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in Arts and Humanities

Co-Production with Communities Toolkit

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Introduction

This toolkit emerged out of an online training session held in June 2026, run by the Centre for Public Engagement Practice in Arts and Humanities, as part of a series of trainings exploring participatory and collaborative approaches to public engagement. The training, designed and delivered by Dr David Tross, Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, introduced key principles and approaches to co-designing with communities. Using case studies, frameworks and interactive activities, the session aimed to:

- build confidence in using co-design principles
- understand when to use co-design and its limitations
- how to approach co-design in your specific context and sector

The session, and this toolkit, has been designed for individuals who are fairly new to co-production[1], or looking for a refresher. We hope it will be useful for academics and researchers at different career levels working in a range of humanities subjects, professional services staff from universities, public engagement professionals and staff from community, cultural and charitable organisations.

[1] Although the original training was called co-design not co-production, and the terms can be used interchangeably, we have chosen to use the most recognised term.



Defining Co-Production

Co-production has been defined as:

> *'a way of designing and delivering public services in a more democratic fashion, giving citizens control over the day-to-day decisions which affect their lives'*[2]
>
> *'[A] relationship in which professionals and citizens share power to plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital expertise'*[3]
>
> *'different from activities like consultation, engagement and co-design because it doesn't just ask for people's ideas and insights; it also includes their skills and expertise'*[4]

More than consultation

Co-production is more ambitious than other participatory approaches like consultation. Rather than merely soliciting the opinions of individuals and groups who use services, co-production includes them as active partners in the service design and delivery process. This requires 'the active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process'[5] but is also meant to be an ongoing process, one emphasising 'long-term relationships between state agencies and organized groups of citizens, where both make substantial resource contributions'[6].

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[2] https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/public-service-reform-tools/engaging-citizens-devolution-7

[3] https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/public-service-reform-tools/engaging-citizens-devolution-7

[4] https://thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/our-hubs/co-production/what-is-co-production/

[5] Hannibal & Martikke (2022)

[6] Green & Baker (2020)

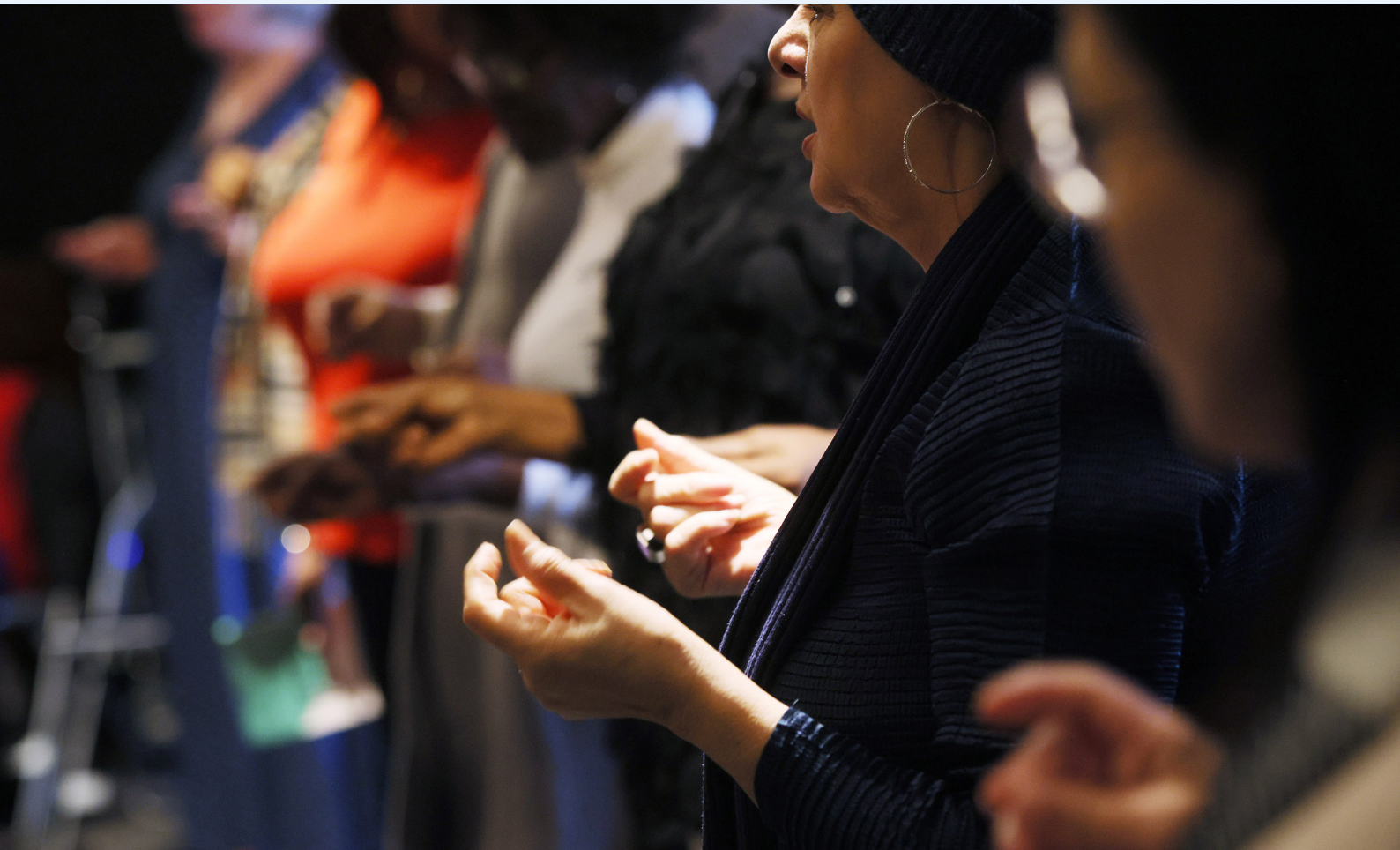
Why co-produce?

Enthusiasm for co-production over recent decades has arisen from a desire to create more efficient public services and also to instil a more equitable process of service delivery where citizens are partners in the design and delivery of interventions that affect their lives.

Why engage citizens and communities in this way? One rationale is simply that public institutions need the help of their users to achieve better outcomes.

> *'From the NHS to the local council to the police, to charities providing support for marginalised groups, professionals need community support as much as communities depend on them, to provide the expertise and input that is necessary to solve complex issues'*[7]

[7] NEF (2008)



Shifting power

Co-production necessitates a re-imagining of the power dynamic, a shift away from seeing service users as needy beneficiaries, to one that appreciates and values service users as assets. For promoters of co-production, the failure to engage individuals and communities in policy design has been the equivalent of squandering large amounts of talent and potential. This aligns with Community Development practitioners and theorists who recognise the richness of communities, 'locating the assets, skills and capacities of residents, citizens, associations and local institutions'[8] . "Assets" include residents but also Voluntary and Community organisations, local institutions e.g., schools, and businesses in local area.

> *'... public services, and technocratic management systems, have become blind to the most valuable resource they possess: their own clients and the neighbourhoods around them.... a failure to ask people for their help and to use the skills they have'*[9]

For an "asset-based" or "bottom-up" approach to work, professionals must stop thinking about communities as needy and passive. Particularly damaging has been the tendency to view more socio-economically deprived communities as deficient, as needing large amounts of public intervention and resources (which of course play an important role) but without any real say or influence about where interventions or resources are most needed or would be most effective. Power is important here. Robert Chambers, writing about the failures of international development in the 1990s, put it like this:

> *'Outsider professionals have believed that their knowledge was superior and that the knowledge of local people was inferior; and that they could appraise and analyze but local people could not'*

[8] Kretzmann & McKnight (1993)
[9] NEF (2008)
[10] Chambers (1994:963)

Top-down co-production

> *'Most models generally propose a unidirectional flow of power, with the benefits generated by any co-production project firmly residing in the hands of the 'regulatory' or state actors, as opposed to the 'citizen' or lay ones…. These models reinforce existing patterns of power in terms of sharing and redistributing agency and knowledge'*[11]

In an academic and research context, co-produced research has been critiqued as 'little more than information-dissemination'[12] an essentially top-down approach that academics bestow their knowledge through various and interesting methods but where the power is retained in the academy. As one academic working in co-production puts it:

> *'A typical public engagement approach for researchers… will usually involve researchers setting an agenda of "what will be discussed, what form the content the discussion will take, and which public groups will be engaged with'*[13]

In academia, the term "extractivism" has been coined to describe the top-down process of research where information is "extracted" from communities and then analysed and disseminated elsewhere. Here, participation is largely without community benefit.

> *"It's not about asking a few people some questions. It's about having a dialogue and deep listening… there's lots of consultations with and surveys of residents, but a lot of information gathered has been used to inform policy, rather than put to use in the area. When people take that information out of the community and do things with it, we call that "data-mugging" '*[14]

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[11] Green & Baker (2020)
[12, 13] Watson (2023)
[14] www.thirdsector.co.uk/first-community-organisers-trained/article/1104963

Understanding the Voluntary and Community Sector

The vast majority of co-production initiatives engage with Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) groups. This is either because these organisations act as gatekeepers to groups researchers are keen to work with, or because VCS organisation themselves are co-producers and active participants in research projects. Therefore, it is useful to understand a bit more about how this sector works, particularly given that organisational culture, ethos and priorities differ from public institutions in some important respects.

Firstly, VCS organisations often see co-production as 'central to their mission and an ethos of co-production as embedded in their culture. This is because VCS organisations do not just deliver services to communities, they are also "value-guardians"'[15] . These organisations often emerge through mutual aid, communities organising together to solve problems. A good example of this is the 4000 neighbourhood groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these types of organisations, and even the more well-established (and famous) VCS organisations like OXFAM, governing structures will include the users or beneficiaries of their services.

VCS organisations all operate independently of the state and the market, hence the synonym "third sector". Made up of charities, campaigning organisations (like Greenpeace, who break the law and therefore cannot be a charity), community groups, trade unions, social enterprises (like the Big Issue- they generate a product for profit but all proceeds by law are recycled back into the organisation), the "third sector" has been described as 'a loose and baggy monster'[16].

Clearly, there is a significant contrast between large charities with incomes of millions of pounds and over a hundred paid staff and an informal, volunteer led community group but some common features run through all VCS organisations.

[15] Anheier (2000)
[16] Kendal & Knapp (1995)

Key features of the VCS

The VCS sector is:

- Non-profit distributing
- Independent of government
- Voluntary (e.g. funding and labour)

The VCS sector is made up of:

- 171,000 UK charities
- 450 major charities (almost half total income of VCS)
- 600,000+ community groups (volunteer-led)
- 850,000 paid workforce [17]

Key values driving these organisations are philanthropy (helping others), social justice, self-help/mutual aid and conviviality (providing opportunities for people to get together and have fun).

Community[18] organisations are typically entirely volunteer-led, though they will have a governing structure (chair, secretary and treasurer), a bank account and a constitution outlining their missions and objectives.

However, as in the case of the People's Museum in Somerstown, a volunteer-led organisation can still run a building and secure quite large grants. Informal does not mean amateur. Some community groups have no unique space or funding, and yet, working with vulnerable groups, will often have sophisticated safeguarding policies.

[17] NCVO (2024)

[18] Community usually can be described as "place-based" (neighbourhood/locality), "identity-based" (youth, refugee, women) and "interest-based"(sports and recreation, politics)

Differences between public institutions and VCS groups

Coproduction between public services and VCS groups inevitably means that there will be some clear differences in organisation ethos and structure that may impinge on the process.

Speed

Bureaucracy and speed of action is a notable difference. One researcher talked of 'constantly apologising' for the slowness and clunkiness of her university's processes and payments. VCS organisations are likely to be a lot nimbler in decision making. Researchers often talk of "culture clashes".

Timescales

The VCS sector is often working to shorter-term timescales, with groups often securing short-term funding that limits the scope of what they can commit to in time and resources. VCS groups are often funded for specific projects and have little in the way of core funding.

Working with the VCS sector

Because of reductions in Public Sector funding (particularly at the local government level) in the last 15 years, and a funding environment that is both shrinking and highly competitive, organisations are often engaged in an ongoing struggle to survive. This struggle is exacerbated by the cost of living crisis and welfare "reform" under austerity

This means that coproduction initiatives will often need to align with the deliverables of short-term project funding. VCS organisations are likely to think-what's in it for us?

One pitfall of public participation has been the assumption that VCS groups can "rustle up" 20 or 30 users for a meeting or workshop without considering the large

amount of time and resources that go into such activities, or whether the issue is something that aligns with the groups' mission or core deliverables.

Working with volunteers

Co-production at the community level means working with volunteers. Volunteering is the lifeblood of the sector and they should not be taken for granted. 14.2 million people volunteered through a group, club or organisation in 2021/22.[19] Volunteering, however, has decreased in the UK since the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. Volunteering requires time and resources. Those who volunteer may need to develop skills as well as want to make a social contribution. This means that there has been a shift towards volunteering as "career and professional development" and skill development.

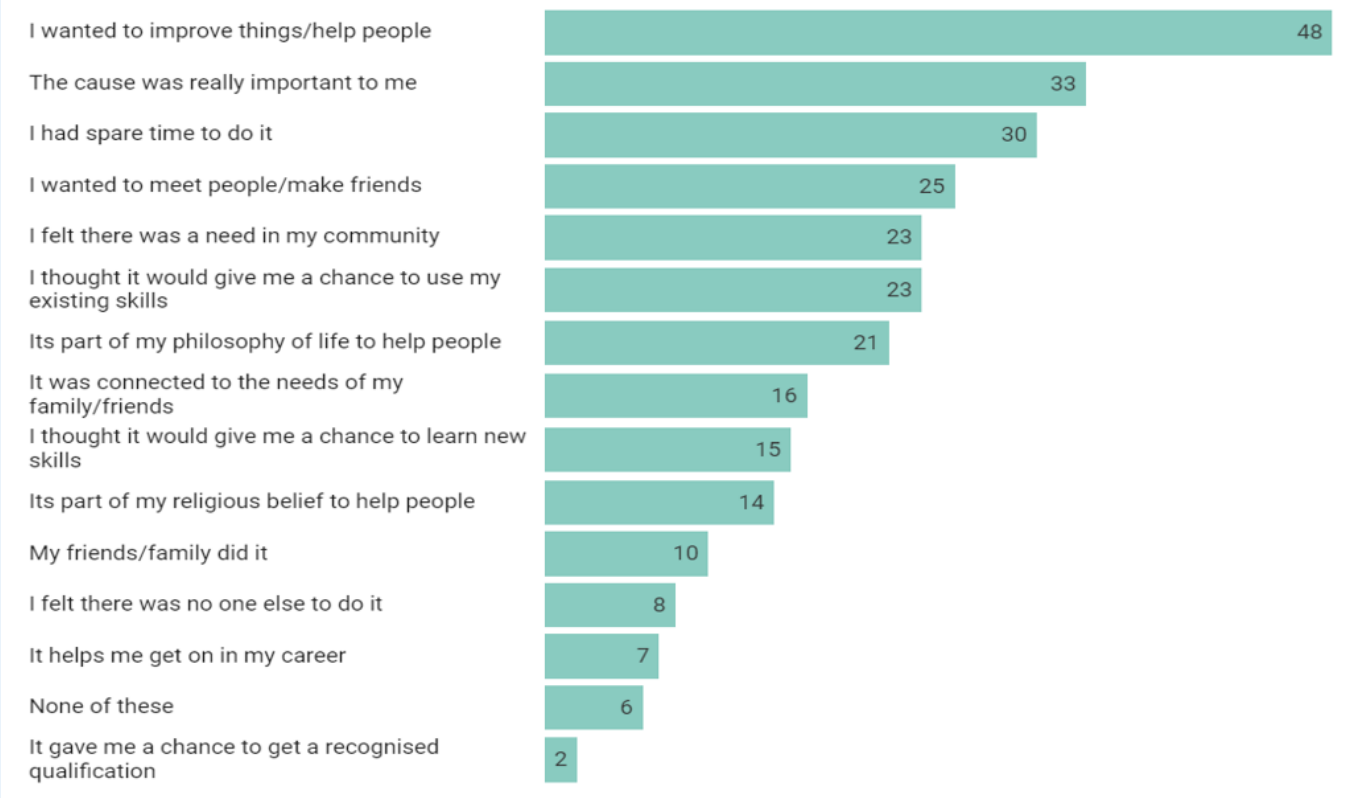


Figure 1.
Reasons for Volunteering (numbers are percentages that ticked this option, respondents were allowed to select multiple options), in descending order[20].

[19] NCVO (2024)
[20] NCVO (2024)

Overall, cause/values, social contribution, spare time, social connections and then more skills-based motivations are key factors. But this will vary and to sustain commitment over a period of time, coproduction professionals will need to understand the volunteers they are working with. Age is a large determining factor, with younger volunteers likelier to be motivated by career development and learning new skills, as opposed to older volunteers for whom spare time, using existing skills and developing social connections are key motivators.

Working with a community

It is important to stress that a "community" is an imagined construct albeit one which has high subjective meaning for many people. It is not a homogenous whole, with divisions of class, ethnicity and values within a community, and intersectional differences within a community group. "Community" has been described as a warm and comforting term[21] (as opposed to "society") but the warmth and comfort can also derive from undesirable forms of belonging (think gangs) and communities can be defined by "them" and "us". As one scholar puts it: "face to face often means eyeball to eyeball'. For coproduction practice, this means that professionals need to make efforts to understand the diversity within communities and resist accepting the narratives of dominant groups at face value as much as they want to resist top-down narratives who assign particular values to a community e.g., "rough", "deprived", "divided".

[21] Bauman (2000)



Challenges of participation

Co-production does not exist in a vacuum. It is the latest in a long line of public approaches to community engagement and participation. In the UK, kickstarted by the "New Deal" programme of New Labour in 1997, citizens and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations have been engaged in a variety of participatory methods - consultations, steering groups, partnerships – aimed at getting more local involvement and inclusion in policy processes. These initiatives had varying degrees of success:

> *'some real progress is being made at the level of implementation: residents are influencing small-scale decisions and managing projects determined by themselves…(however)… the same issues about lack of power and about the limited access for community interests to power structures remained'*[22]

This highlights many participation challenges that are highly relevant to co-production practitioners.

Tokenism and distrust

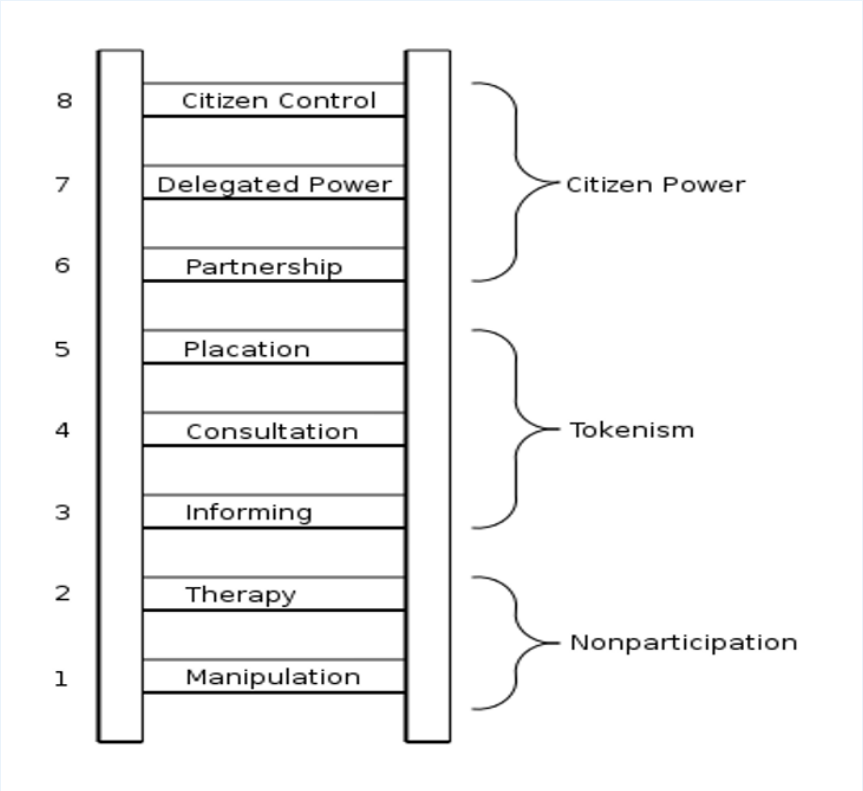
Participation approaches have often been viewed as tokenistic: 'all too often, public services view engagement with local people as a tick-box exercise; the ways that public engagement is done leads to citizens trusting public institutions less'[23]. Tokenistic participation backfires because it further reinforces the idea that citizens and communities are unable to influence power structures.

In "tick-box" participation, communities are engaged and consulted but have little or no way of knowing whether their views had any effects. Furthermore, a feeling persists that consultations serves to legitimise or rubber-stamp decisions already taken. Here, consultation is purely cosmetic.

[22] Taylor (2011:158)
[23] Involve UK (2013)

The (negative) legacy of previous initiatives can also cloud current ventures. Community groups may be sceptical of the promises of public institutions. In one London example of co-production, it was noted that 'residents were wary of […] academics, who had previously researched aspects […] and not returned to disseminate their findings. Regaining and rebuilding trust was therefore essential'[24].

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation



One of the most famous (and oldest) participation models is Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (see Figure 2).

It ranks community engagement on a scale from "citizen control" at the top to "manipulation" at the bottom.

Figure 2.
Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation"[25]

Over the last 30 years, most initiatives rarely exceeded a "tokenistic" ranking because consultation lacks follow-through and often failed to reach the most marginalised groups, seeking views from citizens and groups already "plugged in" to policy processes. As Marilyn Taylor puts it:

'we are riding in a top-down vehicle of development whose wheels are greased with a vocabulary of bottom-up discourse'[27]

[24] Green & Baker (2020:284)
[25] Arnstein (1969)
[26] Arnstein (1969)
[27] Taylor (2011:45)

Overpromising, underdelivering

One of the challenges facing participation initiatives is that resources rarely match the rhetoric. Often with goodwill, outcomes are overpromised, however funding or resource constraints mean that they end up under-delivered.

Previous ineffective initiatives can also taint how proposals for participation are received. Community groups may be sceptical of the promises of public institutions.



Co-production in practice

In this section we look at what works in co-production, explored through several key themes. Some key dos and don'ts and tips are highlighted, drawing on the literature and experience from academics and practitioners, as well as case studies

Reflexivity

One of the fundamental aspects of co-production is that experts, including academics, are reflexive in their practice, not imposing pre-conceived ideas and dominating the agenda.

> *'Reflexivity highlights the importance of researchers critically reviewing the "institutional, personal and political factors" that influence their "design, impact and acceptability" of co-production'*[28]

Returning to the key issue of power, which can threaten relationships and trust, we can see how power might manifest in various dynamics.

- There may be a power asymmetry between a paid academic with symbolic cultural capital[29] who may be intimidating to unpaid community volunteers, particularly from marginalised groups.

- There can be a power difference between a large public institution and a voluntary and community sector group, particularly in terms of the resources each command.

[28] Green & Baker (2023)
[29] Brear (2020)

In a study of multiple co-production initiatives in the North of England, traits conducive to a co-productive relationship included the ability to:

1. *listen*
2. *learn from other participants*
3. *compromise*
4. *adhere to formal agreements e.g. meeting times*
5. *acknowledge and embrace the expertise they themselves had to offer to the process*
6. *deal with conflict constructively*
7. *facilitate discussion without dominating it*[30]

The fifth item on the list highlights a key dilemma for academics and professionals in coproduction settings: how to utilise their expertise without co-opting the agenda. In their coproduction work Green & Baker[31], for example, stress the need for engagement professionals and researchers to "step aside" and, quoting Fals Borda:

> *'Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organisations. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals' (Fals Borda in Chevalier and Buckles (1995), p.27)*[32]

[30] Hannibal & Martikke (2022)
[31] Green & Baker (2023)
[32] Green & Baker (2020)

Real complexities

Within co-production, academics often take a position of 'silence, listening and learning and being there, rather than telling people how it is and providing the answers as the purveyor of knowledge and expertise'[33].

But one question crops up frequently in coproduction workshops: To what extent is removal of oneself as the "expert" a form of self-effacement that ultimately harms the initiative? As Green & Baker admit, a potential consequence of professionals' painstaking efforts to not impose their own agenda, can lead to paralysis when the community (remember, unpaid volunteers) are expected to lead: 'With the academics in the group refusing, on principle, to take the responsibility of leading discussions, the continuity of meetings struggled, with individuals coming and going'[34].

Other academic literature on co-production provides some solutions to this dilemma. All partners are experts, but their expertise lies in different areas. For Fabian et al[35],:



'coproduction is not about uncritically accepting the perspectives of people with lived experience. This might seem ethically attractive at face value but places an undue burden on people with lived experience, expecting them to solve complex policy problems with little more than their voice. Lived experience can be best utilised when it is supported by the practical insights of policymakers and the technical expertise of subject matter experts. Two-way learning between these groups can sharpen the insights of people with lived experience and translate them into effective policy.'

[33] Green & Baker (2020:83)
[34] Green & Baker (2020:83)
[35] Fabian et al (2023)

Accessing and engaging communities

> *'Co-production should start at the community level and be based on an issue originating from that community'*[36].

However, accessing and engaging communities and citizens is often the part professionals find hardest, particularly when engaging marginalised or vulnerable groups.

The evidence, both from the literature and professional experience, is that in the majority of occasions, a prior relationship or connection exists between the professional/academic and the citizen/ community partners, either because the professionals are embedded in a community or organisation (they live, work or volunteer there) or have done previous work with this group. Often, you have to 'do your time' getting to know individuals and communities, getting alongside them and building trust and rapport.

In accordance with Community Development principles of bottom-up practices[37], understanding the expectation and commitment of participants is key. Academics could ask questions such as:

- **What are they interested in working on?**
- **How would a co-production project benefit them?**
- **How would they like to get involved?**

A more formal method of getting to know a local area or community, and their skills, resources and knowledge is to do an asset map.

Where prior contacts and relationships do not exist, the key message is: go to where people are and spend time there. These may be formal as well as informal and could include:

[36] Green & Baker (2020:83)
[37] Gilchrist & Taylor (2016)

- Community infrastructure e.g., schools/ GP surgeries
- Local voluntary groups
- Retail/markets
- Libraries
- Places of worship
- Resident and tenant forums
- Local media
- Online/social media
- Gatekeepers (community leaders/ organisations)

Typically, professionals find a gatekeeper, usually a voluntary or community organisations who work with communities and have already built trusted relationships.



Methodologies

In co-production, community groups and citizens are actively involved in selecting a particular research method. These are more likely to be qualitative, such as surveys, focus groups and interviews . For particular groups e.g., young people, more creative methods may work better. Some arts co-production projects (e.g. The People's Museum in Somerstown[38] project) have outcomes like a co-produced community exhibition.

Barriers to engagement

Language is often a barrier to engagement, where researchers may use academic jargon which alienates participants. Methods that go 'beyond text', such as story-telling, performance, art, photography, social media, and blogging, are likely to be more accessible.

Instead of interviews, open conversational techniques may enable more authentic sharing and celebration of stories. However, it is important to consider that participants may see this as a barrier, and in some cases, 'participants often remained silent when provided an opportunity to contribute their voices because they were afraid…of getting the wrong answer… marginalized people may not speak because they have internalized beliefs about the inferiority of their ideas, opinions and/or abilities'[39].

The success of co-production initiatives can lie in creating the "right atmosphere" so 'spaces for co-production were often kept deliberately informal. Creating a safe space appeared to challenge normative power dynamics. Service users' familiarity…meant that its premises tended to be taken for granted as a safe meeting space, where certain rules of engagement prevailed'[40].

[38] https://spaces.rca.ac.uk/inthemeantime/pdf/
[39] Brear (2020)
[40] Hannibal & Martikke (2022)

What kind of "co" are we talking about?

There is no single definition of what co-production is or a universal template that can be adopted. One recent literature review on co-production argues that the '"co" concept is polysemic – it means different things to different people – and hence can be difficult to implement'[41].

For Martikke, co-production can be broken down to three different models which are relevant at particular stages of the project life cycle. These are

1. **co-initiation** (suggesting an idea for a new service/project)
2. **co-design** (designing a new service/project)
3. **co-implementation** (helping to implement the service/project)

In the majority of cases, there is an effort to embed co-production across the project cycle. Co-production initiatives may seek to ensure accountability through:

- A steering committee or advisory board
- Existing service user and community networks
- A formal partnership agreement

For example, in one piece of research, the survey and interview questions for a study about living with autism, were written with the involvement of autistic individuals, particularly checking for appropriateness of language. This group also provided ongoing feedback throughout the project via an advisory panel[42].

Another example, with an emphasis at the co-implementation stage, researchers and community hosts co-delivered programmes on a community radio station with the purpose of disseminating knowledge in a more deliberative and "community-friendly" format[43].

In another example, researchers interested in developing lay concepts of financial wellbeing partnered with an anti-poverty charity to engage individuals with experience of poverty as part of the research. This partnership co-implemented surveys, workshops and co-authored an academic paper[44].

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[41] Hannibal & Martikke (2022)
[42] Thompson et al (2020)
[43] Watson (2023)
[44] Fabian et al (2023)

Transparency

However co-production is designed, there needs to be transparency about the project scope, timescales, the possible outcomes, available resources and what the commitment will be.

- What kind of accountability is built into the process?
- In practical terms, do community groups get to “sign off” on the academic material published as a result of co-production?
- Are they involved in the writing?
- How is the end of the project going to be marked and treated with care?

When you are designing a co-production initiative, transparency around expectations is important and should consider:

- Time commitment of volunteers can be varied, and may not be reflective of a wider group
- That the volunteers with more time and resource are generally those who find it easier to get involved and more marginalised groups may be missing out
- Reliance on volunteers can tip into additional work for paid staff
- Initial budgets may not reflect the true cost of additional labour for paid staff.



Finding Local Voluntary and Community Sector Groups

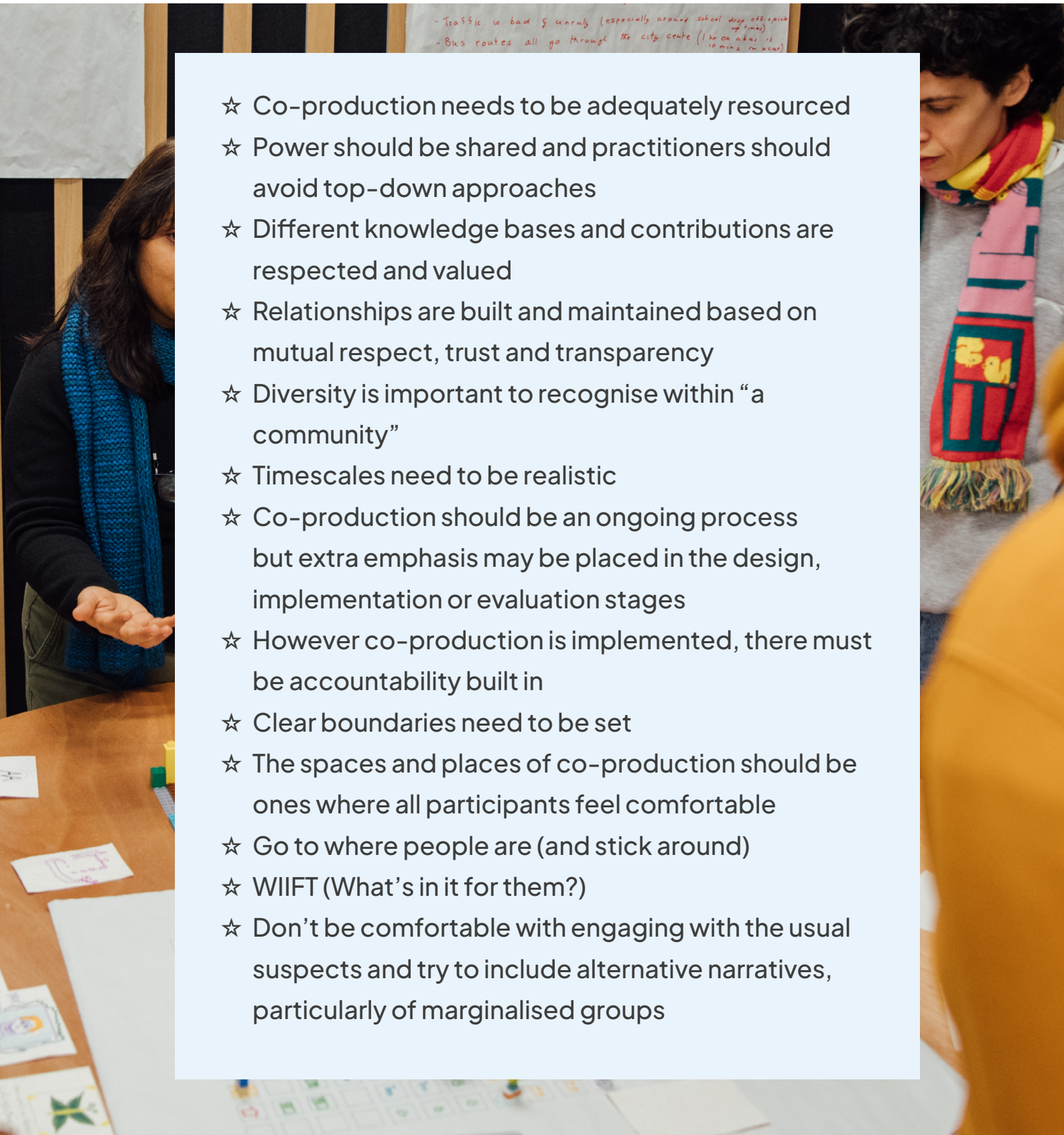
To find local groups, the best bet is to contact a CVS (Council for Voluntary Service). CVSs can be found in most local Authority areas in the UK. A CVS is an organisation that supports and brings together local charities and community groups and can be expected to have excellent contact with local groups in their patch. To find a CVS, check out the national database of CVSs and a London-focused umbrella body below:

National: https://www.navca.org.uk/find-a-navca-member

London: https://londonplus.org/london-cvs-network/

Going forward

To summarise, researchers and professionals looking to initiate a co-production project should consider the following success factors and reflection points (as well as the other points contained in the toolkit)



- ☆ Co-production needs to be adequately resourced
- ☆ Power should be shared and practitioners should avoid top-down approaches
- ☆ Different knowledge bases and contributions are respected and valued
- ☆ Relationships are built and maintained based on mutual respect, trust and transparency
- ☆ Diversity is important to recognise within "a community"
- ☆ Timescales need to be realistic
- ☆ Co-production should be an ongoing process but extra emphasis may be placed in the design, implementation or evaluation stages
- ☆ However co-production is implemented, there must be accountability built in
- ☆ Clear boundaries need to be set
- ☆ The spaces and places of co-production should be ones where all participants feel comfortable
- ☆ Go to where people are (and stick around)
- ☆ WIIFT (What's in it for them?)
- ☆ Don't be comfortable with engaging with the usual suspects and try to include alternative narratives, particularly of marginalised groups

A final thought

Surveying a range of feedback from participation practitioners, Bell & Reed[45] have developed a "tree of participation" which visualises the journey of participation from the roots to fruits.

The Tree of Participation suggests twelve factors for inclusive and effective participatory processes and seven contextual factors that feed that process. The roots are three important aspects of initiating successful participation: *an inclusive process, a safe space* and *removing barriers to participation*.

Practitioners should also be mindful of external factors impacting their participation initiative. These include:

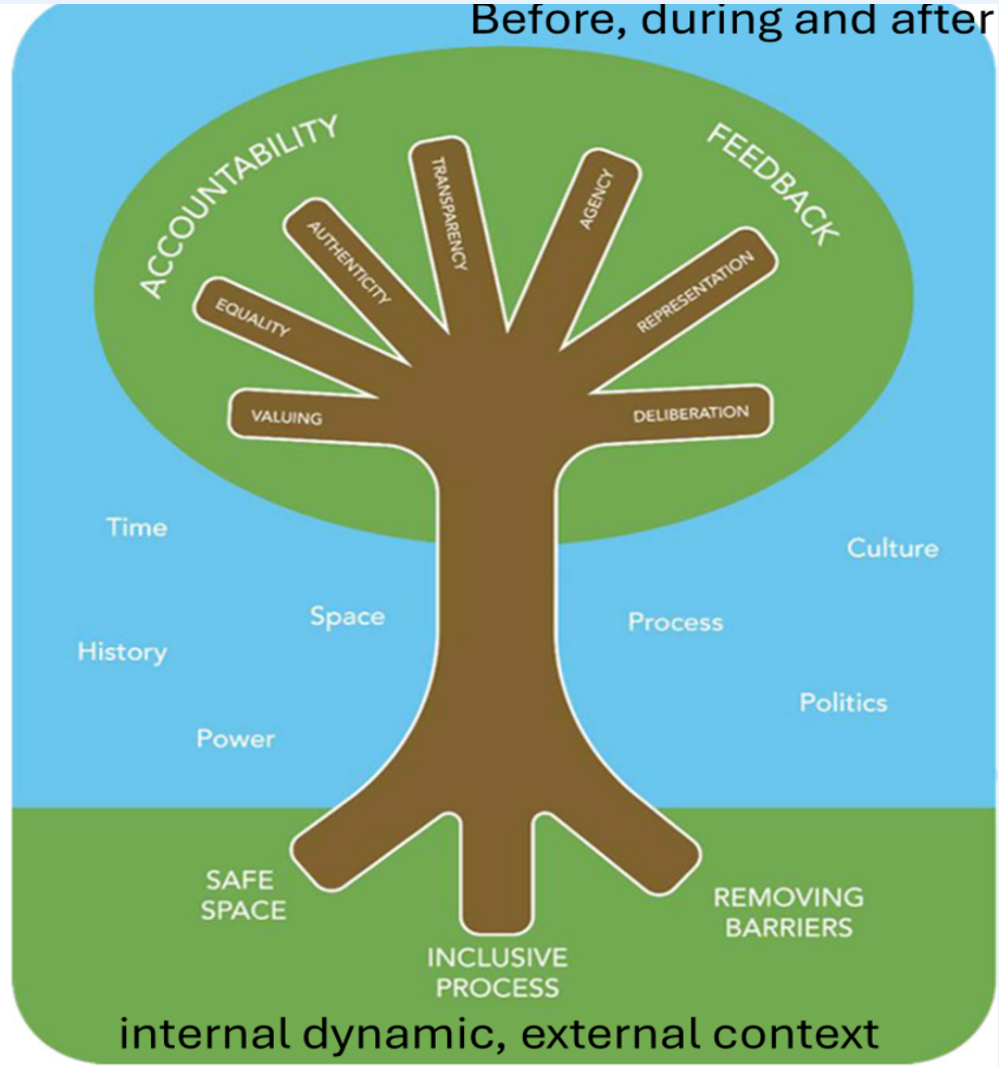
- objectives of the participatory process
- spatial scales (the boundaries of participation)
- social-cultural contexts (diversity, politics, social demographics)
- political-governance contexts (including national policy as well as local)
- historical contexts (what has happened previously in a particular area); and
- power dynamics.

Outcomes must be accountable to participants and provide the opportunity for feedback. Overall success is contingent on other factors. These are:

- **agency** (enabling participants to use and develop voice and skills
- **deliberation** (conversations, discussions, storytelling)
- **authenticity** (honest communication and respecting community voices)
- **transparency** (being truthful, open and consistent)
- **valuing** the contributions of all partners on the basis of **equality**, and **representation** (reflexivity about who is representing who, and whether multiple voices are included)

[45] Bell & Reed (2022)

Figure 3.
'The Tree of Participation'[46]



[45] Taken from (and slightly adapted) Bell & Reed 2022

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