



A starter guide to **co-production**

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in collaboration with **Golden Key**
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KEY

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Introduction

What is co-production?

Co-production is an intentional way of working when organisations want to create, review, or deliver something with service users or people with lived experience of services. Genuine co-production requires everyone to see each other's perspectives and make decisions collaboratively. This approach results in outcomes that have been created equally by all parties.

What is lived experience?

We define lived experience as when someone has first-hand knowledge of something from their personal life experiences.

Who are we?

We are members of Independent Futures (IF): a diverse group with direct lived experience of a combination of homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health. Some people use the term “multiple disadvantage” to describe the experience of a combination of these things at the same time.

IF was created as part of Golden Key, which is an eight-year citywide partnership in Bristol made up of statutory services, commissioners and the voluntary sector. Golden Key is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, and aims to improve services for those experiencing multiple disadvantage.

What do we do?

At IF we encourage organisations to place the needs of service users at the centre of everything they do. Having experienced many services ourselves, our perspectives offer practical ways of creating better outcomes for the people being supported.

We form constructive relationships and take part in many types of co-production work and activities. We work with a variety of organisations across the system, in Bristol and nationally, to meet a range of objectives. These can include setting up a service, collecting feedback from current service users, client selection, recruitment and sitting on boards. In the context of our work, we define 'system' as the collection of statutory and voluntary organisations as well as other services that support people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

How does being part of Independent Futures help us co-produce?

Many elements of IF can provide a model for successful co-production. We are able to work together as a strong, supportive, and unified group. Our members feel equal, included, and accepted. We have honest conversations, reflect together, and help each other. Being part of this group increases the value we bring to co-produced work.

Coordinators within IF organise the group and support the co-production work we do. They help us access resources and opportunities to develop our skills. There is an understanding that our members are at different stages of their journey, so we can shape our roles and try different things. We feel empowered by the work we do and share the same goals as many other lived experience groups nationally, which makes us feel that change in the system is possible.

Why are we writing the starter guide to co-production?

We want to share our learning because it will support those across the system to collaborate effectively with lived experience groups and reach genuine co-production. We can achieve more if we work together.

The Learning Team at Golden Key helped us gather our learning. Several workshops were held to discuss themes that we felt were important to co-production, and this is a summary of what has emerged. We hope it will help everyone think about what they can do to co-produce successfully in their own context.

From the Independent Futures team:



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Increase your awareness

It is essential to be aware of yourself, of others, and of the context in which the co-produced work is happening. We do a lot of reflection and thinking to increase our awareness. If those involved in co-produced work do the same, it helps create the conditions for better co-production. Awareness of several things emerged from our group discussions. We will talk about them here in general terms, but we recommend further reflection and research to help increase awareness.

Power

We define power as having, or exercising, influence or authority.

Power can come in many forms and can change depending on context. Sometimes power dynamics are obvious and sometimes they are not. We believe everyone brings a unique perspective and therefore holds some power in their own right. Our lived experience of services mean we have unique insights and knowledge to contribute, which has power in itself.

How people think about power is influenced by their past experiences. Service users and professionals are rarely viewed as having equal amounts of power, and we have experienced these dynamics transferring to co-produced work. We have learned that power is affected by physical aspects, such as unfamiliar office environments. We think access to things like transport and technology affect the power balance in co-produced work because they can affect individual's ability to contribute.

In our experience, people involved in co-production can be unsure about how to manage these complex dynamics, and many workplace cultures can affect the thinking around this too. It is important for everybody to reflect on power in their own context. Being aware of how power may influence the co-produced work can help to create conditions for good co-production.

Bias

There are many different types of bias. We talk about bias here in general terms but encourage everyone to read further about different forms of bias.

It is important to recognise that from whatever background we come from, we all have biases, prejudices, and ways of thinking. We are often not aware of these and their effects. Each person involved in co-production has biases from past experiences, and this could be from using services or working within the system.

“Make the
unconscious
conscious.”

For better co-production, safe spaces are needed to help us reflect on our biases honestly, both individually and together. This can feel uncomfortable but can be very constructive. An increased awareness of biases will enable everyone to make more informed and balanced decisions.

Discrimination

We see discrimination as treating someone unfairly because of who they are.

Laws and policies exist to try and protect people from discrimination. However, it is important to be aware that they are not always enough. Subtle and nuanced discrimination can emerge in some workplaces. Some organisational cultures result in people feeling unable to speak about or report discrimination. It is important to remember that discrimination can sometimes happen without us realising. When this occurs, and especially when there are organisational power dynamics at play, genuine coproduction can be challenging.

Difference

We define difference as when things are unique, and not the same. As we have discussed, people come from a variety of backgrounds and bring with them different life experiences and biases. We have learned it can be helpful to increase your awareness of different cultures, experiences, and beliefs to expand your understanding of other perspectives.

Co-production spaces can evoke different emotions for individuals. For example, some of our members have experienced some anxieties in co-production when faced with new people and situations, which can feel overwhelming. Similarly, we realise co-production can require a new or different approach for organisations which may result in similar feelings.

“Everyone is responsible for thinking about everyone else’s feelings”

We believe that being aware of our own feelings, as well as putting ourselves in the shoes of others, will increase understanding and facilitate more genuine co-production.

What can you do now?

After increasing your awareness, you can take action to help create the conditions for effective co-production to happen.

Build relationships

We have learned that relationships are the gateway to breaking down many barriers to genuine co-production. They help us learn about each other and balance unequal power dynamics.

“Relationships are the foundation of co-production.”

There are things that can be put in place to help build relationships. Put simply, it's about treating people as we would want to be treated. We believe successful relationships need constructive and honest communication to be built and managed. Each individual is different, so it is important that everyone considers how this can be successfully achieved.

In our experience, we have found that there is often limited time available to build relationships in co-production. Pressures from within the system contribute to this, such as short-term funding and limited resources. We have also observed that relationships aren't always a priority in some organisational cultures. However, trusting relationships do take time to build, so if this is incorporated as much as possible from the outset, it provides a solid foundation for co-produced work. It is therefore important that conscious efforts are made by everybody in co-production to shift their mindset and to ensure the work is grounded in good relationships.

Case study

We were asked to co-produce a slot in a webinar by a senior academic. Time was dedicated upfront to get to know each other and build an initial trusting relationship with the professor where everyone felt like equals. This provided a foundation for the rest of the work as IF members felt able to voice any anxieties or blocks they came across.

Shared understanding of goals and expectations

There are things that help contribute to the foundations in place to enable effective co-production. These include understanding and agreeing from the outset why we are present, what our role is, and what is expected from us. It is also useful for us to understand the roles of staff involved.

Having common goals is important for co-production. Sometimes the group feels the need to align with an organisation's goals and expectations, and this can potentially feel overwhelming. Ideally, goals would be co-produced with us as much as possible, so that the perspectives of those with lived experience are incorporated. This is much easier when people with lived experience are involved with the work at the earliest possible stage. Managing expectations are also important. We have found that organisations can ask a lot of lived experience representatives by asking us to recount our stories, which often involve traumatic experiences.

Case study

When introducing us to a piece of work, the individual we were co-producing with clearly explained why he wanted lived experience perspectives there and provided a brief on what our role could be in broad terms, but we had a flexibility to interpret this role and bring forward our ideas.

We had the freedom to say what we wanted to put across within this piece of work. He was clear there was no expectation to tell our personal stories.

We believe co-production should be about our viewpoints rather than just our stories because we are able to provide an alternative viewpoint on how services can be run.

Create an equal, accessible, and inclusive environment

Co-production is most effective when the work is created equally by all parties. Although some people may not view themselves as equal to others outside of the co-production context, in co-produced work an environment needs to be developed where every person feels equal, welcomed and able to contribute.

Thinking ahead about what could be done to maximise everyone's ability to contribute to the work is important, so things can be put in place in good time.

This forward thinking in itself helps lived experience representatives feel valued and generates trust.

Case study

Some of our members took part in a series of workshops along with a variety of other organisations. Documents, such as those needed to prepare for the workshops, were sent out in a format which meant assistive technology could be used to help us read them.

The agenda and slides for the meeting were also sent in advance of each workshop, so we had time to process the information before the meeting. This meant that during the workshops we felt able to participate.

All of these steps together removed barriers to participation, and made us feel included.

There are some things that can be done to increase accessibility and inclusivity in co-production more generally. Using language that everyone can understand will mean those involved feel more included, and therefore more able to contribute their honest view.

Checking practical things in advance with the lived experience representatives can be very helpful. Examples that have been useful to us in the past include: checking the meeting location is somewhere we feel safe and able to get to, as well as confirming whether we are able to access the technology required for the work.

Good relationships and open communication between the organisation and lived experience representative are vital to identifying and removing accessibility barriers. Some lived experience representatives may have hidden accessibility needs, so individuals need to be given a safe space to voice these.

We have found it helpful when organisations we work with are as flexible as possible, but honest about what they can offer in support. Realistic expectations from the outset help create an environment where the organisation and lived experience representative can work together to find potential solutions. In our experience, acknowledging that conversations about equality, accessibility and inclusivity may not feel comfortable, can help the process.

Ensure multiple and diverse perspectives are present

“If system change is the goal, one perspective is not enough”

Multiple and diverse perspectives are essential to any project. It enables people to challenge each other about their assumptions, which increases understanding amongst the working group. If a group hopes to contain diverse perspectives, it must be both inclusive and accessible. We believe there are many aspects to thinking about diversity and equality; it can be subjective and can include a mixture of “seen” and “unseen” characteristics.

Diverse lived experience perspectives are particularly important in co-production, especially when thinking about multiple disadvantage. This is because everyone’s experiences of the system reflects their personal and nuanced journeys. What was effective in helping one person may not help another. Having more lived experience representatives involved increases the understanding of the range of experiences people can have when accessing services. This can help generate more ideas.

Case study

We have been part of a multi-agency selection panel for a new service. Conscious effort and thought were given to ensure a range of services and perspectives from different organisations were present, as well as different people with lived experience. We have found this to be a good way to reduce the potential for bias in the selection process and to make sure balanced decisions are made.

“If you draw on more people’s experiences, you’ll be more likely to find what can work and what sometimes doesn’t”

As we have discussed, new environments and people can feel overwhelming. We have found that having more lived experience representatives involved consequently means we feel better able to contribute in an honest and meaningful way.