



MEAM resources:

Getting started with co-production

Introduction

This practical guide to coproduction has been co-created by members of the MEAM team and volunteers with lived experience of multiple disadvantage involved in MEAM's work. The guide is based on learning from MEAM's experience of supporting local partnerships to develop and maintain coproduction in their local work, combined with people's personal experiences of participating in coproduction as a person with lived experience of multiple disadvantage.

This guide outlines a set of practical steps that local partnerships can consider to begin or continue their co-production journey. We know that in reality the process is not a linear one and we are always learning and adapting our approach. As such, we expect this guide to be a live document that iterates over time.

This guide aims to support partnership conversations and includes the following sections:

1. What is co-production?
2. Practical steps towards co-production
 - a. Setting purpose and building relationships
 - b. Sharing power and responsibility
 - c. Creating opportunities to be involved
 - d. Reviewing and continuous improvement
3. Support and next steps

We encourage anyone leading efforts towards co-production, needing further advice or training to contact the MEAM team on info@meam.org.uk

1. What is co-production?

Co-production is a core principle of the [MEAM Approach](#) and the [MEAM systems intervention model](#), frameworks that are used by local areas to help them transform services and systems for people facing multiple disadvantage.

There is no one definition of co-production that everyone agrees on, as approaches to it are constantly developing and changing. The term “co-production” will mean different things to different people in your local system. At MEAM, we believe it is vital to listen and be responsive to the voices of people with lived experience in the design, delivery and review of systems and services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. This means a fundamental shift in the relationship between the people who traditionally design and fund services and the people that use them.

Co-production is a process which recognises that it those with experience of how systems and services function who are the experts in knowing what works, and what does not. Coproduction recognises that experience as an asset, empowers people with lived experience to be involved in decision-making and combines their expertise with that of other people in the system like commissioners, policymakers and frontline staff. This can lead to improved and more sustainable solutions to complex issues and provide a therapeutic benefit to those involved.

Meaningful co-production will require services and people across local systems to interrogate organisational culture and attitudes towards involving people with lived experience.

This guide highlights brings together a few key principles and approaches that we have chosen to highlight when defining co-production.

2. Practical steps towards coproduction

a) Setting purpose and building relationships

The first step to co-production is about building relationships with people who use services, or have used services in the past, recognising their assets and engaging them in a planned manner to allow them to develop, gain confidence and find their voice. Co-production is as much about experts by experience feeling there is value to them personally as a result of their involvement, as well as there being value to services and the system.

Understanding people's assets

Speaking with experts about what their interests are and where they would feel helpful contributing is key. This will help ensure that experts are involved in activities relevant to their interests, skills, goals and experiences, and that people know that their contribution is genuinely valued.

Consider the various stages experts are at in their journey, and where they can contribute best as a result. For example, people who are still actively accessing services can give insight 'from the coal face' concerning the effectiveness of services in real time, whilst those who have had many years of experience of receiving services can offer comparisons and insight into how changing models of service provision have affected them over time.

Agree on process

It is important at an early stage to collaboratively agree with everyone involved a process for working together as equals, including:

- A shared set of values to which you all commit
- Clear aim, focus and scope of the work – what are you all hoping to change together?

- Timeframes for the project
- Any training or development needs required to fully participate
- An agreed “reward” or “remuneration” policy
- An agreed process for addressing any problems that arise

Set expectations

There is a need to agree the aim of the work and what it realistically hopes to change with those who are engaged in the process. It is key that people understand the focus of their work together, what the process is, what outcomes can be expected and what services will do with the information they share. This should take into account confidentiality and anonymity, making sure that people trust that their identity will be protected in any analysis. Be realistic and honest about limitations of the work and ensure you act on co-produced decisions. Where this becomes difficult to achieve, be open about why change hasn't come about and what can still be done.

b) Sharing power and responsibility

Understanding the power dynamic in your coproduction work, and in services more generally, is crucial; it will affect how much people say, and whether they think it's worth participating. Coproduction work should seek to change the dynamic between the 'professional' and 'service user', so that solutions and decisions occur with people with lived experience as equal partners. Everyone involved should spend time reflecting on the different forms of power that they have in any given situation, in order to consider strategies for change. We mention here three types of power imbalance that are often present in coproduction work and often sit alongside and interact with each other.

Traditional top-down power

Includes the processes that shape traditional decision-making and occurs when people with lived experience are invited to participate in formal processes and deliberate with services and commissioners, but existing hierarchy, rules,

structures and procedures mean those with power ultimately make the decisions.¹

Unconscious power

Actions and processes that influence the agenda and enable services, commissioners and policymakers to maintain their position by unknowingly creating barriers for people with lived experience to participate. This could involve withholding information, excluding certain people from meetings, restricting the methods of communication, or using jargon and confusing language. All of these may mean that alternate views and opinions are marginalised, as although people with lived experience are present, the conditions they are operating in mean they cannot engage freely.

Strategies that address this form of power should focus on maximising opportunities for participation, flexing protocols, strengthening people's voices and confidence to speak out, and ensuring all parties have enough information to take part in decision-making processes. There may be issues around confidentiality and information sharing, which will need to be resolved for co-production to be successful.

Intrinsic power

Internalised beliefs that determine how someone is seen, or sees themselves. For example negative stereotypes, stigma and subsequent experiences of shame can deeply affect people experiencing multiple disadvantage in a negative way regarding self-esteem and their own perceptions of the value and expertise they can contribute. This can affect people's willingness to speak out and the confidence in their own thoughts and opinions.

¹ In this resource we use the framework outlined in the [power cube](#), a tool for understanding power relations in efforts to bring about social change.

Strategies for challenging this involve approaches such as awareness raising, trauma-informed education and focussing on expert's assets to validate their involvement.

c) Creating opportunities to be involved

There is no single model for co-production, and not all people will want to be involved in the same way. To include as many people and viewpoints as possible, local partnerships should find a range of roles for experts and consider the full array of ways that the system can support people to be involved in decisions that affect them. Partnerships should consider both how they can create space in professional environments for experts by experience but also how they, as professionals, can create space and opportunity for coproduction within the communities they serve.

When we're talking about co-production, it's production. So, that has to be something that gets done there, that gets made.

Expert by experience²

Coproduction is increasingly being used as a term to describe any form of engagement with people with lived experience. In practice this can range from one-off consultation to full involvement in a project from start to finish. However, genuine coproduction should move beyond just consultation to a situation where professionals and people with lived experience work together as equals. Whereas consultation might be described as giving people who are not normally heard a voice, coproduction is a bigger commitment to involving those people in much more depth over a longer period. There also needs to be a clear link to action, or change, as a result of the work.

² <https://www.fulfillinglivesevaluation.org/evaluation-reports/#324-evaluation-findings>

Some examples that partnerships may wish to consider, include:

Working groups

Small groups of people with relevant experience, who are gathered to share ideas, experience or feedback through conversation. The discussion will usually be steered by key themes or questions from the facilitator. An experienced, respectful, creative and neutral facilitator is essential.

A variety of formats should be used to engage with different communication styles. These include mind maps, group discussions, list making, role plays, games, whole group conversations, short presentations, individual reflection and note-taking, voting, drawings and graphics.

Enquiry/Interrogation Group

A group convened to examine a specific issue and develop a 'wicked problem' question for further investigation by a Coproduction group. This group should be made up of individuals with lived experience of the issue and professionals who are concerned with the services surrounding the issue.

Meetings

Invite people who use local services to internal and external meetings, especially networking meetings or forums. For example, people could deliver short presentations on 'What it's like to be...' or 'What a respectful service looks like...' or 'How would you know your service is working for me?'

With prior permission, professionals may also attend service user meetings or recovery groups to get a clearer idea of how things are working for people.

Where practical, participation in parliamentary processes including meetings with councillors, MPs and All Party Parliamentary Groups should be encouraged.

Surveys, questionnaires and consultations

Use open-ended questions to capture opinions, experiences and personal accounts of using local services. Surveys, questionnaires and consultations are a useful way of generating a greater quantity of responses. The feedback will usually require analysis to help identify trends and themes that can be explored further in a co-produced way. Consider the most appropriate method, including face to face, over the phone or online.

Whilst these methodologies can be thought of as service user involvement they do not in themselves denote coproduction, though they can be used as a first step towards it.

Peer research

A popular area for a first venture in co-production and often reveals a picture that professional researchers can't uncover. People who have experienced multiple disadvantage often have a unique insight into how things really work, and how they don't. People who have navigated services in their own lives know best how those services should work in reality.

Employment and volunteering

Embedding people with lived experience within your staff teams is a key way to share power and to broaden the scope of expertise and experience that makes up your team. There are many things to consider to ensure this process is safe and beneficial to both the person with lived experience and the employer. Some ways to do this include:

- Recruit staff with lived experience into your teams, including those with lived experience of multiple disadvantage
- Review your HR policies and procedures alongside experts by experience to ensure they do not create barriers to employment for people with a history of multiple disadvantage

- Involve experts by experience in recruitment processes right from the start, from co-creating job descriptions and person specifications, to sitting on recruitment panels and supporting with induction processes.
- Develop volunteering roles internally and liaise with other organisations so that experts can access volunteering roles relevant to their own interests and ambitions

Involving people at every stage of their journey

We acknowledge that services and local partnerships usually tend to involve and hear about what is effective from those who have survived, or have received enough support to recover to the point where they can tell their stories. Local partnerships should seek to engage people with lived experience at every stage of their journey, including (where appropriate) those currently using services. In addition, family and friends of those who have sadly died whilst under the care of services can also provide vital insights for services to learn from.

A point on inclusion

In any approach to coproduction, consider equal access requirements at the outset, ensuring that everyone who wishes to, is able to participate fully, including:

- *Are translators required (including in sign language)?*
- *Are culturally specific issues acknowledged and addressed?*
- *Is the group representative of the communities it serves?*
- *Is there representation of all genders and self-identified groups from those communities?*
- *Is there an appropriate age range represented?*
- *Will the process be LGBTIQ-friendly?*
- *Are there adequate digital or other tools available to communicate?*

d) Reviewing and continuous improvement

Co-production should not be seen as a one-off activity, but rather as a process that should undergo continuous evaluation, review and subsequent change. Co-

production benefits from a culture of continuous learning about what has worked and what has not worked.

Review and evaluation may focus, for example, on a particular service or project, on a developing programme of co-production, or on annual performance of an organisation in relation to its ongoing commitment to co-production. However, some questions to ask when reviewing progress include:

- What have you achieved?
- What milestones have been reached?
- Where can improvements be made to maximise impact?
- Have you stuck to the values and principles of coproduction?
- How well has everyone worked together?
- What impact have you had on the people involved?
- How equal has the process been?
- What are your reflections on the power dynamics within the process?
- What would you do differently next time?

Reflective practice

There should be a process for individuals and teams to reflect on their working practices and trialing of co-production to support their professional and personal development, and to support continuous improvement of working co-productively. Time and space to reflect must be offered to all parties involved in the process.

Support continuous review and celebrate success

The insights and findings from the review stage should also be used to provide feedback to those who have contributed, including what has changed to date or how findings will be used to implement changes to local services and systems. This will ensure that those involved know their contributions are valued. Celebrate success in ways such as publishing findings and holding events when goals are achieved. By acknowledging achievement you not only validate the success of the project but the skills, contribution and commitment of those involved.

3. Support and next steps

Coproduction is becoming such a widely adopted practice now that there is no need to re-invent the wheel. Often if you look within your own areas there are projects that are already seeking to coproduce their work. On a national level there is a wealth of examples of how to do this work well, and just as importantly, a great deal of experience of the difficulties and challenges involved and strategies to overcome them. You can often reach out directly to such projects who will most often be happy to share their learning with you, and of course MEAM can offer training and ongoing support if you are wanting to embark on a journey of coproduction. The most important thing is to get started, learn along the way and aim to build coproduction into the ethos of your area.