

Co-production with Disabled people

A supplementary resource to accompany the climate and disability local authority resources

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This document is part of a set of local authority resources developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's Climate and Disability project and the Sensing Climate research project. The Climate and Disability programme is part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.

The resources are designed to support local authorities to understand the impact that climate and nature projects can have on their local communities of Disabled people. This is a supplementary resource on co-production. There is also one on inclusive engagement. We welcome any local authority to use the resources to support their work.

Introduction

Co-production is the best way to create accessible projects that meet the needs of Disabled people. But authentic and good quality co-production can be a complex process that requires sensitivity, adaptability, time and openness to change. It is not a specific

technique but rather 'a way of being with and doing with' (Langley et al., 2022: 112). This guide offers some insights on how to be and do with Disabled people within co-production activities.

Five principles

Co-production typically adheres to five key principles ([Langley et al., 2022](#)):

1. Power sharing, with joint ownership of the process.
2. Including the perspectives of all who can make a contribution who may be impacted by the outcome of a piece of work.
3. Valuing the knowledge of everyone involved in the process and recognising that everyone is equally important.
4. Embedding reciprocity, such that everyone can benefit from the collaborative process. Participation should be fully funded. This includes: time to prepare before meetings, travel costs, personal assistant (PA) costs, child care costs and any other expenses incurred by taking part.
5. Build trusting relationships, with clarity over different roles and responsibilities.

Underpinning all these principles are dialogue and iteration, which are integral. You will need to take time to explore and understand different views and priorities, and ensure this dialogue results in changes in direction in the work and new approaches as needed. Practically, meeting these principles takes time and funding. Ensure that the project is properly resourced before beginning.



Transparency

There are often practical limits on what is possible due to resources and the difference in what can be expected from staff, paid participants and volunteers. You can still do good co-production in such contexts. Just be transparent from the start of the project about:

1. How power will be shared.
2. The scope of the work, especially regarding what is included and what is excluded from planned changes.
3. The roles and responsibilities of the people involved.
4. How people can challenge the way a process is being held if improvements are needed.
5. Expectations about outcomes of the work. You need to support those involved to aspire to change. Yet these aspirations must be balanced with the disappointment and loss of trust that would come from aiming for outcomes that are impractical within the context or budget.
6. How you will bring plans or other pieces of work back to the group for final review

This transparency helps the group know what to expect from you and will settle anxieties about what members will be required to do. Many Disabled people will have experienced multiple examples of organisations, government, researchers or consultations 'helicoptering in', engaging in extractive practices and betraying their trust. Invitations to imagine and create plans for improvement can cause distress when held in contrast to the stark and difficult realities of people's lives. Disabled people may also have had limited opportunities to engage in this type of thinking and may need support and encouragement to do this work.

Authentic co-production requires that the group can make meaningful change to a project. This means that co-production should be carried out at the right time - early enough that meaningful change can be made in light of the group's recommendations, but not so early that the group cannot engage with the detail of the work.

Creating the co-production group

Group make up

Your group should reflect the make-up of the broader community that you are looking to engage. Unless the topic of discussion is related to a specific impairment group, then co-production groups should be pan-impairment. This may involve, for example, including people with mobility impairments, mental health conditions, sensory impairments, learning difficulties, long term health conditions and people who are d/Deaf or neurodivergent. Also embed intersectionality, supporting diverse participation across identities of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and class. Aim for a group of 8 to 14 people.

Understanding needs of members

It can be helpful to arrange a quick call or meeting with members of the group individually before sessions. Use this meeting to explain the project, answer any questions and to understand:

1. Access needs. Explain what kinds of tasks are involved in the co-production so people know what access needs might be relevant to share. Where people might have conflicting access needs, explore what compromises are possible with all parties.
2. Communication preferences. Some people will find email inaccessible, other people will find phone calls inaccessible. Capture preferences and needs such as: needing email reminders or main points in bullet points.
3. Dietary requirements for refreshments.
4. Contact details in case of emergency and an agreement that you can reach out to this person if you are concerned for the wellbeing of the individual.
5. Payment preferences. Invoice or voucher. If voucher, for which shop and physical or digital voucher. An address to send this to.
6. Make sure to keep all information in line with GDPR.

Before the meeting

Sharing in advance

Share the following information at least two weeks in advance:

- An agenda with timings
- Materials people need to engage with at the meeting
- Any slides you will be using.

Make it clear that people should not have to come to the meeting having read these but that some people need them for their access needs.

Also bear in mind that people will want to have time to consider different options before casting votes where this is relevant. Sometimes you will be able to share information for being able to vote in a meeting. Sometimes you will need to set the context in the meeting then vote at the start of the next meeting or over email or phone.

Meeting 1:2:1

Different Disabled people will have different needs when it comes to accessible language and discussion. In cases where a discussion will be difficult for some members of the group, it may help to have a one-to-one conversation with these people ahead of the main meeting. You can then go through the material at a pace and in a way that is comfortable for them. Together, or between the individual and their personal assistant (PA), they can identify and bring a list of the points that are important for them to contribute to the meeting, ensuring that their voice is heard and that they're included.

Credit: Evoke Pictures



First meeting

Time and location

Meetings should be:

1. Hybrid. Ensure people online have an equality of experience and ability to speak.
2. The in-person venue should be step free, with an accessible bathroom and seating. There should be no strong scents or flickering lights. There should be a quiet space that people can use during the meeting.
3. The in-person location should be easy to travel to by both public transport and car, with accessible parking.
4. The best time for meetings for Disabled people is generally 11am to 3.30pm. This gives time for people with carers to be ready to leave the house and allows for people with children to do school pick ups. If the meeting goes over the lunch hour be sure to offer lunch. Depending on your group you may wish to explore other times that work for the majority. Provide alternative options to allow Disabled people who are in full time paid work to feed into the project.

Building trust

Co-production requires trust between the group and the people facilitating it, as well as between members of the group. It can be helpful to hold a social space for the group before any deliberation starts. Offering a free meal when meeting in person can help build trust and appreciation for the time that people have given up to come along (provided dietary and access needs are catered for). It also means that it is more likely people will come to the discussion focussed and excited to begin.

Group agreements

In your first meeting, you will need space to talk through and agree on:

1. Terms of reference. These terms clearly lay out responsibilities and expectations as well as how problems should be raised if they occur.
2. Ground rules. These lay out how the group should act and what

behavior is tolerated and what is not. Bring a draft list of suggestions then give the group time to think through these and suggest additions or modifications. The whole group should then commit to uphold these.

In co-production sessions

Engaging in discussion and deliberation may be tricky for some Disabled people in a group, especially if their lived experience has led to chronic lack of confidence and the expectation that their voice will not be heard or respected. Build time and facilitation tools into your meeting to support quieter members to feel empowered to talk and to encourage louder members to share space. It can also help to invite them to bring along a supportive friend, family member or personal assistant if they feel nervous.

Facilitation

Holding this space well needs expert facilitation. An expert facilitator has:

1. Mature listening skills,
2. The resilience to respond to challenges without getting defensive,
3. The confidence and insight to explore when challenges are reasonable and when they may be pointing to a problem that has a different solution than the one expressed,
4. A good understanding of the lived experiences of disability, ideally first hand,
5. The ability to safely hold difficult emotions that might arise.



Accessibility tools

Tools that can be helpful for co-production processes include:

- **A jargon buster sheet:** this is a piece of paper that you can add explanations to for jargon, complex words and terms as the sessions go on. It can be left on tables for people to refer to.
- **A jargon whistler/red card:** a 'jargon whistler' has a whistle or other instrument, like a bell, and makes a noise whenever jargon or inaccessible language is used. This playful approach alerts speakers to the need to explain and simplify their language in a way that is not threatening to speakers or listeners. Another option can be for participants to have a piece of red card that they can raise. These options might not be accessible to all participants and, in this case, you can work with the person to find an option that is accessible to them, for example they might choose to make a noise or say 'jargon'. It often helps people to build the confidence to use these tools by practising with them at the start and for facilitators to model using them on each other.
- **Parking lot:** This is a piece of paper on the wall that discussion points are added to when they are raised at moments in the meeting when they can't practically be discussed in detail. They can then be returned to when there is an appropriate moment. This means that they won't be forgotten and the individual can trust that their query or idea is not being ignored.
- **Ground rules:** This is a set of rules about how members of the group agree to comport themselves in the space and towards each other to ensure trust, respect and responsibility in the group. It can be helpful to bring a list of pre-suggested ideas that people can then discuss and refine together at the start of the meeting rather than trying to start this process from scratch.
- **Post-it notes:** Encourage people to make notes on post-its as they think of them, which the facilitator can make a point to explore at regular points throughout the discussion.

Mental health

Discussion of barriers and harms faced by Disabled people may bring up difficult emotions and trauma. Chasing a tight agenda and efficiency in the short-term often leads to inefficiency and lack of trust in the long-term, since engagement, hope and empowerment require people to feel properly listened to. However, you will likely need to put facilitation tools in place to ensure work can still move forward. Take time to co-develop ground rules at the start of the process to enable people to enter the space in a way that ensures everyone can feel comfortable and no one feels excluded by anyone else.

At times it is worth creating space for one-to-one listening time with individuals outside of the meeting or in a break so that they can engage in a more focussed way. Be careful that any mental health first aid is delivered from the perspective of the social model of disability.

The work can potentially also impact on the mental health of facilitators. Ensure you also have support in place for them should they need it.

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