

Taking co-production forward – the challenges and opportunities

Laura Wilkes, *Local Government Information Unit*

As all authors in this book make clear, co-production in health and social care is not about service users looking after themselves; it's about them giving their time and using their skills to run their own care *with* professionals.

There are many reasons to believe that the co-production approach to public service delivery is essential – particularly if we are to tackle some of the big issues facing society today. This approach shouldn't be exclusive to health and social care, but should be at the centre of how local government will transform for the future. Indeed, the co-production and 'Big Society' approach to public service provision is at the heart of the government's political vision for local government service transformation.

Why the co-production approach?

We know that some of the problems facing society can't be tackled by governments alone – they are too complex in nature. Climate change and an ageing population, for instance, require citizens and government to work alongside each other to find solutions for the future. Co-production is essential for a series of reasons, principally: to innovate, ease pressure on the public purse and to encourage citizens and service users to take greater responsibility for their own lives.

Local authorities have a huge opportunity to transform their services – with citizens at the centre. Real innovation can come directly from the service user, who has the in-depth knowledge of what their requirements are and the best way to meet them. Opening up services to users will ensure that the right services are prioritized, and will give the space and opportunity to find new solutions to getting services right first time.

Let's not pretend that it is all about service improvement and innovation; we are in a reality where local government has to save money. Co-production is a credible means to generate free resource – one way of contributing to the massive savings that need to be made to the public sector purse. Tony Bovaird has written that co-production is about regular, long term relationships between service users, members of the community and service providers – where each make resource contributions. Co-production then, is a means through which local government can capitalise on the free resource that citizen involvement generates.

Finally, co-production should encourage citizens to take more responsibility in their own communities and for their own health. For a council to put recycling bins in place will be pointless unless citizens themselves take the time to use them. This is a simple example, but the principle is important. Citizens have to take responsibility for co-producing services, including their own care, if we are to find a sustainable way of delivering these services in the future.

Taking co-production forward

Local government has a key role in enabling and influencing co-production, by providing opportunities for participation. In doing this, local authorities should take advantage of the opportunities available.

Using the tools

There is a series of powers and opportunities that will be coming on-stream and available to local government in the next few months. The Localism Act provides many of these, in the shape of: the General Power of Competence, Community Right to Challenge and Community Right to Bid. Using the commissioning process in a different way and adopting a community budgeting approach also offer local authorities a way to involve communities, provide opportunities for them to participate and shape the priorities that are set.

Councillors as community leaders

The role of the councillor is evolving and changing every day. More and more councillors are seeing themselves as community facilitators and leaders of place; people who have the access and ability to bring together diverse sections of their communities to understand priorities and concerns. Councillors are the direct link between the local authority and community – as such, they are ideally placed to coordinate and facilitate opportunities for their communities to have meaningful involvement in the process of co-production.

Make it easy

There is no use in putting together opportunities for people to get involved, but offering these at times, or in places that are inaccessible. This is a basic point, but an important one. We should be making it as easy and attractive as possible for people to be involved in co-production; this should include making opportunities available at the right time and place, but also making the opportunity something that people will *want* to get involved in. The essential thing here is to tap into what people care about locally and what will encourage them to get involved (this is where councillors should come into their own – they will know what people really care about).

Communicating two-way with our communities

Local government should let the community understand what possibilities are available to them. Unless people know what their options are, including; examples of where involvement has led to something worthwhile, and information about the process of involvement in co-production, it may be difficult for people to fully understand the opportunities that involvement in co-production may bring. Of course, the other side is that we in local government need to be open to suggestions that may be presented by the community and service users. Not all suggestions will be great ones, but some will be gems, and you need to be willing to listen to them when they come along.

Bureaucracy is a real turn off – avoiding this wherever possible will remove barriers, and the perception of barriers, to small community groups getting involved in co-production activities, such as co-commissioning.

We know it's not that simple – the challenges

While there are many opportunities to adopting the co-production approach, it would be remiss to present it as an easy solution to a series of complex problems – we know that it's not so simple and that actually taking co-production forward is challenging. There are a series of things that local government and citizens will have to confront and work through in order for the co-production approach to flourish. These are not insurmountable challenges, but they are challenges that will take thought and consideration to work through.

Changing culture and mindset

An essential part of being able to take this agenda forward will be done through a change in culture and mindset – of local government officers and members, and within communities themselves. Councils have to create an environment where decisions are made differently and where new possibilities are explored. In this new culture officers and politicians will be encouraged to float new ideas, experiment, take risks and be open to learning from anything that does go wrong.

Communities will also have to adapt to this new landscape; the future will be much more about giving as well as taking from the state. In this new environment, citizens will have to take more responsibility for themselves and their surrounds – co-production is central to this. For some communities this will mean a huge shift in mindset, although for many others, it is already something with which they have significant experience. In either case, councillors and local leaders will be central in taking communities with them on this journey, and encouraging this new mindset to flourish.

Risk and accountability

We know that councils feel cautious about the new environment, and tend to be risk averse. In a recent LGiU survey, 50 percent of respondents described their council as 'risk averse' or 'very risk averse' and nearly 85 percent agreed that increased community participation will create new risks for the organisation.

This survey also asked council to rate types of community involvement in order of importance; 91 percent of councils said that co-production of services was very important or important. This came top of the list for what will be important to authorities over the next five years. However, when also asked how much risk they were willing to take in getting the community involved in specific services, respondents showed a low level of appetite for taking risk in adult services.

This suggests that although councils understand that co-production will be important moving forward, they are not necessarily yet prepared to take risks with aspects of health and social care services. Moving forward, this will have to change and councils will have to be prepared to take risks by letting the community get more involved in services.

Local authorities will have to be prepared to take risks, but also understand that with this, they will also have to be prepared for some services to fail. Plans will have to be thought through on how this will be dealt with, as the co-production approach also raises questions about the nature of accountability. If more and more citizens will be responsible for aspects of their own care alongside professionals, if and when things go wrong (and let's be realistic – sometimes they will), lines of accountability will have to be clear.

New skills

There is no doubt that the co-production approach will require a different skill set for communities. Local authorities will have to be mindful that communities will have different capacities to undertake co-production; some capacity building may have to form part of the process, which will require resource. Councillors too may need different skills, including facilitation and deliberation. They will also need to be prepared to manage competing community priorities and manage expectations.

Particularly in relation to personalisation and social care staff, a significant challenge will be to understand what the implications of personalisation are on the way that they work, how they deal with service users and what this will mean for their role in the future.

The future

The future delivery of health and social care services is changing; it has to transform in order to meet the needs of future generations. There are some big questions that still need to be confronted – not least, future funding. But there are steps that local authorities, councillors and communities can take now in order to start this transformation process. Co-production is one of these steps; and working through the challenges and opportunities above will enable councils to move forward.