



Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Co-production Learning Report 2 - Delivery Partner Perspectives on Co-production

May 2020

Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) is a six-year £6 million investment by the National Lottery Community Fund to **reduce isolation and loneliness amongst older people** in the city. It is being led by South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA) and delivered in partnership with the voluntary sector, public sector, and older people across the Sheffield.

This is the second of a series of **Co-production Learning Reports** produced as part of the Evaluation¹ of ABiS. It focuses on **capturing Delivery Partners' experience of and views about the ABiS approach to co-production and identifies wider lessons** for co-productive approaches within and beyond Sheffield. It builds on **Co-production Learning Report 1** which sought to **understand the ABiS approach to co-production**.

Key Findings

Delivery Partners' Understanding of Co-production

The conversations with Delivery Partners focused on **how they understood and then undertook co-production at a project level**. Although some partners did refer to different aspects of co-

production such as co-design and co-evaluation they tended to talk about co-production in terms of underpinning principles such as **engaging service users in meaningful and appropriate ways** and **giving them a say in the services and types of activities they accessed** rather than specific co-production methodologies.

All Delivery Partners that we spoke to were clear that co-production has a vital part to play in their work within the ABiS programme. They tended to be clear about the SYHA approach to co-production and understand why it was so important.

Importantly, Delivery Partners felt that the work of SYHA had supported them to think about the way that they engaged people in co-production:

“ We're trying to go back a bit more of what comes naturally to us in terms of co-production, but it has definitely helped us think about 'have we asked these people those things, do we need to a little focus group or something within the group at certain points' and stuff like that. (Delivery Partner) ”

¹ The evaluation is being led by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University but is co-produced in partnership with South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA), the ABiS Core Partnership and Delivery Partners, and older people in Sheffield.

Perspectives on co-design

When discussing the extent to which Delivery Partners had been able to input into the design of the ABiS programme, experience varied. Some partners recalled the early stages of SYHA designing the programme and remembered early discussions where colleagues had been invited to input, but many came into the programme at a later stage. One partner reflected that their members (service users) don't necessarily see how they might be able to shape the ABiS programme as a whole but they will see how they can shape the service being delivered:

“ Even as Delivery Partners we may not be able to influence the whole programme simply because the programme was set up with the funding that's a particular way or because there are other Delivery Partners or other things that the programme management have to consider, so even for us as Delivery Partners, we may not be able to influence a lot, let alone our participants, but within our project they do have a lot of say. (Delivery Partner 4) ”

Support from SYHA around co-production

People talked about positively the range of ways in which SYHA supported them to think about, and develop their co-production activities, whether through co-production workshops, regular meetings, or support to develop co-production plans.

Delivery partners reflected on how it took time to get systems, databases and processes supporting co-production working well in the early years of the programme. However, over time, they have seen the improvements:

“ I would say now it's definitely much better than it has been in the first two years, that's due to many factors, the project was still young, there were some difficulties with capturing data because of change within the database. Now it feels it's all very well-structured and we also have a co-production link person, so that is another way to review it, so I'm meeting monthly with [SYHA staff member] and we discuss more in-depth all the plans, what sort of support I need from them, whether I need any additional budget, whether they can or should be part of what we're doing, and on top of that we have weekly email updates, what's going on and what would be good to touch on. So the co-production is a really big part of the project. (Partner 1) ”

Delivery partners varied in their experience of different approaches to co-production within their work, with some more confident than others. It therefore follows that Delivery Partners got different things from the support offered by SYHA. Some talked about benefiting from learning about different approaches and techniques, whereas others mainly valued them as networking opportunities, and a forum within which new relationships could be forged.

“ And the framework they've got, co-production, co-evaluation and the legacy plans, if you were a small organisation that had just set out and you'd never done anything like it before it is a good framework to use but for us it's something we do anyway across the board. (Partner 5) ”

There was interest in further support workshops from SYHA, to really help them to understand what was expected of them and how that differed from their current practice. An important aspect was the opportunity to network with other providers and learn from each other.

Some Delivery Partners talked about the importance of their positive relationship with SYHA, and how they felt supported and listened to:

“ I'm really happy to say that they listened to us and if we say this cannot be completed, or this part of co-production, like co-delivery, cannot be part of our project because of regulations for example, they're absolutely fine with that. So they do listen to us, they see us as an expert in the mental health field, that makes our job much easier. (Partner 1) ”

Similarly, another delivery partner felt that they had developed a trusting relationship with SYHA, and that as a consequence, they were able to enter into open and honest dialogue about their work on the programme:

“ I can see where you need to get a level of being a good pupil as it were, and build up that trust that then allows you to say that doesn't quite work for us, do you mind if we do it in a different way, and South Yorkshire Housing have always said yes... So I feel like I've had the opportunity to co-produce and they've asked me to core partners meetings to report on.... (Partner 3) ”

Co-production reporting requirements

Some Delivery Partners discussed the challenges posed by the [monitoring and paperwork](#) required, suggesting that partners can feel overwhelmed by these requirements:

“ The co-production, the co-evaluation and the legacy plans I find really hard going, really hard, cos it’s something we do naturally and it’s not like we must do this, this and this, it’s just something that we do and you’ve got to put it all down on paper what you’ve done and a lot of it repeats itself I find. (Partner 5) ”

One partner also talked about how the reporting requirements around co-production could feel over-formal when compared to how they co-produced in practice:

“ So I feel very much from South Yorkshire Housing Association, they want that more formalised way of doing it, we’re going to do a specific activity that is co-production and cos we report on co-production in our quarterly reports it’s like ‘where did you do it, how long did it take, how many people were involved’, so it’s very structured whereas we find that doesn’t work, actually it’s quite off-putting for people. (Partner 6) ”

In this context an opportunity to report on co-production activities more flexibly, that captured more of the ad hoc activity undertaken by Delivery Partners on a day-to-day basis, would have been welcomed. Some Delivery Partners also felt that the reporting requirements around co-production have actually become more onerous over time:

“ So I would say there’s maybe more monitoring measures in place this time round when I thought I might be coming back to something that might be a bit more relaxed in terms of co-production, I feel like it’s perhaps gone the other way. (Partner 6) ”

In some cases, this led to Delivery Partners feeling overwhelmed and scrutinised. Although they acknowledged the importance of meeting of the overarching funder requirements, they were keen to continue to work with SYHA to find ways of working which were easier and less time consuming, but equally meaningful.

Confusion over co-production

Although all partners knew about the importance of co-production, and understood the emphasis placed on co-production activities by SYHA, there was less consensus on exactly what was expected of them as Delivery Partners, and whether aspects of their work constituted ‘co-production’. For example:

“ I think it’s quite ambiguous as well, so someone’s idea of co-production might be slightly different to somebody else’s idea and therefore what does it actually encompass? It brings up lots of questions, is this co-production, like we’re going to a coffee morning, therefore is that co-production? We’ve going to a coffee morning and they’ve said they want this and we’ve then done this, is that co-production?” (Partner 2) ”

In contrast some Delivery Partners were clear about the term, and suggested that SYHA had supported them to develop a good understanding:

“ when it comes to the whole structure of co-production, it was very well-explained to us by South Yorkshire Housing Association so there wasn’t anything we were dreading to do or be part of. (Partner 1) ”

However, other partners talked about the challenge of using the terminology surrounding co-production, with some suggesting that it was too formal to use with customers/service users:

“ And it’s sometimes difficult to explain to people what co-production means, the terminology you would use. Like if we go into a coffee morning group ‘we’re doing some co-production work today’ they’d go ‘what do you mean?’ (Partner 5) ”

Some partners felt that co-production was really at the heart of their activities and services already, but that the terminology itself had been new:

“ So it kind of felt like co-production was coming in as this very new thing that we want to embed in organisations, but actually it was something we were already doing, so it was compatible but more a bit like this isn’t new to us. (Partner 6) ”

Partners also told us how challenging they find the term 'co-production', calling it *'problematic'* *'really awkward'* and a *'barrier'* in certain circumstances. A number of Delivery Partners talked about the way in which things can become a bit too focused on the term itself, forgetting that at its heart, it is about positive and meaningful involvement:

“ I think it's something that honestly I struggle with their definition cos it's something that I think we've always done, we used to call it service user involvement and it's obviously a positive thing that they want to do but sometimes I think they forget the nitty gritty of how it actually works, I think it can be quite, I don't know, a bit of a showy thing, for want of a better word, so it was nice pictures and events and things that happen but I wonder if it's sometimes acknowledged that it's really difficult to do it properly. (Partner 7) ”

Putting co-production into practice

When discussing whether they felt clear about how they were expected to build co-production into their work, Delivery Partners shared a range of views. Several partners were clear and had worked with SYHA to develop co-production plans. A small number, however, were a little less clear on what activities constituted co-production, and suggested that a number of activities did not lend themselves to co-production activities. Delivery partners also discussed some of the broader challenges they faced when trying to build-in co-production activities:

“ Yeah cos I think it's not always attainable, I think it's an admirable desire to want to involve service users and volunteers in every step of the process, but I know it's not always possible. We try and involve service users in everything we do as much as possible, but sometimes when you've got to write a bid and you've got to deliver a service, you need to do those things and time's a pressure sometimes. (Partner 7) ”

This partner also reflected on some of the real challenges when attempting to engage people in co-production:

“ Yeah, the people we're working with are in dire straits a lot of the time so our service at the minute and others we've got, it's either financial stuff or mental health crisis or pure poverty, so to invite them in for an additional chat about something, to make room and time for something else and have to get child care, it's quite a tall order. (Partner 7) ”

The challenge of engaging people in the right way, at a point where it works for the individual was emphasised. Not all formal co-production activities (meetings, events etc) work for everyone, so it needs careful consideration in order to make it most effective. Linked to this, ensuring that people understand that you are going to take their views seriously, and that things will change as a result is really important.

“ So the challenge I would say in the early days of co-production, very challenging thing is that people might not treat it seriously, they might think they want to talk to us but it's going to go nowhere, so you have to show people that you're serious about and you'll listen to people and it's not just for the sake of talking or ticking boxes to say we've done co-production but we're actually not interested in improving or changing anything... But as you build that relationship it gets easier and easier. (Partner 1) ”

This sense of change over time came through in a number of our interviews with Delivery Partners. People talked about how their confidence with their approaches to co-production had grown over time, enabling them to try different activities and engage people in new ways and giving them a sense that “we can do it and we're not going to fail” (Partner 1).

Managing expectations with service users/customers

One delivery partner wanted to emphasise the challenge of co-producing sensitively, and the need to take great care to be clear with people what is 'up for discussion' and what isn't. There is a need to ensure that people bound their co-production activities, and engage people meaningfully so that people understand from the outset what they can have some control over:

“ It was about managing expectations when it comes to co-production. So talking to people is one thing and it’s really important, but in terms of what we do we are very focused on [our service], that kind of stuff and the target audience have very specific concerns and worries about that, but when we go and speak to people we have to be very careful to manage their expectations. (Partner 2) ”

Group and individual approaches to co-production

It is interesting to reflect on the variety of ways in which Delivery Partners talked about their organisation’s co-production activities and practices. We can think about grouping these into approaches which focus on **individuals**, and more **purposeful group work**, for example focus groups.

People discussed their attempts to arrange more formal, or purposeful, co-production activities, such as project steering groups, or one-off focus groups. These efforts had led to mixed results. Some partners celebrated the more formal approaches to co-production, discussing how they felt that their work more broadly had benefited from such practices:

“ Yes, it’s something that we fundamentally want to embed within the project, older people being involved in decision making at every stage in terms of that setting the project up, what the projects are going to look like, the evaluation, so just making sure older people are at the forefront of the decisions we make and what we do. (Partner 6) ”

However, a number of Delivery Partners talked about their approach to co-production being focused on each individual, to ensure their service is shaped around their needs. It was often when services took this more individual, asset-based approach to their work, that the formal approaches to co-production were less popular or successful. For example:

“ Exactly... and that’s how we’re meant to show our co-production and show the co-production meetings etc, but we don’t have co-production meetings, we run a service that is co-produced... we wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t. I think that’s quite different to the other services, I think South Yorkshire Housing know... but I often think that the co-production value or amount that we do often isn’t shown off or showcased because it is the service. (Partner 3) ”

In the following example, one delivery partner explores why the more purposeful approach to group co-production activities hasn’t worked for this particular project:

“ We tried to have a steering group, do more formal workshops with volunteers, having those conversations, and we found it didn’t work, it just jarred so much with our natural approaches. (Delivery Partner 6) ”

An important reflection here is that Delivery Partners are working within very different contexts and therefore the way in which they report on and think about their co-production activities also varies. Those organisations that see their whole services as wholly co-produced with individuals seem to find the reporting task more challenging, because as a number of partners stated, the service is the co-production.

Linked to this is that Delivery Partners reflected on both formal and informal co-production practices. Where some talked about the benefit of more formal approaches, many discussed the benefit to the informal ways of engaging people:

“ People need to feel they’re being listened to, it’s like that you said, we did. Then just that informal grass roots setting that we’re operating in, so the co-production and the settings need to reflect that, it’s generally just coffee and cake and a chat, there’s no presentations, it’s engaging with people in a space that they’re comfortable in, in a way that they’re comfortable with. (Partner 7) ”

Key lessons

The formal focus on co-production in ABiS, and the wider Age Better programme, represented a departure from many previous programmes in which co-production was often a ‘taken for granted’ feature of voluntary and community sector provision. As such the findings presented here provide a number of lessons for the programme, for providers, and for other funders and commissioners interested in embedding a more holistic approach to co-production in their ways of working.

1. Drawing a clearer distinction between programme and project level co-production activities when monitoring progress

Our interviews with Delivery Partners suggest there was sometimes a disconnection between or misunderstanding about programme versus project level co-production activities, aims and objectives. Both types of activities are important: programme level co-production can shape the overall objectives and activities that are provided, including how and to whom; whilst project level co-production can shape the way frontline services are delivered, including responding holistically and in an asset-based way to the needs of individuals.

In practice programme level co-production lends itself more easily to formal monitoring and reporting whereas at the project level, where co-production is embedded in day-to-day activities, formal monitoring and reporting can be more challenging. There is therefore a risk that imposing formal output or activity-based monitoring and reporting on project level co-production does not fully capture the essence of the work that is undertaken.

2. Reframing the relationship between project and programme level co-production as bottom-up

For a number of Delivery Partners the ABiS approach to co-production appeared top down. That is, there was a perception that co-production was serving the interests of the programme rather than its beneficiaries. This was not the intention, so suggests that co-production could be reframed to explain how it occurs from the bottom-up. For example, being clear that co-production means informing project and programme activities by:

- a. Putting users at the heart of how a service is delivered, responding to their needs and understanding what matters to them in their day-to-day lives.
- b. Capturing learning at a provider level, making the necessary adjustments to provision, and feeding learning back into the programme.

- c. Compiling learning at a programme level, making adjustments to provision as appropriate, and sharing the learning with providers and other partners.

3. Being clear about the difference between collective, group and individual approaches to co-production, and the contribution they can make

Building on learning points 1 and 2 above, we found that a number of Delivery Partners made the distinction between co-production with a collective goal and co-production with groups and individuals. This distinction can be found in the wider literature on co-production as well:²

- **Individual co-production** is where citizens participate in a service as provided and the contributions made and the benefits received by citizens are experienced at an individual level.
- **Group co-production** refers to voluntary, active participation in a service by a number of citizens, often through coordination between individual service providers and the users of those services. The inputs by citizens are collective but the benefits still tend to materialise at the level of the individual.
- **Collective co-production** is where co-productive activities result in collective achievements whose benefits may be shared by an entire community. The benefits tend to be collective but the inputs by citizens can be provided individually or together.

Wider evidence suggests that individual and group co-production is more prevalent and straightforward to engage with than collective approaches and this reflects the findings presented here. **Delivery Partners tended to be comfortable explaining how they supported individual and group-based co-productive activities** at the level of their own project or service and in many cases this was embedded in the 'DNA' of their work. **Some Delivery Partners struggled, however, to make the connection between these co-productive activities and the collective co-production** that was expected at the level of the ABiS programme.

² See for example: Bovaird, T., Stoker, G., Jones, T., Loeffler, E. and Pinilla Roncancio, M. (2016) Activating collective co-production of public services: influencing citizens to participate in complex governance mechanisms in the UK. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 82(1), pp. 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852314566009>

This suggests that, in complex multi-stakeholder programmes like ABiS, a clearer distinction and explanation needs to be made about the different purposes of co-production, how they are undertaken, and the ways in which they are interconnected:

- Individual and group-based co-production is necessary to ensure that individual services and activities meet the needs of individuals and can be adjusted in response to feedback.
- Collective co-production is necessary to ensure that the programme as a whole can be flexible and responsive to needs as they emerge, based on shared experience and learning from delivering and receiving frontline services.

This means that collective co-production will be most effective when it draws on a foundation of effective group-based and individual co-production by service delivery providers.

Next steps

This is the second evaluation output focussing on co-production across the ABiS programme. A future Co-production Learning Reports will focus on the ABiS co-governance model from a range of stakeholder perspectives. A second strand of evaluation activity is focussing on the impact of ABiS on older people's experience of isolation and loneliness and will combine analysis of programme and project level quantitative data with more detailed qualitative insights gleaned from older people themselves.

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