Co-production in the time of Corona: co-creating a new normal with the new normal being co-creation

In her latest blog our involvement coordinator, Helen Gavaghan, explores co-production during this crisis period and how it can help shape the 'new normal.'

Multiplying disadvantage

Many of those already experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage in its various forms have been hit hard by Covid 19 and the lockdown. The nature of disadvantage is that it can become compounded very quickly, with disadvantage often inevitably leading to greater disadvantage. Part of that relates to the value that society places on people in certain circumstances. Many rough sleepers, women experiencing domestic violence and those in prison for example have had their lives significantly affected and made much harder in recent weeks.

While the "everybody in" approach has supported many people facing multiple disadvantage, the complexity of peoples' lives and their rights and needs have also been lost in certain places.

The response to Coronavirus has seen many of the preconceptions and institutionalised behaviours the health and social care sector has become accustomed to accepting, and even perpetuating, overturned. Policies and solutions have been on the table recently that have never been considered legitimate, practical or affordable before.

At the same time, some of the most severely top down, 'command and control' decision making has been taking place and perhaps unexpectedly, many breathed a sigh of relief when it happened.

New sections of society are finding themselves dependent on the state. Some people have become homeless and thinking hard for the first time about what people experiencing hard times should be entitled to.

The glaring inequalities that harm so many, have always been accepted by enough of the population to continue to exist. These inequalities have finally had an impact on the *entire* population in a way that was not predicted. Homelessness, poverty and health inequalities that some people experience directly, now have the potential to impact everyone due to Covid because of their impact on the spread of the virus.

Our interdependence as people can no longer be doubted, and hopefully will not be ignored going forward.

- ### The people lead the way

Interestingly perhaps in terms of co-production, it could be said that the public have lead the government on some of the key policies in this period such as instigating the lockdown as well as more recently, wearing masks. Many have taken information that was widely available, as well as 'common sense' perhaps, and made their own minds up.

When it comes to our lives and our loved ones it turns out that many of us are indeed willing to second guess those in power.

Communities, professionals and people with lived experience have also taken it upon themselves to form Covid related 'mutual aid' groups to influence issues like prison release and offer practical help such as delivering food and medicine.

In terms of people experiencing multiple disadvantage there has been a sense of urgency from the sectors supporting this group in responding to the unique challenges presented by the virus to try to keep people safe. Everyone has been in crisis mode to make things happen in a time frame that would have seemed impossible a few weeks ago, and there is no doubt that some incredible things have been achieved.

- ### Benefits and Drawbacks

There are accounts of support workers finally being given the autonomy to do what those they work with believe is needed without many of the constraints of the system that have prevented such progress before.

Early indicators are that such approaches are having a very positive impact on some people's lives and that individuals are finally 'accepting help'. Or perhaps they are finally having their needs and desires responded to appropriately.

There are less positive reports also, with individuals being spoken of as cohort categories and problems that need solving very quickly. Unfortunately, this has resulted in concepts that were always a little problematic, such as 'engagement', being used in a way that now clearly just means coercion.

- Transition Planning

As thinking moves beyond crisis response to transitional planning, there is a strong argument for ensuring people facing multiple disadvantage are able to shape the decisions that impact them to make the most of some of the extraordinary progress that has been made, as well as guard against some of the less desirable impacts of this period.

So for those who are beginning to take a breath and consider what the next few months and beyond may hold, I tentatively offer the following contribution to help answer to some of the fears, challenges & common blind spots around co-production, in the hope that I can bring something helpful to the table, for some contexts at least.

I make the following eight points in the spirit of humility, openness and collaboration in an attempt to model attributes that I myself would like to see more of in the future and I would love to know your thoughts on it.

1. More than ever, co-production should be a priority, not a 'nice to have'.

There is a considerable opportunity to re-build better as we go forward into a future that is both uncertain and yet contains more potential than it has for a long while.

- *Leverage*

Many of the constraining norms and presumptions about what is possible have been shaken off in recent weeks. There is leverage now to enable us to be bolder in our asks and expectations. There has also been considerable resource freed up in places for those impacted by the virus, although we do not know for how long this will be the case.

If we want to avoid repeating old system centric patterns and re-creating inadequate norms, we need to make sure that the people who are ultimately expected to benefit from any new vision are central to its creation and manifestation.

For those who question this statement, imagine having some of the most important decisions of your life entirely in someone else's hands. Maybe you don't ever get to see or speak to that person. That's how it is for so many people when trying to have their most basic needs met. '*Doing to*' can equal trauma, '*Doing with*' can be emancipatory. If we don't want to re-traumatise, we need to work *with* people.

- *Involving people in key decisions*

The government is committed to supporting people in the current temporary accommodation to move to more permanent accommodation. But getting this right will be challenging and people must be fully involved to make sure that this accommodation is appropriate and can contribute to them living fulfilling lives.

There are examples from the past where good intentions have not translated into appropriate action, not least the response to the tragic Grenfell tower fire, where initial attempts at discussions with residents drifted into decisions being made for them and accommodation purchased without their knowledge.

One former Grenfell resident is quoted as saying:

"I would rather they sat down with us, asked what we needed and then worked with us to find somewhere suitable"[1]

Assuming we are really up for trying to get things right -not an 'on paper' or 'boxes ticked' right, but right in a way that means we see many of society's ills eradicated or drastically reduced and if everyone really is, as far as is possible, to have an equal stake in and benefit from, all that life has to offer- then we cannot

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[1] https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/have-the-promises-made-after-grenfell-been-kept-61684

embark on accommodation decisions without ensuring that the individuals affected are at the heart of the process.

Getting it right has to mean doing it *together*.

2. Co-create the future and build co-creation into the future.

I use the word 'co-creation' here rather than co-production as I am trying to approach the future in the most hopeful and aspirational way possible.

- *Embedded throughout*

There are areas and services that have made admirable attempts to co-create aspects of their work pre-Covid. Unfortunately, in many the crisis has caused such work to grind to a halt or disintegrate entirely. Where this isn't the case, it appears to be because it was already embedded throughout existing structures, cultures and relationships.

By 'embedded' I mean that the relevant people have access to spaces and conversations and partake in decisions that are relevant to them or the people they work with throughout the life of a project. Such an approach means there should be few if any additional meetings or mechanisms for lived experience, because that would be separate to the work. If you are building new structures, cultures and behaviours then it is the perfect opportunity to ensure that they exist throughout organisations or pieces of work as far as possible.

There is always more than one way to approach things of course and specific contexts have to be considered. There is real value in people with lived experience having their own spaces if they wish. However, that is as well as, not *instead of* having a seat at every table.

- *Basingstoke*

Basingstoke (a MEAM Approach area) have worked alongside people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage from the inception and throughout all the aspects of their work. Participants, volunteers and workers with lived experience, as well as relevant operational staff and other voluntary sector groups in the area, have been welcome at strategic meetings, working groups, project development sessions, bid writing etc – as far as it is relevant to them.

This has meant that words like co-production or participation almost seem redundant as it is just how they do things and therefore how they have continued to do things in recent weeks. That is not to say that there aren't areas for improvement of course, but the challenges presented by the virus response has shown that robust and embedded approaches such as Basingstoke's are stronger than 'nice to have' or 'add-on' approaches seen in other places.

It is important to point out that a culture of acceptance and 'doing what is needed to make it work' through trust, respect and transparency has been critical in their ability to embrace this way of working.

3. Make sure it is a long-term collaborative journey.

If there was ever a future more uncertain and a time where the conclusions of short-term consultations could be rendered meaningless in a matter of days, it is now.

- *Beware of contracting co-production out*

If you are building co-production into your transition strategy or longer term planning, and thinking of getting in a consultant or other external body there are some questions you may want to ask.

Firstly, why are you doing it? If it is to bring in some expertise to support you on your journey of co-production so it can be as meaningful and positive an experience for all involved, and you don't feel such expertise is at hand within your existing partnership then it may not be a bad idea at all.

In thinking about who to bring in you may also want to consider whether they have any relationship to, or stake in the work or people involved? Are then expected to complete a time limited piece of data gathering for you to act on at some point in the future? If so, you may not be approaching this right for the current context.

You could find some of the information you have gathered is irrelevant as the context and environment change in a way that were not accounted for during initial conversations. Findings therefore may not cater to longer term changes. They may also materialise far too late to be useful if the 'goal posts' move suddenly and decisions need to be made before the contract has even been signed.

The practice of bringing in middle-people or conduits to separate the system from those subjected to it, to professionalise and formalise the information retrieved – can also mean that the nuanced truth, and how it is presented, can be generalised or watered down. It could be said that there is an ethical issue in having external agencies be paid a significant amount to contextualise and communicate any findings that have come from people experiencing the sharp end of the system directly. That is not to say it is never appropriate to partner up or even contract out, but ask, is it to support your organisation in working alongside people in the most meaningful and least harmful way? Is it to get the 'co-production box ticked by whoever makes it sound hassle free and affordable so that everyone else can get on with the 'real work'?

That's an extreme example but worth reflecting on as the system often ensures we have little choice but to do the most convenient thing.

Partnerships with organisations who exist purely to empower individuals with regards to their stake in society can be very successful too, if done as a support for the whole team - as has been evidenced in the National Lottery Community funded Fulfilling Lives projects.

Working in partnership and contracting out are two very different things.

- *Utilise existing relationships*

Where it isn't appropriate to harness external support, for example due to time constraints, you might actually have more resources than you think that are appropriate to the immediacy, dynamism and unpredictability of the current context.

That is relationships that you or others in the system may already have with those who are currently receiving support. Building upon these connections rather than creating new ones might be the best thing to do right now for multiple reasons including cost.

At MEAM, our evaluators Cordis Bright have been working closely together with peer researchers for two years as the MEAM peer evaluation team. They are well placed to speak to those, some of whom they already know, who are currently being supported during Covid in our MEAM Approach areas. This will help us understand what is happening to people on the ground and the impact that changes are having on their lives and wellbeing. This will enable us to influence decision makers about the necessary plans and polices to put in place.

The charity Groundswell has been quick to utilise the relationships that exist between their peer advocates and people experiencing homelessness to gather details of people's experiences of being homeless through Covid via telephone interviews and daily diaries.

As well as using their national platforms to communicate the key messages from these people, they have used the insights to create briefings and guidance for both staff and people receiving support.

Acting so quickly was possible because these relationships already existed pre-Covid.

Co-creation is about having all kinds of expertise present, including those with research and data analysis expertise to utilise as relevant.

- *What makes a relationship?*

So we are looking at a long term journey ideally, with people who are comfortable enough with each other to speak truthfully as well as respectfully disagree.

All the things that any relationship requires to be successful then, are required here too. Think of how much time you might spend with a work colleague before you can really work on things together comfortably, or a friend before you would share some of the most challenging aspects of your life. It's likely you won't be able to do this with everyone you work with but note that the *value* of such relationships is huge.

Building relationships can mean giving something of yourself. It's not just about smiling faces and a fun icebreaker. Everyone needs to be a little vulnerable and open about their own circumstances and context whether that is a limited budget, time constraints, perceptions of decision makers, a lack of understanding of organisational jargon or street slang and so on.

If you are afraid to disagree with people who have used services or to tell them why what they have in mind may not be feasible, you are not treating them with the respect they deserve and their participation is meaningless.

To feel comfortable doing this you need to take time to get to know each other and create a culture of open and respectful communication. You are going on a journey together. Nobody can promise where it will end and that is ok. People don't want empty promises.

- *What if they ask for the world?!!!*

One of the most common fears around co-production that I hear is: 'What if 'we' can't give 'them' what they ask for?'

I don't believe that this is the purpose of co-production or working together in any form. You are not a parent pretending to be Santa, praying that your child asks for something affordable this year.

If *everyone* communicates openly, then people know what they are working with and you can come up with the solution *together* and within the existing constraints. You may also want to use the strength of your numbers to try to change those constraints of course too!

As the Grenfell resident said – 'ask us what we need then *work with us'*.

They didn't say 'ask us what we need and then make it materialise regardless.'

Transparency and humility is key, for all involved, as it is in any long term relationship, you might say. They help to raise awareness of the different kinds of power at play and make it explicit rather than pretend it isn't there because everyone has shared their favourite TV programme in an icebreaker. Some people will have more power than others and possibly more pressure and more constraints. They may not share all of these but the more that is known the better people can work meaningfully together.

The long term bit also comes with the recognition that what you try may not work first time and may not work for everyone. If people can't come along with you, how can they learn from the mistakes themselves and help you think of something better?

4. Think systemically and embed co-production systemically.

- Utilise existing relationships

Often a temptation is to start from scratch with co-creation and create new additional frameworks that necessitate new roles and relationships.

People and organisations form flexible communities where relationships often continue to develop beyond their initial objectives. Viewing systems in this way

can help identify where meaningful connections already exist and can be built upon.

If we think of that idea of 'building in' and throughout as everyone's responsibility, instead of creating 'add-ons', then perhaps co-production might actually already be said to *be* built in, with a little creative tweaking here and a change of focus. For example, if a commissioner has a relationship with an operational staff member and that staff member has relationships with those they support, then there is potential there for those relationships to be utilised in co-developing the next service model. Rather than tasking someone to find some new 'people with lived experience' who would then have to get to all the other parties involved. For operational staff to be able to use their time and the relationships they have with people for this dual purpose they need the time in their day to do it of course.

There are good arguments of course for having dedicated participation roles to 'hold' the expertise and ensure co-production is happening across organisations. But it is important to understand that such roles are to support the whole organisation in working with people, not to allocate one specific person whose job it is to do it.

- *A square peg in a round hole*

Often some of the best attempts at co-production become challenging because they are 'square pegs in round holes', efforts that the system isn't set up for. Attempts to meaningfully co-create can quickly 'push up' against conflicting structures and processes such as decision makers revealing their constraints and pressures to those they are co-creating with. This isn't typical in most work cultures.

Where co-creation works best is where endeavours have been created together from the outset and with future togetherness in mind.

However, you may not have this luxury, although you may have more scope than usual if you are lucky. Whose permission do you need then to work differently? Do they know they are holding you back? When you come across a barrier to progress do you just accept it or do you think about it as your opportunity to influence for change? Thinking systemically can mean thinking about the wider context around you that helps or hinders and then using what power you have to influence that.

Thinking systemically also means trying things out in the spirit of learning and continually seeking improvement, rather than looking for a perfect final process that makes people feel comfortable.

Co-production requires a systems outlook more than most things as it is so dependent on people and circumstances. Those things are inherently unpredictable and messy, and that is ok.

5. Work with those who are receiving or needing support <u>now</u>, not just in the past.

There are many scenarios where it ends up being more feasible and relatively appropriate to work alongside people who aren't all in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances. I am all for this. I believe the experience of being at the mercy of strangers using processes that are rarely designed to suit your circumstances - is a trauma that doesn't leave you quickly, if its ever behind you at all.

I believe that such experiences of disempowerment can stay relevant for a long time and can unite people who have had very different kinds of struggles also.

However, Covid 19 is a very unique and evolving scenario that people are experiencing on top of already complex challenges. Where possible then, I think we should be striving to work with those that are experiencing the biggest challenges now, along with the people who are working with them, to ensure a nuanced and broad understanding of the varied impact of the virus and what can be done about it.

That is not to say that people who have been on the sharp end of systems in the past cannot be immensely valuable too in this, perhaps in part by helping you to connect with and hear from those currently facing challenges, as peers.

If ever there was a time to be in dialogue with those directly receiving your support and a time where relying on a static advisory group of people with historical lived experience may not fully meet the current challenges, it is probably now.

For the same reasons this is also the time to speak to those who are not receiving or 'accepting' help. The system can be biased towards helping certain demographics of people. Therefore, only speaking to those it is working for or

who are well represented won't give the full picture and may mean a more biased and marginalising system is created for the future. To be clear by marginalised I mean those covered in the protected characteristics as well as those who are failed again and again because they experience such extensive challenges.

6. Support the creative use of technology, but don't overlook the basics.

Mero a woman who participates with us at MEAM states;

'Even with Zoom it is possible to do co-production. It's important to try to carry on as normal as anything is possible if you put your mind to it.'

Many people, even those is temporary accommodation have smart phones. Where they don't, they can be provided, and the cost easily justified for the multitude of benefits they provide in general for people, as well as in the current scenario of Covid.

Phones are a lifeline, moreso now than ever, linking people to the largest library of information in the world including support, guidance, friendship, knowledge, art and entertainment. To lack internet access is to be excluded from huge and fundamental aspects of society (arguably it should be considered a right for all).

Some people may struggle to use certain technology, or to pay for data and/or minutes. I am discovering that this can be easily remedied for very little relative cost in most cases.

Due to changes we have had to make at MEAM during the lockdown, I have been helping people understand how to use zoom and WhatsApp over the telephone in recent weeks and it was far less challenging than I expected.

In chatting to other participation people I have heard about lots of solutions to technical barriers such as providing data dongles, minutes and SIM cards. It is possible to pay in advance for people's calls into video meetings (Microsoft teams) and to put the entire cost of group chats on the host through conference calling.

Using platforms such as WhatsApp is a great way to keep people informally connected through messaging as well as the obvious video calling capability.

A group of professionals and citizens (i.e. humans) that I work with in Oldham have been staying in touch this way, offering support and entertaining each other. It has become a safety net during the virus.

The group already had well established relationships however and did start use the platform before Covid but the fact that it was in place meant it was very easy to shift to using it as the main way to stay in touch and support each other.

- *Safety Concerns*

A concern I sometimes hear for such platforms is about the risk of people meeting outside of the group and people potentially being exploited.

I personally think that aside from such occurrences being beyond most professionals remit or business, these groups are no different to facilitating the meeting of people in person - the risks of *not* staying connected, *not* using time meaningfully and *not* receiving support are often missed. It of course depends on the specific context and people involved. They can be asked to agree parameters themselves if they wish and use platforms that don't show personal numbers and so on.

Decision making based overly on fear and liability is one of the major flaws in systems and services. I believe that going forward it is important at least to question such perspectives rather than allow them to be the default.

An unpredictable benefit of everyone working from home that I have observed is that **for those who are set up with the technology, many more decision making spaces are now potentially accessible than could ever have been previously.** Every meeting is now joinable in a click, if you are invited.

This is particularly relevant at MEAM as we are dispersed all over the country, so often very costly and time consuming travel is usually required to come together in person.

- *Don't knock pen and paper*

Not everyone wants or is able to video or voice call of course, especially in the demographics of people we are talking about. When all else fails there is always old fashioned pen and paper.   This might make us think of feedback questionnaires, that evil second cousin of co-production, but it doesn't have to be used for one-way communication and it doesn't have to involve closed, if any,

questions. There is often scope for written word to be used over a prolonged period as part of back and forth communications in a way that isn't just reduced to a most basic form of consultation, if there is a real will to make it happen, that is. If questions are kept open people will talk about what is important to them. If they don't read or write, can somebody help them? As with all things, it really depends on the specific context.

- *Creative Approaches*

Beyond straightforward written and spoken communications I am hearing of more and more creative ways to communicate experiences and influence the system.

'Lockdown Live' in Manchester is offering an online platform to any homeless people who have access to a smartphone to broadcast their own short films to communicate their thoughts and experiences of being homeless at this time.

The charity Children Heard and Seen have created a platform for art and poetry to communicate the experiences of children with parents in prison at this time. Soundelivery, in partnership with Tortoise were very quick to live link people experiencing the lockdown from many different walks of life to thousands of webinar attendees.

Where the above examples may be limited is in the individual owning the whole journey of their insight through the system. Storytelling and answering questions can be very powerful and help to influence very strong solutions. But what if it didn't stop there? If we want a bold vision to aim towards it might be one where the 2-way communication continues in an ongoing feedback loop and people's experiences and insights are never separated from them entirely, if they don't want them to be.

There is arguably value in all forms of input however. These projects have succeeded in getting information out nationally in order to have an influence, in a very short space of time and during the unprecedented challenges of connecting during the lockdown.

Some people don't want to have a prolonged relationship with the sector either and don't want to spend time in organisations or with decision makers. They want to do their bit to give back and move on with their lives.

7. Bring your best self. The most collaborative, humble, selfless and self-aware you (that the system will allow.)

Anne, a woman who collaborates with us states:

'The co-production journey is a journey of hope. I used to wish I was dead on a daily basis, but being able to make a difference through co-production gives me hope.'

Hope is looking to the future at what we can build and achieve as a society and as a planet as we start with a slate that is in some ways cleaner than ever before. However, our pre-existing missions, models, values, behaviours, pressures and limitations won't necessarily disappear overnight. We might not want them to, perhaps some were hard won and came from a good place, maybe they cost a lot to develop in time, passion or money. But we should still check ourselves - *Are they really what is needed now?*

We know how this stuff usually works. We create models we truly believe in, tweak them to attract funders and then find the funding to roll them out or scale them up. Perhaps we found a niche that we were just beginning to plug, or have been waiting for an opportunity to place ourselves at the top of a certain game.

Co-creation however is messy. It is dependent on the context, the place and the individuals involved. It cannot be fully centralised and will not be owned or lead or boxed off by any one group or individual.

The system can be set us up to be competitive, to self-promote, hide mistakes and prioritise winning contracts. Organisational cultures based on such values can foster nepotism, control and self-interest. We know where cultures that are led by such values take us and it isn't usually pretty or particularly helpful.

For co-production in particular perhaps, we need to guard against these pitfalls as we will end up re-creating the facades and hierarchies that have oppressed those most disadvantaged in the first place. Perhaps the ultimate work of co-creation is to explore new ways both of working and influencing, to ask what new forms of 'collective leadership' might look like – if it is even still to be about leadership as we think of it currently. Perhaps it is also to model an awareness of inequality and the abuses of power in all forms. In co-production we cannot be the leader of the game as no one person or group represents everyone. That's surely the very reason the concept was born.

We should ask ourselves, who isn't represented, whose views are most marginalised and ask: am I taking up space that should be taken up by, or shared with, those with different experiences?

Similarly, if we are in the powerful position of inviting people in to work, we need to think about who we are including and who we might be leaving out to guard against creating communities and designing solutions that further marginalise those already marginalised. If you aren't sure how to go about this, speak to relevant community leaders or groups that exist to support or give specific demographics of people a voice.

If we really want to get ourselves out of the way however, we perhaps need to be more aware of our thoughts and feelings and how they influence our behaviours. We must then consider whether those behaviours are complicit with a system that has failed the most marginalised in society and maintained vast inequality and suffering.

If you are the small king of a small castle you are still advocating for kings and castles. Where there are 'kings' there is inequality.

We perhaps need to develop the humility and self-awareness to accept respectful challenge on such matters, and the tact to give it. We also need to ensure we are wary of an attachment to ideals that may not reflect the complexity of peoples real experiences. Strongly held views can sometimes cause the most well-meaning of us to disregard what people are actually telling us. They can be the enemy of truth.

Cultures that encourage learning and self-awareness can better support power sharing and better welcome the learning that offers us for the better health of the system and society.

8. Create a bold yet open Vision.

To do this stuff well we perhaps need to know what really good might look like so we can think about how to get there, rather than starting out blindly.

We are almost forced at the moment to think in visionary ways as, what seemed like a fairly reliably mapped out future has recently been thrown away.

As you think of the vision for your local authority, service, community group or creative project consider making sure there is a co-developed vision for co-creation, working together, or whatever you want to call it. One that is interwoven as finely as possible into every aspect. Be prepared for this to mean it will go in directions you may not yet imagine because you likely haven't yet had dialogue those who will be key to its formation.