



# Involving older people in creating services and activities

The Ageing Better programme emphasises the importance of involving older people in shaping the activities and services they use. The belief is that by working together, those who provide and those who use services can achieve better outcomes. Working together to build an activity or service in this way is often called ‘co-production’.

## What is co-production?

There are different ways that users of services can be involved in designing and delivering them. Co-production is one of the more advanced ways in which to do this. Co-production goes beyond informing or consulting

people on your plans and requires a genuine partnership between all stakeholders.

“ Co-production enables citizens and professionals to share power and work together in equal partnership, to create opportunities for people to access support when they need it and to contribute to social change. <sup>1</sup> ”



<sup>1</sup> This is the definition offered by the Co-production Network for Wales [www.allinthisgetherwales.wordpress.com](http://www.allinthisgetherwales.wordpress.com)

Co-production means working with the people who will use a particular activity or service right from the start, through conception, design, delivery and evaluation.

Activities funded through the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme are required to involve older people from the outset. The National Lottery Community Fund identify five different types of co-production activity:

- design (of projects, activities etc.)

- decision-making
- delivery (of services or activities)
- research
- voice (awareness-raising and influencing)

This briefing explores the different ways in which older people have been involved in co-production as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and highlights some key learning from the experience.





## Why co-produce activities?

Both participants in activities and the organisations providing them can benefit in a range of ways. Co-produced activities draw on a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Older people are experts at knowing what they want and need. Bringing them together with people who understand how to set-up and deliver services, should lead to more effective and relevant services and more engaged and empowered citizens.

### Benefits for participants

Evidence suggests that co-production can:

- Improve satisfaction with activities because they are

more likely to be aligned to participants' needs and preferences.

- Give people a voice, provide an opportunity to share their experiences and enjoy learning from others. This can help improve self-esteem and create a greater sense of community belonging.
- Help develop new skills and boost confidence, which may lead in the longer term to people getting more involved in other forms of civic and community participation. In the case of Ageing Better in Birmingham, we have seen older people go on to establish new groups and activities across Birmingham as a result of their experiences with the programme.



## Age of Experience Group

The Age of Experience Group help the Ageing Better programme team to make decisions and steer the direction of the programme. Group members are all over 50 and have experience of isolation. The group meet regularly to share experiences, identify training needs and discuss future opportunities.

Membership of the group has increased and diversified as the programme has progressed. Being able to draw on experts' lived experiences can be a powerful tool for promoting the programme, providing a unique and first-hand perspective.

As the programme has developed it has expanded the range of opportunities for older people to contribute. Members have been involved in a variety of different ways, including programme design, delivery, evaluation and governance of the programme. Types of activities vary considerably but have regularly included recruitment and procurement for aspects of programme activity; becoming Ageing Better Fund panel members; representing the user voice on programme groups and sub-groups; and undertaking research and evaluation activities.

*"I have been involved in the funding panel and was able to make a difference in some very important decisions, and my views were taken into consideration."*

Members have also been involved in a range of marketing and communication activities, promoting the programme, not just in Birmingham but also on the

national stage and have even met the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street.

Members value the opportunity to give something back to the programme. They say participation has helped to bring about a sense of purpose and for some, counteracted negative perceptions of ageing. They also report feeling more connected to the programme and there is substantial evidence of the impact that their participation has had on themselves and the programme.

*"Being involved has increased my self-worth and made me feel more useful."*

*"You can see the progression of the people who've been on the Age of Experience group in terms of their professional and personal development and the friendships that they've got out of it. Most of them are [now] sitting on other boards and different panels."*

One reason for the success of the group has been that the programme team have recognised the importance of offering a wide menu of engagement opportunities to members to ensure that all can participate across different levels of intensity of involvement. Another reason has been the level of planning and resource the programme team has invested in the group, which includes an induction process to explain the role and purpose of the group and regular communication between the programme and members.

## Benefits for activity and service providers

Co-production can help service providers to:

- Develop understanding of people's experiences, needs and preferences, as well as establishing a deeper connection to the community.
- Increase take-up of, and satisfaction with, services as the people they are aimed at have helped shape them.
- Achieve better outcomes, such as a reduction in loneliness. This could result in a reduction in demand for more costly support down the line as more effective services should prevent problems developing in the first instance.
- Enhance staff job satisfaction, by increasing their knowledge as well as building greater confidence in their work as a result of co-production.
- Strengthen funding applications by demonstrating a clear need and support for a service.
- Raise their profile by demonstrating recognised good practice.

“ [Co-production] has really changed the way that we design the programme... [The programme] is based on people's real experiences, it is also better informed as well. You're not making assumptions whereas in the previous programmes I have been involved in, where there was little or no co-production, we were working on assumptions and then prove it right or wrong. ”



## Practical tips for ensuring successful co-production

So, how does co-production work in practice? Key is recognising that everyone brings assets - skills, lived-experience, knowledge, ideas and their time - and therefore should be treated as an equal and given the opportunity to contribute.

### Getting people involved

- Make sure that everyone who wants to can take part in co-production in a way that works for them.
- Demystify what co-production means when looking to get people involved. Think about using different ways to describe what you are doing. You may want to explain it as coming together to work as an equal partnership to achieve shared goals. Or perhaps that it's about finding out from the people who are experts on their own life and needs what works for them and how to make sure that activities or services are the best they can be.
- Make activities friendly and fun. Sharing food can be a

great way to bring people together. Ensure that breaks are provided in meetings to enable people to talk and connect.

- Set the right tone for meetings. Co-create ground rules at the start, making sure that older people feel safe to speak.
- Offer a range of ways to contribute to appeal to different people – from light-touch activities like jotting ideas on a postcard to more demanding activities such as sitting on a decision-making panel. Think about what opportunities for progression can be offered as people's confidence grows.
- Make activities accessible. Provide plain English information about activities in advance and consider the particular needs of older people, such as using venues with good public transport links at a time when people can use their bus pass.
- Consider whether people need training to build their

confidence and provide them with the skills to contribute, for example, public speaking or facilitating a meeting.

## **Give and take**

- Taking steps to reduce power imbalances is an important part of co-production. Everyone should get something out of taking part and feel their contribution has been meaningful.
- Consider asking staff and professionals to dress down and remove lanyards and other ID badges.
- Be open from the start about what can and can't be done. If you have budget or time constraints, or some aspects of the work aren't within your control, be upfront about this to create trust
- Be reflective. Check in with people regularly to see how things are going and make changes as needed.
- Encourage new people to join you from time to time to keep ideas fresh. Try to ensure a mix of people from



diverse backgrounds so you can draw on a range of experiences and knowledge.

- Be pragmatic. If you can't do full co-production, be open about this.
- Remember you are co-producing for a purpose.

Professionals need to be open to challenge and doing things differently.

- By the same token, co-production is not about handing all control over to service users. Older people will need your support and expertise.

## **Think Positive**

Think Positive is a support group for vulnerable adults and was formed using co-production principles. Members are involved in decision-making and management roles are appointed by the whole group.

The group meets at the Sanctuary in Castle Vale and offers a range of activities in a friendly, supportive environment. Group members agree what activities to put on and have planned an agenda for 2020. If someone does not want to take part in an activity there is always an alternative option. The group encourages members to suggest activities by providing a sheet alongside the sign-in register for members to fill in.

*"The group is very inclusive and treats with me with dignity and respect. My opinions are always listened to and sometimes I have a suggestion put into practice."*

## Co-production requires commitment

- Ensuring buy-in to co-production from all those involved is key to success. A genuine commitment to co-production means adapting your culture, mind-set and ways of working.
- Be willing to invest time and resource into developing co-production, so that it meets your aims and is appropriate to service users.
- Allow sufficient time and resource to do the job well and fully support people. Otherwise co-production will not fulfil its potential, and at worst, could do harm.
- Be patient – some people may need time to see the value in helping to build services rather than being passive recipients of them.

- To truly embed co-production within your organisation it may be necessary to get information about co-production out to every part of your organisation so everyone understands what it is.

## And finally...

- Have a go. Accept that you may make mistakes and things may not work out exactly as planned. The real value comes from learning and the willingness to be open to new ideas.
- Capture learning as you go, work 'out loud' and proactively share what you are doing with others.
- Seek out people with experience of or an interest in co-production to learn from. Share what's working for you, what hasn't gone so well and why it's worth it.

## The Sunlighters

The Sunlighters are a group of older people who meet regularly to do pottery. With the support of a local community organisation they developed their idea, secured funding from Ageing Better in Birmingham and are now on their way to being self-sustaining. As well as enjoying the craft, members have experienced a transformation in confidence and self-esteem.

St Paul's Community Development Trust, based in Balsall Heath, was established to support local people to lead healthy and fulfilled lives. To find out what older people in the community wanted the Trust carried out informal consultations by inviting people to coffee mornings and a community lunch.

*"I think the fact that it was co-production made it work better."*

The Trust provided a safe and supportive environment for the Sunlighters to develop. The manager engaged older people who were already active citizens to encourage their less confident neighbours to come along. Some group members were initially nervous about running the group and often looked to the Trust staff member for direction. But over time their confidence has improved and the staff member has stepped back. Members now host a successful stall at local events, such as the Balsall Heath Carnival, to raise money to continue the group; they sell books, bric-a-brac and crafts they have made.

Participation in the group has empowered members to take on new challenges. One has become Chair of another local Ageing Better group and another has signed up for English classes.

*"The group are very much more engaged and involved, it's done wonders for their self-esteem and confidence... they're becoming more independent so they don't need me there actually."*



## About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. The examples are of activities supported by the programme and the quotes are from people running and taking part in activities.

Ageing Better in Birmingham is part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021) £78million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

## Further information and useful contacts

### **Ageing Better in Birmingham**

[www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk](http://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk)

### **Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)**

[www.bvsc.org](http://www.bvsc.org)

### **A Meeting of Minds: How co-production benefits people, professionals and organisations**

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/co-production>

CFE Research evaluated the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and produced this leaflet. February 2020