the co-production process:

- Develop good relationships between stakeholders. Encourage team building, provide opportunities for stakeholders to get to know each other and work together.

- Encourage a comfortable environment where people are happy to take part.

- Emphasise the importance of attending and contributing regularly where possible. Commitment from all stakeholders is important, although this needs to be carefully balanced with individual capabilities and time commitments.

- Co-production works better when everyone has a shared motivation to do the work and where everyone is convinced by the value of the work.

- A designated facilitator can help to drive the work forward. This can be a volunteer or a paid member of staff. It is often their enthusiasm and motivation which supports the success of co-production. Importantly, this person doesn't make decisions or hold power over the other stakeholders; they act as the 'glue' which keeps the stakeholders together.

- Co-production often works more effectively when there is an active project or a problem to solve. In these contexts, challenges appear to bring clarity to roles and responsibilities and motivate stakeholder involvement. If the group is just 'ticking along' this can be a time when many lose interest. It may be worth considering how to build capacity within the co-producing group, ready for the next phase of work, or the next challenge to be addressed.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 7: Identifying what stakeholders need to be included**

# 4. Power and influence in co-production

Co-production involves a group of stakeholders coming together to make shared decisions. As we have seen, stakeholders are a diverse group of individuals and organisations. Consequently they may have a diverse range of values and motivations. A co-production approach values everyone's opinions and contribution equally. But what happens if stakeholders disagree? If one stakeholder holds more power over the decision than another, they may unintentionally unfairly influence the decision so that what they want happens. To avoid one stakeholder having more influence than another in this way, it is important to explore power throughout the co-production journey.

Uncovering power and influence can be a challenge in co-production as stakeholders might not be aware of the influential position they hold. Sometimes individuals, or paid representatives from organisations, are very confident and assertive. They might regularly contribute the most to meetings and so their opinion is disproportionally heard.

Sometimes, in specific circumstances, power can be unbalanced. An example of this could be when funders of the work, or project, have particular requirements which must be fulfilled by a project or service. Here, the co-producing group needs to take into account the limitations of their influence and recognise the parameters they need to work within. For example, the National Lottery Community Fund required Time to Shine to take part in a national evaluation to help understand the impact of the programme. All stakeholders had to work within these parameters even if some stakeholders disagreed.

Sometimes organisations say they want to share decision-making with service users, but in practice, it can be difficult to let go of power. Co-production may be a new approach for organisations, and they may have to unlearn their traditional ways of working, which can take time. It can be difficult for professionals and organisations to share the power they hold, for understandable reasons. They may feel personally responsible for a project's success and they may be responsible for large sums of money. Their organisation may be accountable to other more powerful organisations and be dependent on them for further funding, contracts or professional registration.

Genuine co-production involves real culture change. Those who are engaged in the process will need to reflect on and discuss the power and influence they hold, and be willing to share power and commit to equal decision-making. As we discussed earlier, sometimes co-production means working in a different way and taking risks to find out what works.

# Who might hold power and influence?

> I've kind of worked my way around the commissioning cycle to try and understand how services fit together and where the power lies within systems and why the power doesn't lie with the individual people when it's their lives.

There are lots of different, and often invisible ways, that stakeholders can hold power and influence. Here are some examples:

- An assertive and confident individual, such as a service user who has held a senior management position, may talk more than others at meetings.

- A large organisation that has lots of networks and resources may take the final say on decisions.

- The managers of the organisation that funds the service.

- A group of community members who have lots of experience working together may use their bond to outnumber others.

- An individual who is in an influential management position may be good at persuading others to their viewpoint.

"When people are there in a paid capacity and other people aren't, there is a little bit of a power dynamic"

"There are certain people in the group with vast amounts of experience and confidence. It can be hard for the person sitting next to them, that might not have the same confidence, or experience, to realise that they have an equal voice"

"My belief is that who holds the money tends to have the power. If older people hold the money then maybe the power transfers through"

## How do we share power and influence for co-production?

**Shared decision-making**

All stakeholders need to have an equal say in decisions, including where professionals usually hold power. A good starting place to begin to share power is self-reflection on the power and influence that individuals or groups hold. Organisations can then map how they make critical decisions and who makes them, and design an inclusive process to ensure all stakeholders have a say in these decisions.

One way to do this is through regular forum meetings. Other ways include voting systems, feedback questionnaires or annual general meetings. In our research, older people who had experienced isolation and loneliness contributed to decision-making in a series of forums, including general steering groups and more specialist sub-committees. Forums were carefully designed to make sure they supported all stakeholders to feel included and actively encouraged their contributions. Care and attention was paid to ensure no one stakeholder held undue power, whether that be an assertive individual or an influential organisation.

When working towards shared decision-making, it is important to pay attention to creating opportunities for stakeholders to have real influence. The 'ladder of participation' is a useful visual tool. It helps stakeholders understand different types of participation in decision-making. At the bottom of the rung is coercing or educating, which is telling people what to do, or what you want to happen. In the middle is informing, consulting or engaging, which is sharing or asking for opinions. Co-production is different – it aims to make decisions in partnership. Co-production and co-design sit on the top rung of the ladder and it is here that power and influence are shared.



*Diagram taken from Independent Age*

"I think when you're working with older people you've got to be mindful of people's physical health and family health and grandparent duties and so maybe power is the wrong word, but as a worker you can't just do what you want to do and involve people when you're ready to do because you've got to work with the older people."

Ultimately, sharing power and influence equally amongst stakeholders involves thinking about how all stakeholders can influence every stage of the co-production cycle, from commissioning, to overseeing delivery, to evaluation. If co-production takes place at every stage of the cycle, significant culture change can emerge.

One barrier to sharing power and influence is that paid staff usually do most of the work for co-production because they are paid for their time. Sometimes paid staff feel that it is exploitative to ask unpaid stakeholders, such as volunteers or service users, to take on tasks that they might usually be paid for. However, often people interested in co-production are happy to give their time. They are motivated by a range of reasons including wanting to contribute positively to the community, learn new skills, meet new people, have new experiences and share their knowledge, skills and experience to bring about meaningful change. As long as the time commitment is reasonable, and they are supported, the relationship can be mutually beneficial, or reciprocal, rather than exploitative. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to take responsibility for some appropriate and reasonable tasks can help with sharing power and influence.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 8: Examining power in co-production**

# 5.  Risks and challenges for co-production

The road of co-production does not always run smoothly. Culture change takes time and can be difficult to achieve. However, co-production is an excellent way to ensure that a project or service meets the needs of the people involved. It ensures that provision is the best that it can be. The journey may be hard at times but the results are worth it.

Stakeholders on a co-production journey should try to be mindful of the potential for things to go wrong, and to think about what they can do to minimise or avoid these risks where possible. Our research identified some potential risks and challenges for different stakeholders.

**Risks and challenges for service users, community members and volunteers:**

- When co-producing with volunteers, be mindful of fluctuations in people's abilities to take part based on individual situations, including health issues and caring responsibilities. Our research found that older people who are isolated and lonely face many challenges that can sometimes affect their ability to take part.

- Service users and community members may disengage if co-production is not a mutually beneficial process. For example, if they do not feel there are genuine opportunities for influencing decisions or enjoying meaningful activities.

- Co-production may contribute to people feeling excluded if care and attention is not paid to supporting people to engage, using a language everyone understands and challenging stereotypes, stigma and discrimination.

- It can be frustrating to work within parameters they may not agree with, or don't fully understand.

# Risks and challenges for organisations:

- Employees participating in co-production may leave their role, taking their experience with them. When this happens, the co-producing group needs to consider how it will manage the changing dynamics and the potential loss of knowledge and experience.

- Co-production is a new way of working that often requires more resources initially. Organisations may struggle to provide sufficient staff time to support the process.

- There is a risk to an organisation's reputation if co-production isn't attempted genuinely or if power dynamics amongst stakeholders become unbalanced.

- There is sometimes a risk that employees using co-production will need emotional support whilst learning to work in a different way.

- There may be risks for the organisation if using a 'test and learn' approach. Organisations have to be comfortable with failure if the co-production approach encounters problems or doesn't work first time.

The following practical activity links to this section of the training:

**Activity 9: Thinking about warning signs**

# 6. Endings

Co-production in the context of services tends to be long term rather than time limited. The time cycle of co-production described in the introduction to this toolkit is not always clearly defined. Even so, there are times when the group works more closely together around pieces of work or emerging problems, and 'down time'. Groups should use the times when work is less well defined to take stock of their progress.

**After each phase of co-production activity should reflect on:**

✓ The experience of the journey of co-production, with honest conversations about it from the perspective of each stakeholder.

✓ What skills, knowledge, experience or strengths stakeholders gained from their part in the journey.

✓ What the group has achieved.

✓ An exploration of what has worked well.

✓ An exploration of what hasn't worked or has been problematic or challenging.

✓ Reflection on the learning and how it can be applied in the next cycle of co-production.

✓ The skills, knowledge, experience or strengths the group might benefit from and how the group will make those connections.

The following practical activities link to this section of the training:

**Activity 10: Reflecting on what we have learnt about co-production**

**Activity 11: Evaluating the impact of the training/toolkit**

**Activity 12: Planning and sharing your co-production journey**

## Next steps

The aim of this toolkit has been to share the research findings from the thesis and to put these findings into a context which makes sense for practice. The activities were developed to mirror and illustrate the research findings and it is hoped that all partners will find this useful on their co-production journey.

*Photo credits: Unsplash, Paula Solloway, Peter Howarth, Yorkshire Dance.*