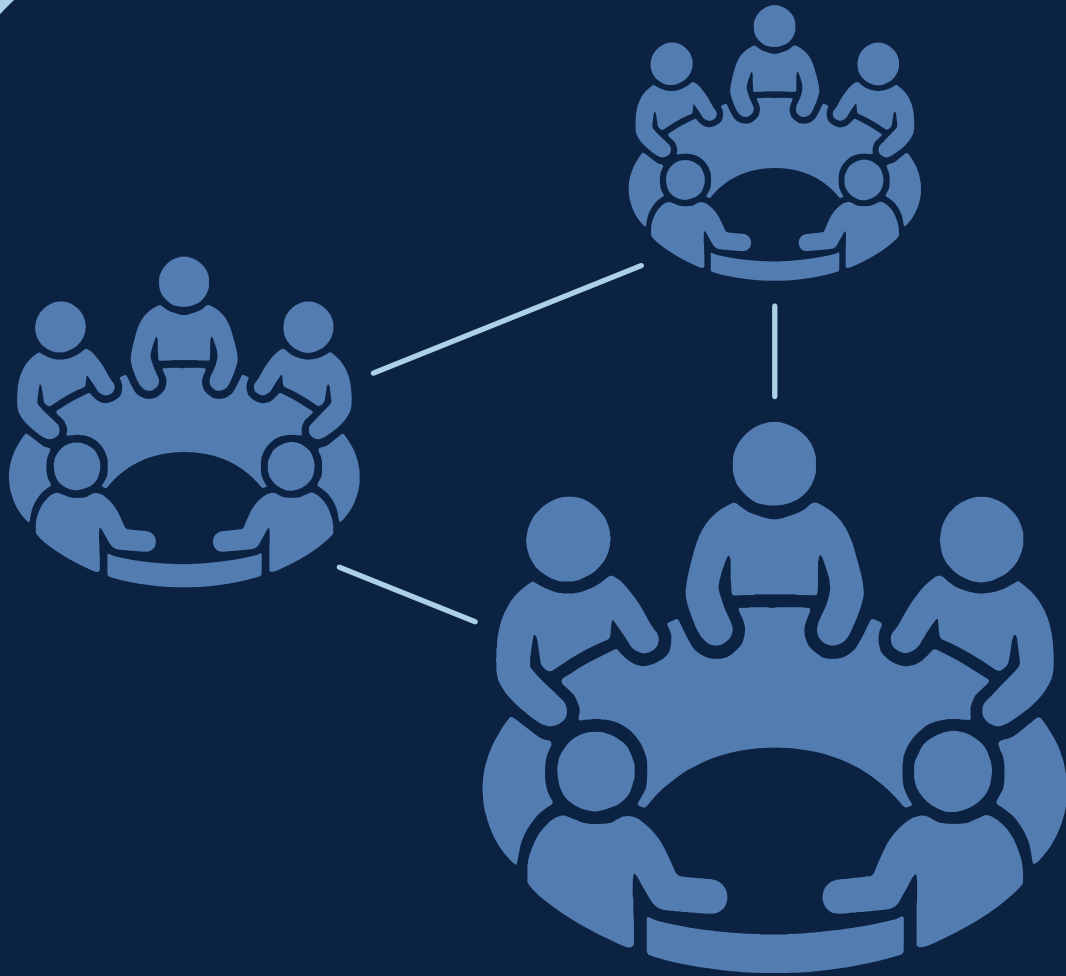




Why and How to Embed Coproduction in Your Organisation



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Acknowledgments	5
Executive Summary	6
Background	8
What is Coproduction?	9
Why Coproduce?	11
1. Knowledge and learning	11
2. Effectiveness	11
3. Buy in and legitimacy	11
4. Justice, relationships and trust	11
How to Embed Coproduction	12
1. Getting started	12
2. Scaling up	14
3. Making it everyday practice	15
Barriers and How to Overcome Them	16
Lack of leadership buy-in	16
Organisational anxiety and risk aversion	16
Sceptical technical staff	17
Lack of funding	17
Administration of payments	18
Overburdened staff and fast turnaround	18
Stigma, paternalism, and implicit biases	19
Emotional labour	19
Staff churn and corporate memory	20
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	21

Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank everyone we interviewed for the project for their time and insight. We were continually left impressed by how dedicated each person was to involving the people that matter most in service provision. We especially thank Turn2Us and the Edinburgh Trust for including us in their own coproduction programmes, which inspired us to consider what it takes to make coproduction a part of everyday work.

We acknowledge and are grateful for funding from the British Academy / Leverhulme Small Research Grants and the Society for Advancement of Management Studies (SRG25\252254) and the Wellbeing Research Centre, University of Oxford.



Executive Summary

Coproduction is gaining traction across the UK's third and public sectors. However, while many organisations aspire to coproduce, fewer succeed in embedding it into everyday practice. This report draws on interviews with 34 coproduction practitioners, alongside academic literature and the authors' own experience coproducing. The aim is a practical guide for those seeking to make coproduction a structure in their organisation: what coproduction is, why it matters, and how to do it. Our audience is principally practitioners within organisations, but we hope experts by experience can also use it to advocate for their own involvement.

Coproduction is the most substantive form of involvement, underpinned by meaningful power-sharing. Coproduction refers to a wide range of participatory activities, across any stage of service, policy, or product development, where practitioners, technical specialists, and lived experience experts (LEX) work together to produce value. Crucially, it requires that those affected by decisions have real authority in shaping them.

Why coproduce?

- **Better knowledge and learning.** Lived experience provides insights that improve understanding of needs and systems.
- **Greater effectiveness.** Services are more likely to work when shaped by those who use them.
- **Shared ownership.** Builds trust, motivation, and credibility.
- **Advancing social justice.** Coproduction challenges power imbalances in society and fosters more equitable relationships.

How to embed coproduction

Institutionalising coproduction is a gradual process that unfolds in three stages:



Common barriers and overcoming them

- Limited or inconsistent leadership buy-in
- Risk aversion and scepticism
- Resistance from technical staff
- Funding and capacity constraints
- Administrative challenges (e.g. paying participants)
- Time pressures
- Stigma, bias, and emotional demands

These can be addressed by visible leadership support, starting small and building evidence, investing in relationships and skills, and adapting organisational systems and culture to support coproduction.

Coproduction is more than a single method, and can be a long-term organisational transformation. It requires time, resources, and commitment, but breeds more effective services, stronger relationships, and a fairer society. The priority is not to get it perfect from the outset, but to start, learn, and build over time.

Background

“

I was there for 6 years and saw it go from having no involvement to having an established network. At first, it felt like a battle... it was driven by the organisation recognising that we needed to urgently do work in that space, and then looking around at our almost entirely white middle class workforce and realising that the expertise and drive to do that, we would need to get communities on board. So the buying-in came from a need that everybody, up to the highest level, recognised that.

”

Coproduction and other forms of service-user involvement are a rapidly growing practice across organisations in the UK, especially in the 3rd sector. While methods differ, they all involve bringing together a range of stakeholders and subject matter experts to share power, learn from each other, and ultimately improve the way an organisation operates.

The most significant of these stakeholders is the end users - sometimes referred to as “experts by experience” (we will use the shorthand LEX, for lived experience). These are the people the organisation is trying to serve and will be most affected by its practices, so their perspectives, values, and insights should be centred. Advocacy organisations founded by LEX often deploy the principle of “nothing about us without us” to affirm the legitimacy of coproduction.

Other stakeholders or experts commonly included are the practitioners who work in the organisation, the funders who bankroll it, and subject matter experts from universities or similar organisations with relevant technical skills and knowledge. Collaborative design from all these perspectives encourages ideas that are legitimate, rigorous, practical, and trustworthy. No wonder coproduction is popular!

The UK’s charities, non-profits and voluntary organisations are world leaders in the use of coproduction with a great deal of wisdom to impart for those looking to adopt best practice. In this guide, we sought to distill learnings from the sector about the benefits of coproduction and other involvement strategies: how to get started with it, and how to embed it as part of standard operating procedure. It’s a long journey, but a rewarding one.

To tap the wisdom of the sector, we spoke with 34 coproduction practitioners, including LEX leaders, heads of involvement, and consultants who have built the practice over decades. Their insights augmented our own experiences with coproduction in the anti-poverty space, and a literature review of involvement and coproduction studies conducted by academics.

What is Coproduction?

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When anyone comes together in a coproduction process: What are the questions? What is the psychological contract that needs to be negotiated at the beginning? But also in an ongoing way, to make sure that everyone is feeling like the coproduction process is representing as it should, their needs, and one party isn't putting the process in a way that doesn't represent or support the ambitions of everyone. The process of developing those principles has been co-productive itself.

”

One of the most common complaints we heard from coproduction practitioners was the misuse of the term, so let's try to be clear. Coproduction is the most intensive version of *involvement*, especially in terms of *power sharing*. This doesn't mean that it's the *best* for any particular organisation or piece of work.

Coproduction is often defined differently by practitioners and academics. Academics commonly view it as an umbrella term for various participatory activities (e.g. Nabatchi et al., 2017), whereas practitioners often place it at the top of the involvement ladder. Here, we take the ladder approach but note that coproduction refers to a wide variety of participatory activities, not just one specific practice. It can occur in any service, policy or product development phase where domain professionals and lived experience experts work together to produce value. Crucially, for something to be coproduced, citizens, service users, LEX and other people affected by your outputs must have authority in your design *and* decision-making processes.

This authority can take a variety of forms. LEX might hold the pen on the outputs, but some coproduction partners don't want to be involved in the writing or administration of a project. Instead, they want to contribute to its substance. That means having LEX involved from the beginning in a creative capacity, making space for them to be heard (which often requires new listening skills), and actively seeking out their input. Perhaps most importantly, it means giving them the power of veto on outputs. The coproduction needs to come in before decisions are made. In its most advanced form, the coproduction partners should be setting the agenda.

Now coproduction isn't always the best thing for your organisation, or the best thing for a particular thing you're doing, or indeed the best thing for the service users. It usually takes a lot of time, resourcing, and innovation in ways of working. That's suitable for the development of a mission statement, for example, but less so for responding to a media or governmental inquiry that needs a 24-hour turnaround. Here, less in-depth forms of involvement might be more practical while still retaining the egalitarian ethos of coproduction.

What are these less demanding forms? Practitioners we spoke to often referred to a ladder of participation, often citing Arnstein (1969) or Hart (1992). We find Arnstein's framework overly strict and even a little cynical, and Hart's is specifically for young people, so we've proposed a simple and more general ladder in Figure 1. A ladder makes it easy to understand why some practitioners are frustrated by things like consultation being called coproduction, but we note that there are also non-hierarchical frameworks for

FIGURE 1: A LADDER OF COPRODUCTION



understanding coproduction that emphasise principles and practices rather than ranks. Two of the most prominent are the Lundy (2007) and the IAP2 (2015) spectrum of public participation. This ladder takes inspiration from all of these other sources.

Coproduction requires the coproduction partners, especially those with lived experience who will be affected by decisions, to be empowered. What differentiates coproduction from involvement is the degree of this power sharing. In the latter, coproduction partners might have significant say over the content of outputs including veto rights, but the agenda is likely to be dictated by the organisation and its needs. By way of a relatively benign example, a LEX might agree with what is written in some output but want it phrased in a way that is more intelligible to them. This desire might be acknowledged but overruled by the organisation because it is an internal document and so needs principally to be legible to practitioners, not LEX.

One step down the ladder of participation we have consultation. It can be tokenistic or empowering depending on the sincerity of the practitioners and the level of accountability and feedback available to LEX. Tokenistic consultation usually presents itself as seeking information and feedback from service users when, in fact, all the important decisions have already been made. That information then just allows the controlling organisation to better market what it is doing. Sincere consultation, in contrast, genuinely tries to integrate what LEX say into whatever decisions or outputs the organisation is developing. There is a desire to learn from LEX and keep their needs and values centred, but it does not extend to power sharing over decisions. Consultation can be appropriate and endorsed by all parties where service-user perspectives are required quickly and in a way that isn't especially burdensome for the coproduction partners.

One driver of tokenistic consultation is funders requiring coproduction in their tenders and grants without any guidelines for what this means or meaningful audits as to how it was done. Business as usual approaches can then tack on language about coproduction, which then may degenerate into something like a focus group at best. Such tokenism is often exacerbated by tight timelines or a lack of funding specifically for genuine rather than tokenistic coproduction. We hope that by making guides for coproduction more widely available and the term better understood that such practices will diminish.

A further step down we have informing, such as sending round a newsletter to service users providing information on research changes and why they were introduced. Here there is neither power sharing nor learning, but there is an earnest desire to be connected to service users. If this is the only sort of activity an organisation does, then we wouldn't regard them as practicing involvement. But as part of a wider suite of efforts, all conducted in good faith, we think informing can be in the spirit of involvement. Just like in a business where employees feel more central to an organisation if managers communicate with them, service users will feel more seen if an organisation takes care to inform them regularly.

At the bottom of the ladder of involvement we have manipulative practices like publicity and public relations. These are not in the spirit of involvement but are included in the ladder for illustrative purposes. There is no power sharing, nor is there learning from LEX. Instead, the organisation is trying to convince LEX and other stakeholders of its own strategy.

Good faith and sincerity are crucial. Are service users treated as agents with the capacity to direct their lives? Are they seen as sources of crucial information? Are they given respect, patience, care, and an actively listening ear? Then you've got involvement. If service users are instead infantilised, dismissed, or seen as a nuisance, then you're in the realm of tokenism and non-participation.

Why Coproduce?

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We think it produces the best quality of work basically... We do this on a national scale - engage people's experiences across the UK - because we think when it's done well and you build up those relationships and run long term projects, the insight you get is really great.

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Our research identified four overlapping reasons for coproduction: knowledge and learning, effectiveness, buy in and legitimacy, and social justice. For a longer treatment of the value of coproduction, see Co-production Collective (2022).

1. Knowledge and learning

Having people with lived experience involved in organisational operations can provide critical insights into what actions might work and why. For example, in a coproduction we ran in Edinburgh examining anti-poverty efforts, we heard from a homeless man recently released from prison. He pointed out that the shelters have curfews for understandable security reasons. However, most of the jobs available to him were in hospitality or cleaning, both of which have hours that overlap with the curfew. He faced a choice of working or sleeping. The policy of the homeless shelter was undermining his exit from homelessness!

2. Effectiveness

The involvement of LEX can not only inform how your programs are working, they can tell you whether those programs are working at all. The Welsh charity PLATFORM, formerly GOFAL, shut down operations temporarily after a coproduction exercise revealed that their service users didn't think the charity was especially helpful. They relaunched with a Refreshed Strategy codesigned with their service users, and have gone from strength to strength since.

3. Buy in and legitimacy

When service users have an active role in shaping an organisation and its policies, they are much more likely to endorse them. When practitioners see that their work is met with gratitude, they are likely to feel more motivated. When funders see that the people involved in a project are trustworthy, they can loosen their reliance on poor fitting metrics and other clumsy sources of accountability. The overall effect is to enhance cooperation, enthusiasm, and vitality in spaces where coproduction is thriving.

4. Justice, relationships and trust

Coproduction is often underpinned by a desire for social justice. In fact, this is often the first positive outcome that organisations point to - a change in their *relationship* with their service users. There is a desire to move away from paternalism and control to a more empowering approach that respects people and their knowledge about what they need. This motivation is especially strong in member-led advocacy groups like VOX Scotland, but was at its most transformative in public services historically characterised by power imbalances and social exclusion like mental health and disability. Here, working *with* people often led to transformations in the perspective of all parties, greater respect and collaboration, and radical improvements in service effectiveness.

How to Embed Coproduction

Our research suggests that it is useful to explore coproduction in three stages - getting started, scaling up, and making it everyday practice. Years can pass between these stages and they have different opportunities and challenges.

1 Getting started

“

*The other thing that's maybe a very, very consistent theme is that **you have to learn by doing**. And so we need to start with small scale, low risk stuff, and then go gradually...the people with lived experience themselves absolutely need to learn by doing.*

”

Coproduction is hard and needs to be learnt by doing, so don't be afraid to make mistakes. That said, for the sake of persuading sceptics and building momentum, it's valuable to have a positive first experience. The most important determinant of that is to *pick something appropriate for coproduction* that everyone involved is committed to getting right. Strategy documents are a common case, but might be too existential and thus risky for an organisation trying coproduction for the first time. Another option is a research agenda. What questions the organisation should be answering, what knowledge it needs, and how to get that information are all questions suitable for coproduction.

You can also coproduce how to coproduce! Get together with your service users to develop a protocol for how they can be more meaningfully involved. Ask your service users for help with determining what success in coproduction looks like for them.

A second hot tip for getting started with coproduction is to select your coproduction partners with care, whether they are practitioners, funders, academics, or experts by experience. This isn't about reinforcing control and exclusion from the beginning, it's about acknowledging that coproduction can be time consuming and both intellectually and emotionally demanding (Faulkner & Thompson 2023).

To begin with, you need people who are up for it and able to commit. Personality is also crucial - an ability to work with others, good listening skills, and humility all facilitate coproduction. If you find some great coproduction partners you can add them to your roster for future endeavours and gradually build out to include people who might be harder to work with but nonetheless have a lot of value to contribute. You should not exclude people who are angry, opinionated, or have qualities that require an inclusive approach, like neurodivergence or a language barrier. Coproduction is precisely about having those difficult conversations, and the difficulty often lies with the organisation not LEX. But you should consider building a constructive dynamic in your coproduction projects first, such as collectively agreeing basic ground rules, and then deepening it as your community finds its feet.

Our third tip is to find a good coproduction guide. We've included some written guides in our reference list (see Fabian & Alexandrova 2022, SCIE 2022, MEAM 2022, Scottish Coproduction Network, Rethink 2015), and a quick Google will probably turn up one specifically tailored to your sector. But we would also encourage you to find someone who can step you through the process. Coproduction can be nuanced and complicated and often varies across contexts. The sector has numerous communities of practice, organisations and consultancies happy to help, like LEX Scotland, the Shared Learning Group for Involvement, Practice Solutions, Cwmpass, Coproduction Works and the Co-production Network for Wales (full disclosure: people from these organisations volunteered their time to be interviewed for this paper). Because coproduction is so much about practice rather than theory, someone with a lot of experience can provide clearer instructions than a book or a report like this, and offer advice tailored to your case.

Fourth is to be prepared and organised. What this amounts to will vary widely by context, but some things you probably want to consider include:

- **Timetabling:** how long do you expect the exercise to take? Will it be easiest to focus efforts into a week or two, or should it be spread over several months to make diary management easier?
- **Scheduling:** would your coproduction partners like to fix dates well in advance, or would they prefer to poll a time that works for everyone after each milestone?
- **Resourcing:** it is increasingly accepted as best practice to pay everyone involved in a coproduction. This can be tricky from a taxation and payroll point of view. Do you have your funds and protocol sorted?
- **Venue:** working group meetings and interviews can often be conducted one-on-one over videocall, which facilitates recording and transcribing. But plenary sessions where you take stock often have better energy in person. Do you have the required software and/or space?
- **Methodology:** How do you hope to build rapport across the team, share power, settle on a question or task, learn from each other, and find an answer?
- **Implementation:** What will you do with the results? How will you report these outcomes to the coproduction partners? Do you have some way to check whether people were satisfied with the process? Can you improve your ability to learn from your experience?
- Finally, it helps to *imagine what could go wrong* in your coproduction and how you might respond effectively. A little bit of contingency planning can go a long way, especially if your coproduction is a quick affair with little time for reactivity.

Above all, don't get disheartened if it doesn't work so well the first time. Keep at it. You will get better with experience. Welcome criticisms and feedback to learn from mistakes, but also be self-compassionate. We sometimes find the sector too critical of itself. Coproduction is a very different way of working from the status quo in most organisations, so you sometimes need to perform your way into it.

There are also many training resources for involvement and coproduction, e.g.:

- Shared Learning Group on Involvement
- Co-production Works
- Co-Production Collective
- New Philanthropy Capital
- Social Care Institute for Excellence
- Ideas Alliance

If these organisations can't themselves provide the expertise you need, they will know where to go.

2 Scaling up

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We are trying to move toward systemic change, and that's why we hit up against these kinds of challenges, with funding and governance structures and things like that. It's because we don't fit within the current system, which I guess inevitably means, yeah, we are looking for that systemic change. And it is inevitably imperfect: because whilst we are seeking that systemic change, we have to function - legally, financially, morally and ethically within the current system. So it's inevitably imperfect.

”

The scaling up stage is about spreading coproduction more widely throughout your organisation and its operations. You probably started with the low hanging fruit - straightforward topics, enthusiastic staff, LEX you already had a working relationship with. Hopefully you've had some good experiences with coproduction and built some momentum. Now you can spread the practice to harder but still valuable areas.

This might involve:

- Recruiting a wider roster of coproduction partners. How can you find service users and other LEX who want to be involved? Is it possible to give them some training, make the administration more straightforward, or find a way to ensure the process is rewarding for them? This is a good juncture to think about how everyone involved in coproduction comes to understand what their peers want from the practice. One common communication tools is a “you said, we did” report that summarise the outcomes of any coproduction exercise.
- It's also a good time to interrogate who is missing from your coproduction roster and why. Engage in some critical self-reflection about who you've excluded and how you can integrate them now that you're more established. This is itself something you can coproduce.
- Reluctant or distant teams can now be engaged in coproduction. Service user involvement is inevitably better suited to some aspects of an organisation than others. There's typically more to coproduce in the marketing department than in accounts and finance, for example. But coproduction has value almost everywhere, and it is often the most recalcitrant teams that would benefit the most. They might be stuck in their ways, overlooking key points of failure, or missing out on innovative ways of working. Coproduction can furnish all these valuable outcomes.
- Begin formalising your practice. Start writing down some guidelines, values statements, and other documents that can onboard new coproduction partners and build organisational memory. Talk to your executive and finance departments about systematically setting aside funds to facilitate coproduction. Establish a coproduction lead, or make that role full-time, or build that role out to a whole team. Publicise the existence of this contact person throughout the organisation so other people know where to go for guidance. Note that this person should not become the person who does the co-production – it must be owned by everyone – they are just a lubricant.

3 Making it everyday practice

“

If we look at where we were before, we knew what the word coproduction meant. It has completely transformed how we interact with people. We've shared so much [power].

”

The final stage of embedding coproduction is to make it an everyday practice. Rather than a special event or something that you have to prompt people to do, coproduction should be one of the first thoughts staff have when commencing a new piece of work. At this stage, coproduction partners are suffused throughout an organisation, engaging regularly in most of its operations. The involvement lead is likely an involvement team, and there may even be an dissolution of the team as involvement is built into everyday functioning. Coproduction is now likely to be part of the organisation's ethos and core to its way of working.

One issue that becomes salient at this point is the professionalisation of LEX. Sharing power between an organisation and those it serves is central to the ethics of coproduction. This becomes tricky once a coproduction partner has been with an organisation for what might be several years, participating in a dozen or more projects, and getting paid regularly by the organisation. They may want to credentialise their skills, turn coproduction into a full-time job, and become more deeply embedded in an organisation. All this represents valuable personal growth and is often one of the most heartwarming outcomes of coproduction, especially in services like mental health support or poverty reduction. But it also blurs the line between coproduction partners and the organisation itself. It's not sharing power if you all work for the same organisation and have a vested interest in its status quo.

What can be done? One regular theme that emerged in our research was the need to cycle coproduction partners regularly while developing onward pathways for experienced LEX. People need to graduate, as it were. Cycling regularly requires having a deep roster of coproduction partners to which you are regularly recruiting, and ensuring a mix of both new and experienced partners in your coproduction activities. Onward pathways might involve recruiting from your roster into formal roles unrelated to coproduction, or setting aside funding for LEX to get their experience recognised in credentials and step up to a new career. Helpful to both these objectives is establishing networks with sectoral partners and other organisations doing coproduction. You can share opportunities with each other and spread the fruits of coproduction widely. There are also organisations like LEX Leaders Scotland focused on professional development for LEX. They are both a place for LEX to graduate to, as it were, and a place from which to recruit LEX whose expertise cuts across practical matters and personal experience.

Embedding coproduction typically requires structural change to an organisation's way of working, from timetables to financial procedures, recruitment, and the very aims and services of an organisation. In some cases, this is best brought about gradually, as we have outlined here - start small and get some runs on the board, build out from this strong foundation, then get involvement embedded. But we also heard from organisations like Barnados that enshrined involvement from the beginning. See what works for you.

Barriers and How to Overcome Them

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*I very much had the approach of we are going to **prepare**, and consider every angle of this as best we can, and then we're going to just do it. We're going to do it and we're going to learn as we go, will have loads of reflective practice, we will really think about stuff, we will learn from our mistakes. But we can't just sit in a room and imagine the best, perfect scenario.*

”

Our interviews revealed a range of factors that block or undermine coproduction, as well as enabling factors that make coproduction more likely to succeed. We have organised these here, with barriers and ways to overcome them. While many of these stories are common, they're not present in all cases. Identify the issues that are most likely to plague your situation, and plan for how you might sidestep any pitfalls.

Lack of leadership buy-in

While there are plenty of stories of champions for change within organisations bringing coproduction about, there can be little doubt that support from leadership makes everything much easier. This doesn't need to be full executive management or oversight. In fact, the thing most commonly emphasised by our interviewees was simply broad messaging throughout the organisation to make everyone aware that leadership supported efforts at coproduction. This made it harder for recalcitrant actors to say no or actively obstruct coproduction, and gave permission for enthusiastic actors to contribute more of their time and resources.

How to overcome this barrier? A frequent refrain in our interviews was “once you see coproduction, you can't operate any other way”. So one effective way to get leadership buy-in is to have them participate, either in your own initiative or somebody else's. Now of course executives have no spare time almost by definition. A less demanding option then is to encourage them to attend workshops, conferences, or learning groups about coproduction to hear about its benefits from other people.

Organisational anxiety and risk aversion

A related barrier is hesitancy within your organisation, which usually stems from a lack of trust in coproduction to deliver good outcomes, fears about the disruption it might cause, paternalism about whether fragile coproduction partners are capable of participating (they are), or reluctance to seed hard won power.

How to overcome this barrier? Each of these organisational anxieties needs a different strategy. Overcome scepticism by showing the results in other similar organisations or pieces of coproduced work. Dampen fears of disruption by starting small and scaling up as you get more confident with the practice. Paternalism can be challenged by the voice of LEX themselves asking for a seat at the table. And reluctance to seed power can be met by starting coproduction in areas that are relatively stable or even stagnant. People who have fought hard for power in purpose-driven organisations often do so because they have a well thought through agenda. Maybe leave them to it and look for an organisational area that isn't already being shaken up by someone with a mission.

Sceptical technical staff

A stakeholder group that commonly resists or tries to dodge coproduction are technical staff like researchers in medical charities. They have typically undergone years of formal training to develop their expertise and are understandably sceptical that someone who hasn't been through all that rigamarole would have much to offer. They often fear that coproduction will degenerate into them having to explain complicated things to angry LEX, which would just slow down their regular work.

How to overcome this barrier? Share stories and learnings that were only possible with insights from LEX. For example, we heard of mental health wards that were installing sensory rooms to help neurodivergent people – a change that came out of their empowerment to make requests. In another case, senior clinical nurses involved completely changed their attitude after participating in coproduction and were appalled that they were so dismissive of it to start with. Exposure to the coproduction process and its outcomes remains the strongest response.

Another angle is to explain how LEX can bolster calls for change from technical experts – they can be powerful allies. A granting agencies may be more amenable to unorthodox requests or new ways of working if practitioners and LEX present a united front. But you'll never get this team effort unless you do the work of power sharing and two-way learning first.

Lack of funding

Coproduction can be quite cheap, but it is not free. It takes staff time, and you should pay the people with lived experience for the value they bring to the process. Where does this funding and time come from? Organisations need to make space in their finances and schedules for it, but tenders often don't allow budgeting for coproduction. We heard this especially for government tenders, which tend to be very tight.

How to overcome this barrier? On government contracts especially, we heard from several organisations that *it is critical to turn down contracts that don't make space for coproduction*. Be explicit that this is your motivation, e.g. tell a commissioner directly why you have not tendered. It is especially powerful when big organisations that government relies on for delivering many services start to insist on coproduction budgets. Government cannot switch its contracts all at once, so it must negotiate to some extent. Charities are not usually in their industries for profit, and taking bad contracts that compromise on principles leads to demoralisation and not enough change.

Within organisations, a pragmatic step is to start with small coproductions that require less resourcing. As their value comes to be better understood it will become easier to attract funding for future coproductions, and once coproduction becomes an everyday practice its funding will also become structural rather than relying on slush funds.

Administration of payments

Even once you have come up with the funds to pay LEX and other coproduction partners, the administration of these payments can still present a barrier. Payment method should be about supporting what the payee wants, not making it as easy as possible for the organisation. Yet constraints are unavoidable sometimes and a least-worst option needs to be found. The UK is quite strict on reporting all payments for tax purposes, even shopping vouchers above £50, and with some communities such payments can interfere with benefits payments or otherwise create headaches.

How to overcome this barrier? If a coproduction is long, has multiple arms, or can otherwise spread the work among many LEX, this can make shopping vouchers more viable. A large roster of coproduction partners can help facilitate this but takes a maturity of coproduction practice that is often not available to organisations just getting started. Make sure to find vouchers that are useful – many people do not have access to high street shops, for example. Another avenue is to recruit practitioners who are also experts by experience, or to use a consultancy that can connect you with LEX on a contractual basis. Make sure to point people to the right places to get advice before they accept payment, such as the welfare and tax authorities.

Overburdened staff and fast turnaround

In these times of austerity, many organisations are running lean and staff are consequently harried. Coproduction can take a lot of bandwidth and often struggles to work to a set timetable. This makes it hard to fit into busy delivery schedules.

How to overcome this barrier? Try to budget appropriately for coproduction, especially if you are applying for a grant or tender, so that the time and resources required are costed. This will make everyone involved more relaxed and able to invest appropriately. If you have a project that is well suited to coproduction, try to find a grant that rewards it as you are more likely to succeed and you will get to do your coproduction properly.

While you're getting used to coproduction, avoid setting tight or strict timetables. Pick a project that isn't time sensitive, find coproduction partners who can commit to a longer process, and get it done slow and steady. As you get more comfortable with the practice, you can accelerate.

And don't forget that lived experience is a valuable resource that can help your organisation perform more and better.

Stigma, paternalism, and implicit biases

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I think this real divide that is embedded throughout the charity sector, and perhaps inevitably in the entire concept of charities, is [of] ‘them’ and ‘us’.

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The power sharing aspect of coproduction is strongest in areas traditionally characterised by various forms of social exclusion, but this also tends to be where coproduction is hardest to get off the ground. Exclusion is sometimes baked into the ideology of a sector, like in the criminal justice system. In others it emerges from misplaced paternalism, where service users aren't perceived as capable of exercising agency. Less obvious but similarly destructive are implicit biases that reinforce the perception of some service users as less capable, deserving, or otherwise inappropriate for coproduction. Here we encounter established injustices of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and other forms of marginalisation.

How to overcome this barrier? Coproduction is the solution! Stigma and implicit bias need to be treated with respectful human to human contact, and service-user involvement provides a site for that. Be aware that things are more likely to be prickly where stigma is prevalent. Invest more time in setting the norms and ethos of the project, and in helping those involved get to know each other beyond the pragmatic objectives of the coproduction itself. The magic of coproduction happens through relationships, and these may take longer to build here. Dialogue can be fostered by making sure everyone knows what to do if they have concerns related to themselves or others. Coproduction Collective (2026) has useful resources on safeguarding protocols and other relevant practices.

Emotional labour

Coproduction can require a degree of intimacy and vulnerability that is uncommon in contemporary workplaces and challenging for some staff. The thematic content of coproduction can similarly be more emotionally intense than what you typically encounter at the office. Power sharing can also be awkward, especially where LEX are marginalised and understandably frustrated.

How to overcome this barrier? It is important to be aware of the personalities of your coproduction partners and assemble compatible people. You need a critical mass of individuals who are empathetic and can hold space, can confront tricky or wounded issues delicately, and prefer to find mutually agreeable resolutions than get their own way. Into this core of compassionate and constructive partners, slowly introduce other personalities. They will often benefit the most and have the most to offer, but too many at once can overwhelm the process.

Do not further marginalising people under the guise of curating a coproduction process. Try to embrace the challenge and have the awkward conversations. Embed a culture of learning and development, agree ways of working from the outset, and ensure these are upheld. You need an approach to safety in place and to work on your anti-discriminatory practice as a team. Disagreement is a crucial part of good coproduction, and some of the most successful organisations address this head on with a frankness that demonstrates respect.

Training programs HR departments offer in interpersonal communication, psychological safety, and managing difficult conversations in a work environment can also be valuable foundations for good coproduction practice. Signposting to relevant support services, like counselling, and having such capacities in house can also be valuable, as can things like allowing for leave after the conclusion of emotional coproduction exercises. We also heard frequently about the benefits of sharing positive and negative experience within the community of practice. Staying connected across the sector will support your wellbeing. Ensure all this is available to *all* participants.

Staff churn and corporate memory

Because coproduction is substantially learnt by doing, having a high rate of staff turnover can harm institutionalisation of the practice. This is especially the case if the coproduction lead changes frequently.

How to overcome this barrier? Our research suggests that the embedding of coproduction in organisations, and skill in conducting the practice, moves in lumps. Once you've gone through several projects, recruited a roster of reliable coproduction partners, and familiarised a modest number of staff with how it is done, there is enough architecture for a few people to change over without the practice being lost. The experienced people who are left can onboard the newcomers and lead by example in future coproductions.

Making short guides for newcomers and creating a repository of learnings that are specific to your organisation can also be helpful. This is likely a task for the coproduction lead/s and something they should be especially attentive to before leaving an organisation to promote continuity.

Conclusion

There's a lot more that could be said about coproduction and how to institutionalise it, but we hope this report strikes a balance between being thorough and a quick read. We wouldn't want its length to be a barrier! Coproduction might seem scary at first, and it can certainly be challenging at times, but the rewards are great. We think this quote from feminist theorist Adrienne Rich gets to the heart of what coproduction is about:

"An honorable human relationship – that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word "love" – is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other."

Finding truth and building love through relationships is how we overcome oppression and ignorance to craft better policies, better organisations, and ultimately a better world. We'd love to hear from you about your adventures in coproduction, and about any feedback you might have on this report. Please don't hesitate to reach out.

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