



Co-production within Research



What is co-production?

Co-production is an approach that can mean different things in different contexts. The National Co-production Critical Friends Group describe it as an approach where “professionals and citizens share power to plan and deliver support together, recognising that both have vital contributions to make in order to improve quality of life for people and communities”.

But what is co-production within the context of research?

As with other contexts, co-production within a research setting can be best understood as a set of principles that operate on a spectrum. No two co-produced research projects will be at exactly the same point on the spectrum and each will look different in practice, but all will involve a wider group of people beyond professional researchers.

The six principles described by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) in their 'map of resources' are a useful starting point for understanding the concept of co-production within a research setting:

- Sharing power** – the research is jointly owned and people work together to achieve a joint understanding, people are working together in more equal relationships.
- Including all perspectives and skills** – making sure the research team includes all those who can make a contribution, involving diverse stakeholders and being accessible and inclusive.
- Respecting and valuing the knowledge of all** those working together on the research, building on people's assets and the experiences they bring – everyone is of equal importance.
- Reciprocity and mutuality** – everybody benefits from working together, valuing everyone and supporting their potential.
- Building and maintaining relationships and sharing learning** – an emphasis on relationships is key to sharing power.
- Joint understanding** and consensus and clarity over roles and responsibilities.

Each of the above principles operate on a spectrum and may vary over the course of a research project depending on the specific task and the individuals involved. It is likely that sharing power, for example, will operate differently depending what part of the research process this relates to (e.g. research design, analysis or sharing of findings) and whether there are any external factors to consider such as funding requirements.

In addition to funding requirements, co-production within research will also be shaped (and limited) by factors such as the original project brief, who holds ultimate responsibility for delivering the results and who manages the budget. In these ways there has usually been some prior 'visioning' of what the research restrictions will be, which inevitably limits 'full' co-production.

Co-produced research may have a range of different aims, including creating and delivering new services, evaluating existing ones or capturing underrepresented voices. Regardless of the focus, co-produced research:

- Goes beyond inviting volunteer researchers to ask a pre-established list of questions to a pre-established list of research participants.

- Goes beyond collaboration and involving others in the research project, to a sense of joint responsibility, joint decision-making and joint influence.
- Does not simply engage the public in research, but works as equal partners with members of the specific 'target community' being researched (the peer group of the research participants).
- Co-production in research is therefore complex and constantly negotiated, but a highly valuable undertaking.

“Involving older people in our evaluation has not only strengthened our approach in terms of designing frameworks and developing tools by drawing on their local knowledge, but it has also enriched our findings; research participants tend to be more open and willing to explore their views and feelings with their peers as they can relate to their experiences.”

Research Manager, SERIO, University of Plymouth

About this toolkit

This toolkit is based on experiences of co-produced research within the Ageing Better programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. It has been developed by Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) and SERIO at the University of Plymouth (connected to Ageing Well Torbay), with input from 3 Ageing Better programmes based in Manchester, Cheshire and East Lindsey.

The purpose of this toolkit is to share our learning, recommendations and insights about co-production within research, based on our own experiences. We hope these insights are valuable for voluntary sector organisations, local authorities, community health providers and universities looking to undertake this form of co-production in their own work. While these insights are based on research that has been co-produced with people aged 50+, we believe they also apply to other projects and target populations.

We recommend using this toolkit in conjunction with other resources available on this topic, for example those listed at the end of this toolkit.

Co-produced research within the Ageing Better programmes

Bristol Ageing Better (BAB)

The BAB programme involved a team of volunteer researchers with the role title of 'Community Researcher'. These volunteer researchers were all aged 50+ and worked with the University of the West of England (UWE) to research and evaluate a wide variety of projects within the BAB programme from 2014 – 2020.

While there were some shorter research projects as a result of the 'test and learn' structure of the BAB programme, many were in-depth academic evaluations lasting 2-3 years. UWE provided the Community Researchers with an extensive range of training, as well as ongoing support and guidance.

The size of the volunteer researcher team varied during the 6 years; volunteers joined at different times and some needed to drop out, but there was a core team of 11 volunteer researchers.

All of the Community Researchers' evaluation reports can be found on the BAB website, including their evaluation of the Community Navigators service, six Community Development projects and the Community Kick-Start Fund. UWE's in-depth report about the learning and achievements of the Community Researcher team can be found [here](#).

Ageing Well Torbay

Torbay Community Development Trust (TCDT) commissioned SERIO, a research unit at the University of Plymouth to undertake the local evaluation of Ageing Well Torbay. As part of this, SERIO recruited a team of volunteer researchers with the role title of 'Citizen Evaluator' to support the evaluation; these were residents of Torbay, aged 50+, who would explore the experiences, views and impacts of the programme on participants and facilitate community engagement in the research process.

A team of 8 Citizen Evaluators were initially recruited, and undertook a programme of bespoke training so they could conduct a variety of evaluation activities, including the development of research tools; standalone participant case studies; longitudinal case studies spanning 3 - 4 years; and focus groups with stakeholders and participants.

The findings from these research projects have not only been incorporated into a multitude of SERIO's formal evaluation reports for TCDT and the programme's funders, but have also been used to celebrate the success of

Ageing Well Torbay, in publicly available publications such as their “Our First Two Years” report, which can be found here. Over the course of their 5 year involvement, the size of the team has varied, but there has been a core team of 5 who have remained working with SERIO since the outset.

Other Ageing Better programmes

We recognise that there are multiple ways to co-produce research and each Ageing Better programme had a different approach to achieving this. There was wide variation including in levels of research formality, the academic nature and the length and detail of each study.

More information about co-produced research within these other Ageing Better programmes can be found via the following links:

- Leicester Ageing Together – Community Explorers**
- Brightlife Cheshire – Co-Researchers**
- Manchester – Small community-led equalities research**
- Time to Shine Leeds – Volunteer Listeners**

Structure of this toolkit

This toolkit is split into five main sections, followed by a summary of our key recommendations and some suggested resources for further reading:

- Paid or volunteer researchers
- The role of academic/research institutions within co-produced research
- Research design and development
- Recruitment of volunteer researchers
- Support, communication and training
- Summary of key recommendations
- Further reading

How certain terms are used within this toolkit

Volunteer researcher

A member of the public who undertakes research alongside professional researchers as equal partners in the research project. This role is unpaid, except for repayment of expenses incurred as part of the role.

Paid researcher

The same role as volunteer researcher, except that the role is paid (e.g. hourly) instead of voluntary.

Professional researcher

A professional research role based within an academic/research institution (e.g. a university or college) who supports and advises the volunteer or paid researchers, and works alongside them as equal partners in the research project.

Research participants

The people who are the subject of the research, for example through interviews, focus groups, completing surveys etc.

Commissioning organisation

The organisation providing funding for the co-produced research.