CO-CREATION

Exploring openly, honestly, with understanding, love and compassion the challenges and opportunities of cocreation, coproduction and service user involvement.

www.cocreation.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2017 a small group of passionate people were brought together by The National Lottery Community Fund because of our diverse and deep personal experience in cocreation, coproduction and service user involvement.

We were asked to grapple with the challenges and opportunities of these concepts distiling what makes them really work and what doesn't. The aim was to use this to help anyone – from commissioners to service providers to service users to those with lived experience of tough times – to make them work.

What actually happened was a bit different and we think much more.

The core group has changed and grown since, with many more sharing insights and feedback along the way. We are not an organisation, perhaps more of a loose network of peers.

We were given free rein to determine how to approach the project and identify how we could best support the overall aims rather than reinvent what was already out there.

QUITE QUICKLY WE AGREED THAT:

- a well-designed process of cocreation can be transformative in creating support that really works for people going through tough times, but...

- much of what passes as cocreation, coproduction or service user involvement is not very useful or worse actively damaging.

It can too often become one-way consultation, not recognising imbalances in power and becoming a process without much humanity or kindness. It can be implemented at the wrong times for the wrong problems, without much thought as to the why or the how. Or it can simply be done in order to tick some boxes and feel relevant without much careful consideration. Very often this not only means we don't design support in the most effective way possible, wasting time and money, it can make problems worse by alienating and silencing the very voices that are least often heard.

Over the course of the project we came to realise that you can't define in a single process what makes cocreation effective or not, or indeed define exactly what cocreation is (or is not) in precise terms. After all, every context is different and every set of relationships unique.

What seemed to us to underpin effective cocreation was the principles which might guide how you approach it, underpinned by a proper understanding and engagement with its challenges - rather than a definitive guidebook or toolkit that can be 'implemented;, 'operationalised', 'cascaded' or 'embedded'. What it seemed to us most cocreation lacked was a deeper understanding of each other, the value in all our experiences and the quality of the relationships between each other.

OUR MAIN CONCLUSION WAS THAT WE NEEDED TO CREATE MORE SAFE SPACES FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO COCREATE TO BE VULNERABLE, OPEN, DEEPLY HONEST, TO EXPRESS FRUSTRATIONS AND TO CELEBRATE SUCCESSES. SPACES WHERE WE COULD ESTABLISH HEALTHY, SAFE RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE OUTSET FRAMED IN **UNDERSTANDING, LOVE AND COMPASSION.** SPACES TO OPENLY EXPRESS OUR FEARS OF WHERE IT ALL MAY LEAD AND TO FIND SOLUTIONS IN ONE ANOTHER.

We came to realise that these safe places are the very foundation of effective cocreation – a focus on the "co" before you get to the "creation".

All of this has led us to do the following:

1. **Definition:** Try to create a broad definition of what cocreation is – not precisely but in spirit, as a way to talk about what it isn't as much as what it is.

2. **Principles & challenges:** Identifying a set of principles for effective cocreation, alongside a set of challenges that need to be acknowledged and carefully considered to make it work. Using these principles and challenges not to tell people what to do, but to highlight important questions to reflect on. Questions that are important at the start and throughout any cocreation process, and that help people reflect on what is best in their own context.

3. **Unedited stories:** Sharing, unedited the deeply honest voices of some of those leading cocreation across the UK, organising those voices by these common principles and challenges. Using these stories to help people reading them to grapple with different viewpoints both good and bad, and often contradictory depending on their perspective and particular context or experience.

4. **Safe spaces:** Piloting "Cocreation Anonymous" sessions across the country – mixed groups of 15-20 people from commissioners, service providers, those that have used services and those with lived experience of tough times who came together to understand each other, support each other and to collectively deconstruct and then reconstruct what cocreation really means, why they want to do it and how.

All of this is shared on our website, **www.cocreation.org.uk** (this is in constant development).

We've got plenty of ideas of where this might go next. But at the moment we don't have a team or confirmed funding to take this forward, nor have we sought to put a team in place or seek funding yet. **The project has had kind support for facilitation, travel, room bookings and to build a website from The National Lottery Community Fund. However, much of the work has been done on a voluntary basis to date, and we're keen to keep the project small, simple and nimble.**

We want to share what we've been doing first, to listen and to learn from others – so please log in, explore and give us your honest feedback we'd love to hear from you. Please tell us what you might like to see more or less of. We'd also love to hear from you if have your own stories to share, or would be interested in forming or joining a local cocreation anonymous group with our help.

WHAT IS COCREATION AND WHY DO IT?

AND WHY HAVEN'T WE CALLED IN COPRODUCTION OR SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT?

We settled on cocreation being what people from different backgrounds and from different domains do when they want to make something together.

Essentially about finding the best people to solve problems, finding a way of agreeing what needs to be done, finding who is best to do each bit, and then coming out at the end with something that couldn't have existed in the way it does without having that particular mix of people, skills, knowledge and wisdom.

- We believe this is a creative and unpredictable process, not a production line.

- We believe this is not just about distinct 'services' or 'service users' but about everyone and their whole lives.

- We believe that done well and at the right times cocreation leads to stronger, more rounded, more effective support for people going through tough times.

- We also believe that done badly and at the wrong times it can have exactly the opposite effect.

THE WORLD WE WANT TO SEE IS WHERE...

real effort must be made to reduce or remove any barriers for people taking a role

we can't force people to be involved. They have to both want and feel able to take part

"ANYONE WHO IS WILLING HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE MEANINGFULLY INVOLVED IN THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE GOING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES IF IT IMPACTS AND MATTERS TO THEM"

this is not about one-way consultation but a creative process in which everyone supports and values each other in both design, delivery and decisions made

we need genuine dialogue that results in action

it can't just be about one specific service or intervention, but a wider view of support people might need in their lives

everyone has had tough times: we don't want to exclude people because they haven't had a 'tough enough' time and want to avoid defining people by their needs not their skills and knowledge

a cocreation process could include not just those going through tough times, but their friends and families; support agencies, funders and commissioners; foundations; government – a rounded view with experience equally valued and shared is what makes it work

AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR PRINCIPLES AND CHALLENGES

To achieve our vision we need people to keep bringing together **equal**, inclusive alliances of willing people from all walks of life to experiment, learn and shape support for those going through tough times.

Yet shares of voice, power and influence are far from equal – and what's more these power imbalances are multiple: positional, social, contextual, financial, psychological and spiritual.

We have attempted to summarise some of the root causes of this imbalance in a series of challenges:

ENERGY & WILL

COMMUNICATION

STRUCTURES, RULES & PROCESSES

TIME, MONEY & REWARD

SKILLS, CIRCUMSTANCES & EXPERIENCE

FEAR & RISK

And have attempted, also to summarise some of the core values or principles which can help to address these challenges when considered carefully:

GIVE EACH OTHER RESPECT

GET THE RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

MAKE SPACE TO REFLECT, LEARN & ADAPT

TAKE POSITIVE & REALISTIC ACTION

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELVES & HONEST WITH OTHERS

BUILD A TEAM TO DO THE JOB

Over the following pages we introduce these principles and challenges in more detail, along with a series of questions linked to each of them. They are designed to get you thinking and reflecting on your own approach to cocreation.

On our website you can also get links to the unedited, deeply honest voices of some of those leading cocreation across the UK, organised by these common principles and challenges. These give more of as flavour of what people are actually experiencing in their own words.

None of this content is presented as a definitive guide of how to do effective cocreation. We don't believe in a rigid set of guidelines because every situation is different and cocreation isn't always the answer.

Also, we are very prepared to adapt and change these based on feedback – so do let us know through our website and we can continue to update the content further.

MAKE SPACE TO REFLECT, LEARN AND ADAPT

Co-creation is a creative process. Setting a pre-defined process or making the final goal one that can't change much doesn't allow for a lot of creativity. That doesn't mean not agreeing a process or goal at all. But it does mean that you should feel free to adapt as you go – which you can only do well if you create the space and the process for people to genuinely step back, reflect on what's happening, learn from it and apply that learning. So, stay open minded and be prepared to actually change what you do based on the experience and views of others, actively encourage open debate and challenge, and support people to try out new things whilst accepting that those things won't always go well.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you ensuring you don't close down the opportunities to reflect, learn and adapt by setting too precise a goal or too tight a timetable?

- How do you ensure that failure is accepted as an opportunity to learn rather than an opportunity to apportion blame?

- How do you ensure that what you learn is actually captured and fed back into what you are doing consistently?

- How do you ensure everyone is comfortable that the goal and process at the start might change over time and not look the same, or even involve the same people at the end?

TAKE POSITIVE AND REALISTIC ACTION

It's at best frustrating and at worst disempowering if nothing is moving forward and if there is no clear purpose. There is a need to keep the 'spark' alive with others and make people feel that this is all worth their time. Taking action isn't necessarily about sharing tasks around but making sure the right people are doing the right tasks, and the team as a whole are happy with that.

So be decisive and agree at every step what the next step is, who is going to do it and by when. Keep coming back to your purpose and individual motivations. That doesn't mean you need to boil the ocean with big to do lists, or even decide exactly what the final outcome is going to be of the whole process (especially to begin with). Small steps that move things forward are often enough. Sometimes radical realism about what is possible is needed.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you developing your sense of purpose and values and keeping that conversation alive over time?

- How are you ensuring the goals you set and actions you agree are completely realistic?

- How are you deciding who the best person to take each action is?

- How are you making sure that action is followed through and feedback on progress is shared?

- How do you get comfortable with the fact that not everyone can be involved at every step of the process in order to get things done?

GIVE EACH OTHER RESPECT

Everyone should be given respect for who they are and the knowledge and wisdom they bring - no-one can ever hold the whole truth. People shouldn't have to pretend to be someone they are not and shouldn't fear being judged by predefined labels. That's easy to say and hard to do – it carries with it some personal responsibility to follow through on what you say you're going to do and be honest if it isn't going the way you planned. It also needs the team to find ways to encourage that openness – and to support each other when things get in the way.

But giving each other respect is not the same as agreeing with everyone all the time, staying silent to keep everyone happy, or letting people off the hook. Not sharing your honest thoughts on a subject where you know you have insight to offer is dangerous and in the end the opposite of respectful.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you making sure you take the time not just to listen to every voice but really hear and understand where others in your team are coming from rather than allowing them to fit into predefined labels?

- How are you ensuring that as a team you are prepared to adapt and not do things on your own terms, but trust each other to let go of individual power and control?

- How do you ensure that in this process you don' just agree with the majority in a team, but respect those that have specific wisdom, knowledge or expertise in an area?

- How are you holding each other to account in a spirit of kindness and mutual support?

- How do you ensure that you celebrate each other's strengths and contributions, whilst sharing successes rather than claiming them for yourself?

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELVES & HONEST WITH OTHERS

Giving and taking really honest feedback is always difficult. When you don't know each other well to start with, when you have especially diverse experience, and when there are uneven power dynamics between you this is even harder to do. Without it, though co-creation will never reach its potential. So, try to create an environment of (respectful) honesty from the very start by sharing your vulnerabilities and contradictions (especially if you are in a position of relative power), meet in places and in ways that help people feel comfortable, be clear about everyone's motivations for being involved, be really clear about who owns or can use whatever is created – and allow room not just for the rational but also the emotional response to things that emerge.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you inviting people to feel comfortable in expressing their vulnerability and emotions, including the physical spaces you use and ways you interact together?

- How are you ensuring that everyone's voice can be heard, is listened to and is reflected in what happens next?

- How are you ensuring everyone is clear with each other about who owns the ultimate output of what you are creating – and what their personal motivations for involvement in the process are?

BUILD A TEAM TO DO THE JOB

At work we all talk about how to build a team that can work together. It's pretty rare for people to think carefully about each person involved in co-creation – and how well their different skills, experiences and personalities fit together. It's even rarer that those teams are invested in properly, and rarer still is the recognition that sometimes the team leading co-creation need to get help rather than do all the creating themselves. So, work together to build a team that is designed to help solve the challenge you have set yourself and bring the rounded perspectives and skills you need to do that well. Keep looking at the strengths of the team as things move along and invest in that team over time. Don't be afraid be get outside help if you need the expertise, as along you your team remains in the lead overall.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you ensuring you are building a rounded team with sufficient diversity of skills and experiences to contribute to the creative process?

- How do you find a way to understand what everyone on the team has to offer?

- How are you investing in team members and building on their strengths not their weaknesses?

- How are you addressing any gaps in your team, including bringing in and managing any external support or expertise whilst maintaining leadership?

GET THE RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

Co-creation has two sides to it – the 'co' and the 'creation'. The 'co' is about building a sense of togetherness. All the way through, and especially at the start, you're going to need to allow relationships, trust and understanding to grow between everyone involved before you get too far into the action or 'creation' otherwise things can quickly unravel. At the same time, you will need to get clearer as you go on about who is doing what and where decisions are being made – this is all about relationships, ultimately too rather than just a set of rules and structures alone. So, don't get too fixated by the task without paying equal if not more attention to the relationships first (at every step of the way) – and make sure you are building process and structures that support the relationships you want to have.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How do you ensure you are investing enough time and resource in building relationships, trust and understanding over time?

- How have you agreed the nature of the relationships your team want to have with each other – and with others who are supporting or connected to your team?

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a constant challenge. Everyone uses language differently because they have different frames of reference and have had different experiences. The use of jargon for example can be very isolating and lead to misunderstanding, but it can also be necessary as a way to create common ground and understanding. There are also assumed ways of meeting, behaving and communicating to get things done that just don't work for everyone – not everyone understands the unspoken rules e.g. committee meetings, consultation sessions, feedback surveys – nor does everyone like to engage in the same way e.g. email versus social media, written reports versus video.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- What steps have you taken to understand how people most like and are able to receive and share information?

- What changes are you making to your expectations of each other and methods of communication in response to that understanding?

- How are you making sure that any jargon used is well defined and commonly understood by everyone – not just at the start but also when new people join in?

ENERGY & WILL

People that are having tough times often have lower capacity and energy to engage because of what they have been (and are) going through, and because they are likely to have been let down so many times before. Trying to force the issue and get people to engage on your terms is unlikely to work and leads largely to frustration on all sides. That doesn't mean they haven't got a huge amount to offer, or that you can get anywhere meaningful without them.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- What steps have you taken to understand how people most like and are able to engage and participate?

- What changes are you making to your expectations of each other and methods of engagement in response to that understanding?

- How are you going to hold each other to account for what you've agreed, whilst at the same time being supportive of individual circumstances?

- How are you noticing when people disengage and drop out of the team – and how is that changing your approach for the future?

SKILLS, CIRCUMSTANCES & EXPERIENCE

There is inequality in skills, knowledge, training, experience and personal circumstances. That doesn't always mean that those have the toughest times have more challenges than others – in fact many have a great deal more experience and understanding of what's needed than those in positions of power for example. Neither is it just about those in need vs those in power – there are age, gender, class, place, race, caring responsibilities and many other imbalances as well.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you continually learning what people need to take part effectively and supporting each other to remove barriers or develop their understanding, skills and experiences?

- How are you making sure that this isn't focused only on those perceived to be the least skilled, but recognising that everyone needs some support to gain a common understanding and set of skills or tools to work together effectively?

TIME, MONEY & REWARD

Those with power, control and resources often don't get that they can afford to invest time and money without an obvious or certain outcome. Those most in need and in many cases best placed to engage, often can't. So just asking people to come, making an event free and paying travel expenses is not even enough sometimes. It can also be difficult when the different levels of reward aren't balanced or clear, or where some members don't trust and respect others enough to give them a real sense of ownership and influence.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How have you ensured you have understood each person's motivations for involvement and any financial or time barriers they might face – and then responded to meet these as best you can?

- How have you ensured levels of time, money and reward are transparent across the team and agreed?

- How have you ensured the team feel respected and trusted enough to take real ownership of the process together?

FEAR & RISK

There is real fear and anxiety about failure and inadequacy. Anything that involves working with new people or working in new ways can bring with it anxieties and worries too. This can be made worse by cold, sterile or hostile environments in which many people meet to discuss things, or where traditional services are delivered. For those with lived experiences of tough times, being asked to confront those again publicly can be traumatic - reinforcing the idea that people are defined by their problems, not their strengths. We all carry different fears and have different understanding of personal risk. What might seem small to one person may well not be to another.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How are you seeking to understand different levels of personal risk that people carry without inadvertently contributing to someone's personal fears?

- How are you responding to what you know and ensuring the environments you meet in and the ways you interact allow people to feel comfortable?

- How are you ensuring people don't become defined by their negative experiences, but as rounded individuals?

- How are you ensuring successes are celebrated as a team, not attributed to specific individuals?

STRUCTURES, RULES & PROCESSES

Like it or not our legal, political and funding system does not support the creation of a common and equal voice. Services are commissioned in silos, decisions are taken by people really far away from those people they are trying to support, rigid rules make it hard for services to respond to the real complex lives of individuals in a human way, things change quickly just as momentum is being built for seemingly arbitrary reasons, and the law often prevents those that have committed a crime, or experienced mental health challenges for example from having positions of trust and responsibility.

Funding and commissioned services is also provided in a very rigid way, one that assumes putting funding to this thing or paying for a specific service will deliver a predictable outcome. People's lives are much messier than that. There is little trust from funders and commissioners that those on the ground know what's needed and what is best – and as a result little flexibility to experiment, to learn by doing, to change approaches in response to what people might really need as their circumstances change.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

- How have you considered and discussed the structures, rules and processes that might get in the way of the creative process?

- How have you adapted what you do to try and reduce those barriers, particularly in areas where as a team you might have some influence e.g. a funder relationship?

- How are you ensuring that the structures you as a team put in place support what you are doing and don't inadvertently act against your goals?

CO–
CREATION

www.cocreation.org.uk

Supported by:

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