

Co-production in ActEarly: **NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US**





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Three minute summary

How do we 'do' effective co-production? We used appreciative inquiry to focus on existing assets and spoke to nearly 100 community members and stakeholders in Bradford and Tower Hamlets. In this strategy we draw on the key findings from our appreciative inquiry and offer important values, principles and directions on how to deliver effective co-production for the ActEarly programme.

Three core values:

The 'ActEarly' approach to co-production

- 1 Equality:**
communities and stakeholders as equal contributors
- 2 Agency:**
Voice, choice and power
- 3 Reciprocity:**
communities, stakeholders and researchers all benefit

Nine guiding principles



- 1 Principle 1:** Power should be shared amongst all partners
- 2 Principle 2:** Embrace a wide range of different perspectives and skills to ensure these are represented in the project
- 3 Principle 3:** Respect and value of lived experience and how different forms of knowledge can be expressed and transmitted
- 4 Principle 4:** Ensure that there are benefits to all parties involved in co-production activities
- 5 Principle 5:** Go to communities. Do not expect communities to come to you
- 6 Principle 6:** Work flexibly
- 7 Principle 7:** Avoid jargon and ensure communities have access to the right information at the right time
- 8 Principle 8:** Relationships with communities should be built for the long term and not for the short term
- 9 Principle 9:** Make sure co-production initiatives are adequately resourced



1 ActEarly – A Tale of Two Cities



ActEarly is a consortium of researchers, communities, decision makers and stakeholders which aspires to improve the life chances of children living in areas with high levels of child poverty in Bradford, West Yorkshire and Tower Hamlets, London¹. It aims to do this by developing, implementing and evaluating 'system' level interventions to improve children's health focusing on the key themes of healthy places, healthy livelihoods, healthy learning, food and healthy weight, and play and physical activity. ActEarly's 'City Collaboratory' will provide a whole-system environment where the public, scientists, policy leaders and practitioners can work with each other to develop and test system-wide early life upstream prevention solutions, supported by efficient platforms for robust evaluation.

Community empowerment is at the heart of our City Collaboratory approach. We know that real and lasting changes can only happen if communities have a fair say in decisions that are made about them. We are committed to co-production with communities and partners in such a way that develops acceptable, feasible, and sustainable systems interventions with real impact. Historically, health research, including the development of initiatives to improve health, has been driven by professionals with little or no input from the target populations². A wealth of evidence has emerged over the last two decades showing why this top-down approach is not effective, inclusive or equitable³⁻⁵. On the other hand, there are powerful reasons for taking a more inclusive pathway⁵⁻⁷ with evidence showing people's needs are better met when they are involved as partners to influence change. In essence, this is the underlying purpose of co-production whose time has now come.

Concomitantly, members of public have started to demand a greater level of inclusion in things that affect them. They want to be considered part of the solution and not simply just recipients of services. As social philosopher John Dewey rightly emphasised, there is a difference between '*doing with and doing for*'⁸. In spite of communities wanting to be involved, and the overwhelming evidence which shows 'doing things with' communities is both effective and good for community wellbeing^{3,9}, we find that co-production remains a marginal activity often found on the periphery and in a limited way. In starting this journey to redress this situation, it is important to highlight that both Bradford and Tower Hamlets are not in the same place as far as history and culture of community inclusion is concerned; and for that reason their journeys in achieving co-productive practices may involve different pathways and milestones. In Bradford, for example, researchers working with policymakers and communities have already built strong networks, connecting multiple stakeholders and embedding community involvement and engagement approaches across a range of services over a number of years. However, these different starting points and locations do not stop us from transcending place-based boundaries to make this work for our communities; if anything, they enable us to learn and support each other to make co-production a deliverable prospect for both sites.

At any rate, we know time is right and ripe for change. By paying attention to and adjusting systems, resources, capacity and willingness, the ActEarly programme presents us with an opportunity to make co-production a reality which can run as a golden thread through everything we do. By taking this direction we can make co-production a core part of not only our business but also the culture of how we work with our partners. To this end, we have produced this strategy which will guide our travel.

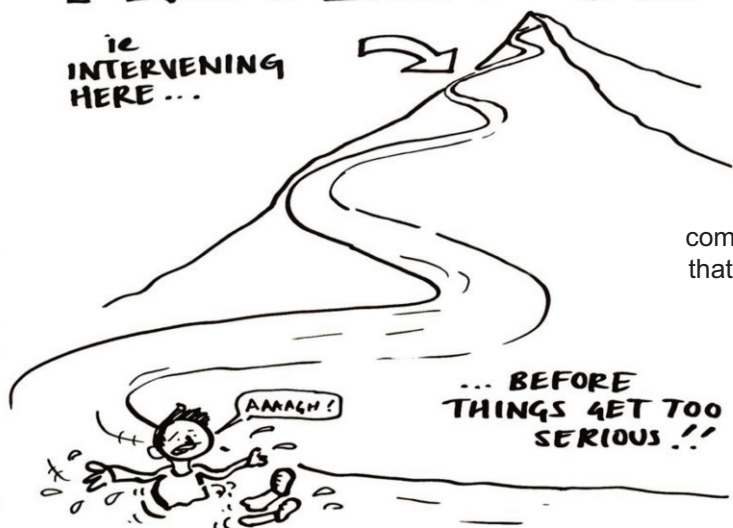
However, it is worth cautioning that this is not another document to add to the existing material which already makes a strong case for co-productive approaches. Whilst that argument has been won and those who

oppose it are now thankfully in the minority, it should be noted that not all aspects of research need to be co-produced and there will always remain some processes and systems that will require specialist expertise and esoteric knowledge which are unlikely to need input from, or be of interest to, community members. Examples of this include sample size calculations, using analytical software tools, populating ethical approval forms, and other administrative processes which make research possible. It is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of all the activities which may not have a natural fit with co-production but we make it clear in this strategy that community members bring a certain skill-set and knowledge framework that we need to capitalise on to make effective co-production a reality.

We hope this strategy will be useful to a wide audience including researchers, theme leads, policy makers, community groups, the voluntary sector, faith organisations, schools and any partner who is connected to the ActEarly programme.

THIS IS ABOUT
**UPSTREAM
PREVENTION**

is
INTERVENING
HERE ...



2 Co-producing a Co-production Strategy



ActEarly aims to:

“engage policymakers, third sector organisations and our public (especially young people and their families) using citizen science methods of community engagement and prioritization in an asset-based community development approach”¹

Central to our ethos is to engage with all actors (communities, researchers, decision makers, policy makers) who have a stake in the issues we want to address. It is only by including all these perspectives that we can create sustainable and acceptable approaches to improve health. To this end we chose an asset-based approach to create our co-production strategy and in the process established and developed some important partnerships. This was not a desk-based exercise; John Le Carre reminded us that “*a desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world*”⁹ as it can fail to take account of what may be going on in the lives of people, the pressures on communities, their levels of willingness, trust, and histories of engagement, along with many other factors which may impede working in a co-productive way. For these reasons we opted for an approach that explored the issues by talking to people and allowing them to guide us with what to include in the strategy. This means we have an end product that embodies the values we seek to deliver.



3 Appreciative Inquiry – Focus on the positives

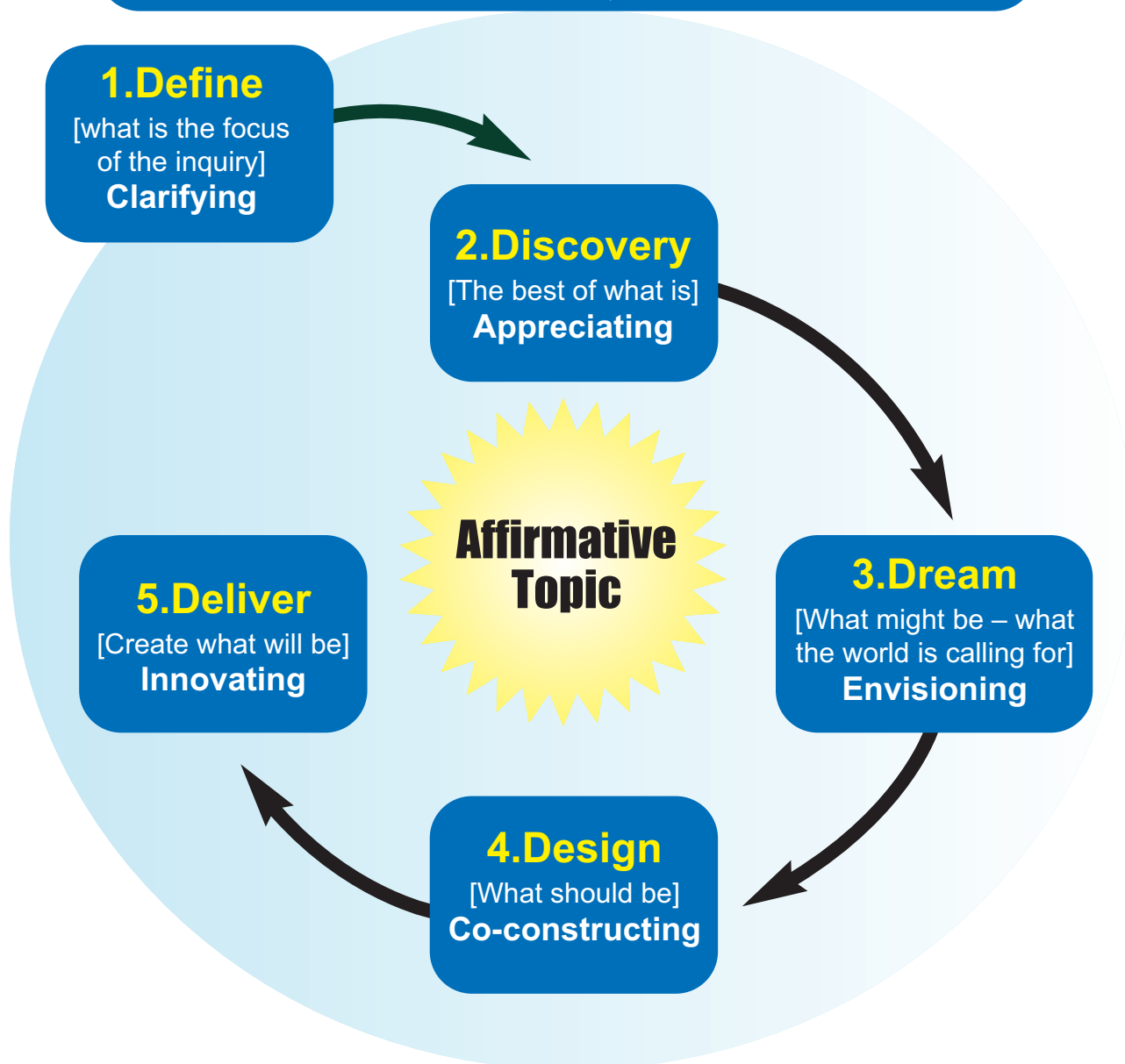


This strategy has been developed using an appreciative inquiry approach. A fundamental principle of appreciative inquiry is its focus on assets and strengths within communities rather than focussing on deficits and problems¹⁰. This approach aims to discover what gives life to a system, what energises people and what they most care about. The deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organisations and relationships are in a stark contrast to more traditional forms of research that seek to analyse or diagnose problems. Appreciative inquiry focuses on what is already working, and where people want to build on or supplement what is already working well. It does not focus on the identification or solving of problems (though that is sometimes where it might end up), but rather fixes attention on envisioning and creating a positive future.

Between March – November 2021 we organised and delivered a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews and workshops with community groups, residents’ associations, people employed in community engagement work and people in the voluntary and the statutory sector, as well as a range of other stakeholders across the two ActEarly field sites of Bradford, West Yorkshire and Tower Hamlets, East London. Across these sites we engaged nearly 100 people. We convened a multi-disciplinary steering group to guide our activities, and our approach was approved by the UCL research ethics committee.

Our Appreciative Inquiry took the 5D approach which is depicted in the diagram below with each step further described below:

Appreciative Inquiry 5D approach



Define

Clarify the scope and form some consensus on what we mean when we say co-production. We started every research conversation by discussing what this means with participants to achieve a mutual understanding.

Discover

What is currently being done, with a particular focus on 'what works well'. We also asked 'who it works well for' and the mechanisms and the context that makes this possible. For example, certain approaches may work well in one area but perhaps not in another.

Dream

What might be possible to achieve or what could make things work even better. This focussed on how to do things differently by building on what has been done before.

Design

This follows from the dream stage and allows planning to go from the 'abstract towards the concrete' by considering resources, knowledge, skills and capacity to make co-production a key part of the programme. We organised two workshops in our respective cities and presented findings from the appreciative inquiry to an audience involving a wide range of stakeholders and asked them to use the findings to design co-production systems. We asked them to do this in a granular way.

Deliver

For our purposes this takes us to the development of this strategy and the methods by which we aim to achieve what is documented here, including our action plans that stem from this strategy.

4 Define: What do we mean by co-production?



What unites nearly all available documents on co-production is the difficulty they acknowledge in defining it. We found that “there is an ongoing debate over what should be included under the co-production construct, (...) and the elasticity of the term has been described as both its limitation and strength”¹². A helpful definition is provided by Nesta in their 2009 report titled - The Challenge of Co-production - where they suggest that:

“Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change.”¹³

For research purposes there are some extra considerations to be mindful of which makes this definition from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) useful:

“Co-producing a research project is an approach in which researchers, practitioners and members of the public work together, sharing power and responsibility from the start to the end of the project, including the generation of knowledge. The assumption is that those affected by research are best placed to design and deliver it and have skills and knowledge of equal importance.”¹⁴

It is important to stress that co-production is not a single method that can be tightly defined with any degree of precision. It would be more appropriate to describe it as an approach that is guided by values rather than a fixed set of tools.

4.1 Three core values: Equality, Agency and Reciprocity

Our research through this appreciative inquiry approach, combined with the literature we reviewed, consistently provided us with three important values that make co-production distinct from other forms of inclusive approaches. These are (1) equality, (2) agency and (3) reciprocity and all three are necessary components for co-production. These are each outlined in Text box 1.

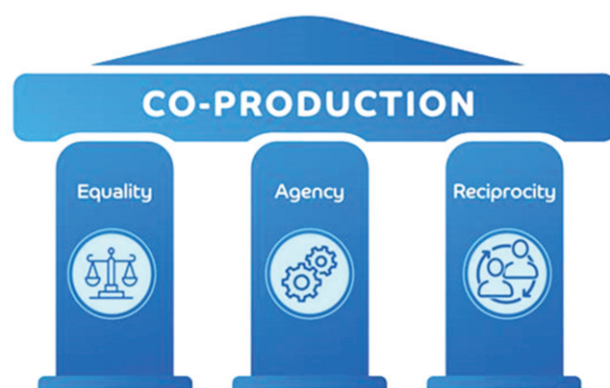
Text box 1: Three core values guiding our ActEarly approach to co-production.

Equality – members of the public must feel they are equal contributors to the process of design and delivery. This requires inclusion right from the start all the way through to the end. Equally crucial is equality with respect to who is included. Certain projects which target under-served communities where levels of involvement may have been historically low will require consideration of how this can be redressed. Equality is not about treating people the same, but is about respecting and accommodating their differences.

Agency – Agency is a person’s ability to act on what they value and have reason to value and should not be determined by the project lead or other professionals. Finding ways to include the different values, knowledge, perspectives and skills-sets is crucial for successful co-production.

Reciprocity – The mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership is vital to effective co-production. In such a partnership all the different parties have something to gain.

This needs to take into account both the individual gains for those involved in the co-production process and also the gains to be made by the community they represent.



5 ActEarly co-production guiding principles

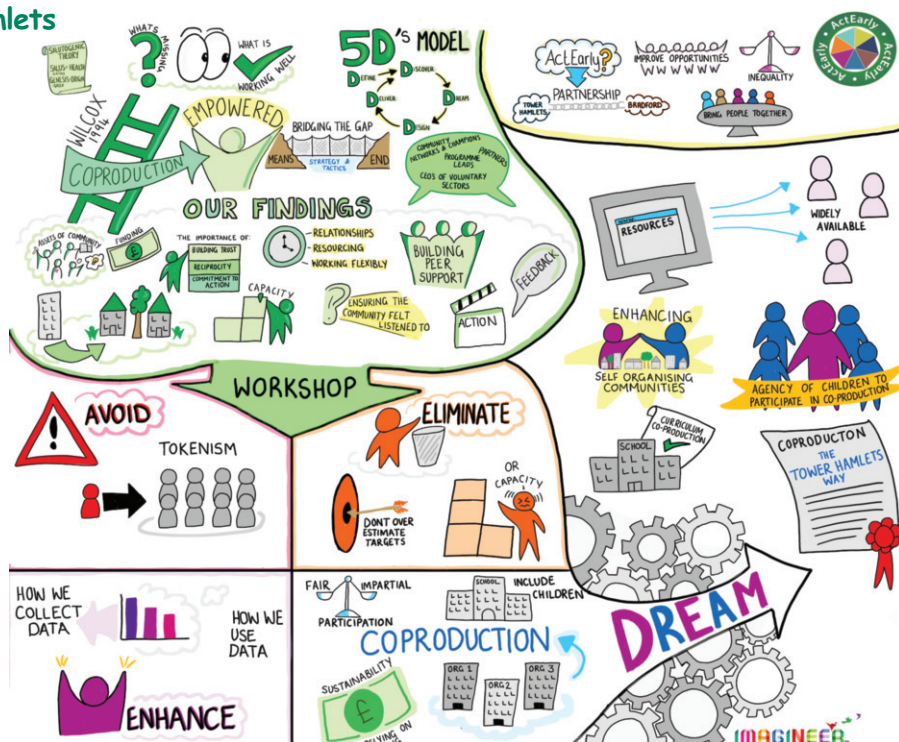


The above values need to be operationalised through some guiding principles with actions. In this section we describe the guiding principles along with suggested actions to maximise the chances of successful co-production. These are listed below and then further expanded on one by one.

Guiding Principles

- 1 Sharing of power
- 2 Including all perspectives and skills
- 3 Respecting and valuing knowledge and lived experience
- 4 Reciprocal benefits for all
- 5 Going to communities and not expecting them to come to you
- 6 Working flexibly
- 7 Appropriate terminology and information
- 8 Building and maintaining long term relationships
- 9 Adequate resources

Artwork from Tower Hamlets co-production dream and design workshop.



Principle 1: Power should be shared amongst all partners

The importance of sharing power was apparent in many of our focus groups and interviews. The literature stresses the need to create relationships that are horizontal rather than vertical because the power differential really can make it awkward for communities to enter systems when they feel powerless to affect any change. This is true for many areas of work, but can be very acute for research endeavours because power structures, particularly professional status, can become an obstacle in the research process. This is exemplified in the quote below by the mental health research charity, the McPin Foundation:

“With all the good will in the world, power structures and professional status can get in the way. I think the hardest part is sharing power and reducing personal influence over the process. This is true for everyone but particularly those with a research status such as “professor” or “doctor”
– PhD or medical ¹⁵”

A Youth Club in Bradford told us that being conscious of this power imbalance is a crucial first step. They expanded: “*So with young people (..), we already have more power because we’re older, but we have to deliberately make a choice to work not from that position but instead to really listen to what the (young people) are saying*”.

In a separate interview we heard this requires “*a mindset shift that’s got to be quite fundamental*” and this must be shown to communities so they can go from feeling like passive recipients of services to people who can actively drive services. One interviewee suggested: “*I think (it is crucial) to actually get that to happen (...), for a group of teenagers in particular to say - oh yeah, I can see how this has changed, I can see how my voice has meaning, has power, has influence - because actually their innate understanding is that their voice doesn’t have power or influence or anything really*”.

It should be noted that the ‘sharing of power’ does not mean everybody will need to be involved in every decision and every part of the project - that would be impractical and unnecessary. In reality it means there is an equitable consideration of how power is exercised in the process. The upshot of this is best summed up by one participant’s brief but salient quote when they said: “*the project lead shouldn’t decide everything*”. Finding ways for community members to feel they can influence and make a difference is a key component for successful co-production.

Practical Tips

We need to start ‘sharing power’ within existing systems and then expand this ambition to any new systems we develop. For example, most projects involve convening a working group comprised of professionals and other representatives. In such cases, the organisers should seek to include members of the public as an integral part of the group. It is important that this is progressed with integrity and inclusion in mind so that community members are selected on the basis of those who are most likely to be affected by the project to achieve true representation.

However, attendance alone will not achieve and deliver this aim. Representation and inclusion are the first steps towards the sharing of power but on their own do not solve the problems of power dynamics found in meetings. Project teams should give consideration to finding ways to minimise this. We found the following guidance helpful:

- Aim to keep membership of a working group stable, with a balance of backgrounds. For example, if there are likely to be many professionals in the group, then increase members of the community to improve the balance. Having multiple people provides confidence as people will not feel like a ‘lone voice’ and can discuss their ideas with each other.
- Professional colleagues should make time to speak to community members outside of meetings to clarify matters. For example, some points raised in meetings may be very familiar to professionals but may be new and unfamiliar to community members.
- Rotate the roles during meetings and change who chairs the meetings. When appropriate to do so, the chairing should be made available to community members with the right level of support.
- Change how a room is set up to make sure people feel comfortable – it might be helpful to ensure that no clusters are formed of any groups especially avoid professionals sitting in one area and community members in another area.
- Use more group work and other techniques such as sharing stories and have fewer formal presentations. This will make it easier for people who do not like speaking in front of large audiences to express their opinions more easily.

Principle 2: Embrace a wide range of perspectives and skills to ensure these are represented

It is vital that a project team includes different ideas and perspectives. In both of our Dream and Design workshops as part of our appreciative inquiry, we were informed that tokenism must be avoided and this includes eliminating processes that get in the way of valuing different types of skills and perspectives. However, we have to be mindful of the deeply rooted traditions that can present as a challenge as captured in a quote below by Steve Pool:

“Today we are increasingly seeing calls for universities to collaborate with communities in designing and conducting research. While such calls are to be welcomed they tend to suffer from a historical blind-spot that ignores the fact that research collaboration – partnerships, participation (call it what you will) – is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge”¹⁶



In this deeply historical tradition, communities have had very few opportunities to bring their skills and perspectives to influence outcomes. The hierarchical culture of most organisations (that is traditionally prevailing in medical and public health institutions) under-values the skills and perspectives that community members possess, and instead gives preference to professionals’ skills and perspectives. One interviewee shared a powerful example that demonstrated this point:

“I suppose when you work in the NHS and other organisations, it’s very hierarchical isn’t it, like you know, people will be talked about in Bands, oh they’re a Band 3, they’re a Band 5, and that determines their value, you know, their abilities and their skills and puts limitations and caps on what they’re told they’re allowed to do, so you know, we had a service (. . .) which is integrated with the (NHS) and I remember we managed it together and I remember the manager from the (NHS) saying ‘You’re asking your Band 3s equivalents if they want to input their ideas or they want to take on a special interest project? Oh we’d never do that with a Band 3’ and I’m thinking well why? These are absolutely amazing people who like have loads of energy and appetite to do something interesting and different, absolutely no shortage of skill or passion but in the NHS they wouldn’t, that wouldn’t have been allowed in inverted commas, because they weren’t at the right grade to be able to.”

People from the voluntary sector highlighted how they try to accommodate the different worldviews and skills their service users bring, and how they have used the diversity of perspectives as an asset to progress their organisational causes. This ranged from supporting communities with mental health issues right through to running English proficiency classes.

There is one very basic point that stems from this which is that organisations responsible for commissioning and running services and those doing research are unlikely to possess the same skills and perspectives as the people who receive the services. This difference needs to be reframed as a strength that adds value to the project. Making it possible for communities to apply their skills and perspectives in research will need to be curated and supported through systems that will make this possible.

To this end we have found training and development to be a useful method to support improved inclusion of community groups, particularly patient groups in healthcare services. However, the literature identifies some important notes of caution that stressed this should not be used to make community members 'more aware' of research systems, but should instead focus on how to energise communities to bring their perspectives and agency to the research process. A crucial role of training is to make those who are new to community involvement aware of what they already know that will be useful to researchers.¹⁷

Another important benefit that will stem from training community partners on co-productive ways of working is that it can generate capacity amongst community organisations to carry out research. This will be beneficial to both the ActEarly programme and the wider community. One community organisation who recently received training on research methods from Born in Bradford mentioned - *"it gave them the skills needed to interview Asylum Seekers to understand their experience during Covid 19 lockdown"*.

In light of the above, we are now in the early stages of considering mechanisms to provide training and development opportunities for members of the public to facilitate their involvement in co-production processes. This will be further planned through the ActEarly Co-production and Citizen Science Theme Group and will focus on ways to make it possible for a wide range of partners to apply their skills and perspectives to research systems.

Practical Tips

It was highlighted that we must always make use of creative approaches that suit communities such as open-space approaches, art-based workshops, and other similar methods that make it possible for people to contribute their perspectives and skills (some examples of creative approaches are listed here in this document ¹⁸)



Text box 2: What makes the best start in life for Children in Tower Hamlets?

Since June 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic, Bromley by Bow's ActEarly Community Research team consulted more than 500 local families to identify "What makes the best start in life for children in Tower Hamlets?". This resulted in four priority themes, ten recommendations which were co-produced with families and stakeholder organisations, and resulted in one Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan comprising of fourteen actions.

The results from this exercise were drawn from participatory approaches, creative methods and the principles of asset-based community development. The research team comprised of community and social researchers based at the Bromley by Bow Centre and University College London. The community researchers were trained in qualitative participatory research methods. Families that participated had shared their dreams, challenges and suggestions to achieve their vision of a best start in life for their children. The findings showed people valued safe, green, clean outdoor spaces; access to play and opportunities to enrich life and socialise with others; a partnership of support around each child to balance safety and to build independence; and work towards a more inclusive society where families' basic needs are met.



Principle 3: Respect and value the 'lived experience' and how different forms of knowledge can be expressed and transmitted

As researchers and implementers, we have to be mindful that many of the ideas found through research processes and how they influence evidence, are shaped by a dominant hierarchy where some methods are given more weight than others. The way we value knowledge reflects how we go about creating it, and unfortunately this has meant that in most cases, members of the public have been limited to the role of participants in research studies (i.e. we collect data about them) without their influence in the design, data collection or eventual output.

However, there is some reason to be optimistic because we heard about a positive change in recent years from an active and well-engaged Patient and Public Involvement group in Bradford who explained how they support researchers by helping them consider practical and ethical issues from a community perspective (see blog by Eisha Khan for further details in Text box 3).

Text Box 3: The Community Research Advisory Group (CRAG)

The Community Research Advisory Group (CRAG) meets on a monthly basis and was established in 2016. It is hosted by Born in Bradford and is comprised of 10 members of the public who have an interest in pregnancy and the early years of life (0-4 years). The group acts as a critical friend to researchers who are planning research ideas and need some help with considering wording for questions, appropriateness of methods, techniques to improve response rates, advice on ethical matters and any other considerations from a community perspective. Researchers who visit the group are always thankful for the help and guidance the CRAG provide and one of the community members, Eisha Khan, has written a blog about her experiences as member of the CRAG which can be found in this link <https://actearly.org.uk/adding-my-voice-to-the-born-in-bradford-bib-study-why-i-got-involved/>

In this blog Eisha says:

“ I feel all communities need to know what is happening around us whether its air pollution, dental issues or perinatal mental health problems. After joining CRAG and continuously seeing the value of my input I realised how important the research efforts are for the betterment of Bradford ”

(Eisha Khan, CRAG Member)







Whilst such inclusion should be celebrated, we found very few examples which demonstrated the more advanced forms of inclusion whereby community members' produce knowledge and conduct research with professionals as a partnership. We heard several contributors make a case for better inclusion of different forms of knowledge and lived experience to feed into research systems.

At this point it is important to distinguish between different types of knowledge which is illustrated in Text Box 4



Text Box 4: Different Types of Knowledge Source: Oates 2002¹⁹

 <p>Propositional knowledge – ‘about’ something in the form of logically organised ideas and theories, as in most academic research.</p>	<p>Practical knowledge – evident in knowing ‘how to’ exercise a skill or a procedure</p> 
 <p>Experiential knowledge – gained by direct encounter; almost impossible to put into words, being tacit and based on empathy, intuition and feeling.</p>	<p>Presentational knowledge – emerges from experiential knowledge; gives the first expression of knowing something, through stories, drawings, sculpture, music, dance etc.</p> 

Most research is created by professionals who possess propositional and practical knowledge. For us to fully embrace co-production we have to make space for experiential and presentational knowledge to play a greater role. In practical terms this means we have to recognise that the ‘lived experience’ which comes from working, raising families, volunteering, take part in events, living in neighbourhoods, engaging with neighbours, attending places of worship and so on, equips people with valuable insight that can support research design and delivery. Crucially, these different forms of knowledge should not be seen as mutually exclusive but instead should complement research methods we have traditionally relied on.

A useful analogy in thinking of the different forms of knowledge is by likening them to a map. Propositional knowledge can help us draw a map, practical knowledge will show us how to read it, but it is experiential knowledge that will show us ‘who hangs out where’ and the location of unmarked alleys and tracks, whilst the presentational knowledge will make the map visually interesting.

There is now a growing body of literature showing why it is important to draw on a plurality of sources and types of knowledge. Some of the benefits include improved validity and better engagement from the target communities. This is possible because “*local knowledge is the ‘mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience’*”²⁰. When this is pressed into service, using the right approaches, it has the potential to augment research and implementation efforts. And when this works well, then communities appreciate research efforts as shown in the quote below from one of our focus groups:

“ So for us, everything that's gone well so far has been because we've listened to the mothers, we've understood the mothers, and we've taken forth their ideas, therefore they've felt as if that they have been involved, they've been listened to, they are instrumental in making change ”



This inclusive way of co-producing knowledge is not only good for making sense of what is being explored, but can also help facilitate change in practice after the research is completed. A systematic review by Cyril et al²¹ found that Community Based Participatory Research approaches, for example, were highly effective in creating an interest amongst local communities about the subject of research and in many cases this interest led to leveraging local policy change.

Practical Tips

This principle of ensuring different types of knowledge are incorporated, in some ways, ties to the earlier principle of respecting different perspectives and skills.

- Essentially this requires a shift in how we value community knowledge and make use of it. A useful example of this was recently achieved in Bradford which can be seen in Text box 5 below.
- Experiential and presentational knowledge are vital ingredients of co-production. Community members need to be informed about the value of this.
- Appropriate systems will need to be put in place to encourage people to contribute their knowledge – for example creative approaches such as art-based methods.
- It is important to ask community members outside of meetings if the system for their inclusion allows them to contribute their knowledge and what could be done differently, if anything, to improve this further.

Text box 5: Holmewood: a holistic approach to health research.

Holmewood is an estate located in South Bradford which experiences high levels of socio-economic deprivation and associated health inequalities; these include rates of obesity and food insecurity. We focussed on how residents made food choices and the impact of this on their health. Data collection was led by community members who spoke to their neighbours at organised community meals about these issues using creative approaches. They discovered food choices were strongly bounded by how far people needed to travel to buy food and also about how safe they felt going into certain areas to do their shopping. The frank and open conversations significantly changed the research focus from health awareness towards matters related to general neighbourhood issues that affect food choices.

People from the community led the conversations with some input from the ActEarly team which resulted in some fascinating stories, diagrams, and maps showing the relationship between food choices and community factors which were collected over a series of community meals. All of this information has been presented to council teams, councillors, police and the voluntary sector in the form of a place-based community cookbook prepared by the community. This was co-produced by community artists and key decision makers with a view to finding ways to resolve the issues to improve health in the Holmewood area.



Principle 4: Ensure there are benefits for all parties involved in the co-production activities

It is vital that researchers are clear about the potential benefits to communities of doing co-production, and at the same time they must manage expectations about what can be achieved. One problem with research, we often hear about, is the very long time it can take for policy change to occur – estimated by some to take around 17 years²². This time lag is not very appealing for communities who recognise problems in their communities and want to see changes on the ground in a rapid way.

Another blockage that gets in the way is that research findings are usually produced for academic audiences and do not appeal to lay people and the general public. It is rare for the lessons or recommendations from published research papers to find their way into communities which raises the question – *why should communities bother supporting such research?* Indeed, this point was raised several times during our appreciative inquiry with a particular point of grievance being around the lack of feedback communities receive after the research is completed. Participants strongly advocated for change – from the many comments we heard, two are noted below:

“Something must get done with what people say otherwise they don't see things change then they can't be bothered to contribute. Change breeds confidence”

“Apply the systems approach of feedback loops so that there's always a process of feeding back to everyone involved in the process and cycle”

These are crucial factors and it is why reciprocity is an essential pillar of co-production without which there is every danger the structure and integrity upon which it is built could be compromised.

ActEarly is a programme that aims to achieve health improvements and reduce health inequalities through empowering communities - we therefore need to make it clear to communities what role co-production will play in helping us deliver this. As one interviewee succinctly raised the question and suggestion – *“What do you as ActEarly want to do? What is the end goal? This needs to be communicated to people”*.

If designed properly, communities can gain from the co-productive relationship in a multitude of ways. For example, there is a wealth of data showing neighbourhoods that enjoy vibrant community life are usually the same places where people are involved in decisions and influence systems, and as a result of all this, are more likely to have high-performing public services.^{21,23} Furthermore, compelling evidence from a meta-analysis of 148 studies on social relationships and mortality risk shows that communities with strong social relationships, across a range of networks, are likely to remain healthy and live longer than similar individuals with poor social relationships²⁴.

At a more personal and individual level, the evidence on volunteering will also be helpful here. For example, people who support co-production efforts as volunteers may experience the health benefits of volunteering²⁵ which the evidence shows is likely:

“to decrease mortality and to improve self-rated health, mental health, life satisfaction, the ability to carry out activities of daily living without functional impairment, improved social support and interaction, increase healthy behaviours and the ability to cope with one's own illness”²⁶

Many people who support ActEarly will be eligible for payment for their involvement and there should be a local policy on what types of involvement will accrue payment. NIHR INVOLVE cover this aspect in some detail on their website and make the following point under the heading of “Good practice”: “*at the outset, offer clear information for members of the public explaining what they are being offered, how they will be paid, how their involvement will be acknowledged, and what actions they need to take*”. Detailed guidance can be found at the following web address <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/payment-guidance-for-researchers-and-professionals/27392>

Practical Tips

Research teams need to make the reciprocal value of co-production well known to communities and this will need to happen at a number of levels including through communication methods and through conversations with communities when planning specific projects. Co-produced research must not be ‘all take and no give’. Specific practical tips here include:

- Be clear from the outset about the anticipated timescales for impact and communicate these to community members. However, do not over-promise.
- Ensure communities are reimbursed appropriately for their input using your local payment and reimbursement policy.
- Work with communities to explore what additional benefits there might be to engaging in co-production activities. For projects with more intensive, longer-term input there could be opportunities for learning new skills or for volunteering. For less frequent activities it could be ‘getting a foot in the door’ for future opportunities. There is no one-size-fits all approach and different communities will expect and want different things.
- If community organisations become energised about the topic and wish to seek grant funding from external sources to improve a matter that you have worked on together then provide assistance with the process (if needed) to achieve this.

Principle 5: Go to communities. Do not expect communities to come to you

Many of the approaches that participants told us work well include going to where people and communities are rather than expecting them to come to us. Equally, talking to people in their own environments informally was seen as a good way to connect to people. Some participants framed successful co-production as being about keeping motivated and connected to the direction the community want to go in and being mindful of giving support when needed and stepping back where space is required. Such requirements necessarily mean a flexible disposition will be necessary. In this way successful co-production should be seen as an ongoing dialogue with communities and not a one-off event.

Practical Tips

- Researchers should use a variety of methods to engage communities and the methods used for co-production should fit the communities rather trying to find a method that works best for the organisers.
- Whenever possible researchers should visit the communities they are doing research with to improve connectivity and understanding by being present and also to possibly increase the chances of more people coming forward to support co-production approaches.



Principle 6: Work flexibly

We have to find a balance to make things work for the people and organisations we intend to co-produce with by working at a pace that works for them. This includes, where necessary, adapting activities to work both face-to-face and online and having the ability to combine digital options with more in-depth face-to-face activities.

Equally, paying attention to different timescales as well as the importance of involving communities from the beginning is a crucial component to make this work properly. Sometimes the different pace and pressures Local Government and NHS organisations work at is driven by political cycles which can dictate the speed at which things get done. Moving things along quickly at a pace that does not accommodate the needs of the community usually results in disengagement. As one interviewee told us:

“Sometimes people can make things too complicated as they're sticking to a formula rather than adapting to context. . . with co-production you have to change as you go along, and you have to be open to change your methodology.”

Moreover, it can be counter-productive to try and fit co-production mid-way through or towards the end of a project. If people have not been involved in earlier decisions then the subsequent options might be out of line with their original needs. We mention building trust under principle 8 and it is worth saying here this type of scenario will erode trust and should be avoided.

Practical Tips

- Researchers should use a variety of methods to engage communities in co-production activities and it is important to stress that co-production is not a single tool but should instead be viewed as a toolbox.
- Researchers should be prepared to flex their co-production plans and recognise that plans may change and evolve.
- Communities are not beholden to project plans or timelines and work needs to be done at a pace suitable to the community's capacity.

Principle 7: Avoid jargon and ensure communities have access to the right information at the right time

It is crucial to be clear from the outset of a project about the aims and this includes being certain about which types of activities require co-production as discussed earlier under section 1. Problems can arise when professionals describe activities as co-production when they mean something entirely different.⁶ When co-production is instigated (or planned), it needs specifying and community members need to have access to information in an appropriate format using the right language. One quote from our appreciative inquiry makes a point about what can go wrong:

“Professionals use the language that can exclude people - things like acronyms. People feel out of place if they ask things to be explained to them. (. . .) So it's important to avoid using terminology or acronyms that might make this worse.”

The importance of using the right language should not be under-estimated because it affects how much people are willing to take part. Professional groups and disciplines sometimes hold their own ways of framing issues which are influenced by a variety of factors including knowledge, training, culture and systems. It is important to remember that community members may not be familiar with the terminology and so professionals will need to communicate using inclusive language.

Practical Tips

- Avoid using jargon or acronyms.
- Making use of existing communication systems that are familiar to the community we intend to work with can improve responsiveness. For example, WhatsApp groups or existing communities of interest groups that are united through social media platforms.
- In order to ensure that all groups feel included, it may be necessary to produce materials and run co-production activities in relevant community languages.
- Researchers should explore use of translators, or local community organisations who have the skills and can possibly create a bridge to the communities.
- Ensure that information about research projects is produced in 'plain English'. Ask community members to help review documentation.
- Using the appropriate terminology and language is equally crucial at the feedback stage. This is to ensure all those involved can see and appreciate the output of their co-productive efforts.

Principle 8: Relationships with communities should be built for the long-term and not for the short-term

Many participants who contributed to the appreciative inquiry told us about the importance of building trusting relationships before reaching a point where communities are willing to support any initiatives. As mentioned briefly above, this means making good use of existing trusted networks.

We heard how this was achieved in Bradford through the Covid Community Champions who were all volunteers working with the statutory services to make sense of community concerns and then followed this up by encouraging people to follow evidence-based guidelines to prevent infection. One interviewee told us:

“ We had 245 champions, they were the voices of the communities who co-designed and co-produced communications that were relevant, reliable, informative and also accessible to those communities. I think because they were trusted they were more likely to be believed. People felt that their concerns were being listened to and addressed and the champions were actually leading by example and I think that was really important (. . .) they became the face, so they were on social media, they went to Broadway, got the vaccination jab you know, they posted online about what they were doing and that got quite a lot of people to accept the messages. ”

The voluntary sector is considered to be particularly skilful at this way of working and saw building trust as something that needs concerted effort and it is not something that will happen by chance. One focus group participant informed us “(you) need to build up the relationships and not assume that people will dive in”. Another focus group participant spoke about building trust over time as being a “game-changer” because it means having the ability to improve both the quality and quantity of data collected and thereby results in more people interested in the outputs.

More than one source mentioned the potential added value that could come from working more closely with the voluntary sector. It seems there are many issues that the voluntary and statutory sector organisations are attempting to improve, sometimes independently of each other, and would find it useful if they joined up efforts. In some ways this returns to the value of reciprocity as working together will offer something useful to all parties. For example, in one of the focus groups a participant stated that *“faith organisations are often explicitly excluded from funding. These organisations need to be included in projects too”*. The same group went on to explain that research organisations *“could support smaller organisations to co-develop funding proposals”* thereby having an impact on the long term sustainability of smaller faith-based organisations.



The number of potential partners in Bradford alone that researchers could potentially collaborate with is captured in the quote below from one of the interviews:

“ So you know, there’s a richness of insight and data (. . .) We’ve got 5,000 un-constituted charities in Bradford, and 900 and something constituted charities, can you imagine how much insight and data they’ve got that could be feeding in and cut in all sorts of different ways, thematically, locally, all of that but nobody has ever cracked that you know, bringing that together and using it to feed research or policy or strategy ” .

There is not a single manual that could effectively guide how to build trust but many of the points discussed in this strategy will help steer in the right direction. At a minimum, researchers must ensure that processes for working with communities do not simply treat people or organisations as sources of data, and must always include a plan for dialogue with communities in a respectful and timely way to ensure reciprocity. This takes time and effort; one paper we reviewed provided a vivid analogy to highlight the energy needed: *“Collaborations do not ignite by spontaneous combustion, and they often are difficult to maintain without someone who is responsible for initially bringing tinder, matches, and fuel and who then will tend the fire without necessarily fanning it.”*²⁷

Relatedly, feeding back the findings after any research is completed is crucial to maintaining a healthy relationship because we heard from several people how they reproached consultation exercises and research projects which completed data collection but then failed to share their findings. One interviewee expanded on this point by saying:

“ If there is no feedback, people will question the point and not want to be engaged in the future. There has to be a feedback loop and explaining to people, for example, why change didn't happen ” .

Practical Tips

- Effective relationship building with communities needs to be prioritised within research and commissioning organisations.
- Effective engagement infrastructure needs to be developed; and maintaining this central engagement infrastructure should be a core part of everybody's role within the research programme.
- Local organisations, for example voluntary sector charities or faith settings, can be effective gatekeepers to accessing community voices and for that reason strong relationships should be developed with these organisations.
- Regular communication and shared priority setting will be crucial to the long-term success of this venture.
- Research teams should work with local organisations to identify and progress partnership approaches.

Principle 9: Co-production activities with communities must be adequately resourced

The topic of adequate resources to deliver co-production came up in almost every discussion in our appreciative inquiry. Building strong links with the voluntary and community sector is a long-term endeavour which requires stability over a number of years and this relies on funding. However, there is a crucial challenge we need to be mindful of. Although effective involvement of communities (often conceptualised as Patient and Public Involvement, PPI) is vaunted as a key pre-cursor to obtaining research funding, the way in which research funding is distributed, often on short-term funding cycles can mean that there is no resource to continue the important work of building relationships after grants have ended. When a new grant starts, the process of engaging with communities starts a-new. In addition, where a research funder sets research priorities without input from communities it can mean that the research topic itself is not one that is felt to be important to communities.

Participants who worked in the faith and voluntary sector raised issues about funding, particularly how challenging it can be to appropriately allocate resources for co-production amongst their other priorities. They also mentioned the issue of capacity, namely that it takes time to do this properly which is not always possible when research projects hold short timelines and insufficient budgets.

A competitive environment for the voluntary sector in terms of seeking funding can lead to a resistance to collaborative processes which poses a challenge to notions of partnerships and reciprocity as discussed above. There is also a real danger of underestimating the labour and hard work that goes into doing co-production – how do we reward communities for their time and effort in making this work? One interviewee made clear the importance of adequately resourcing co-production activities:

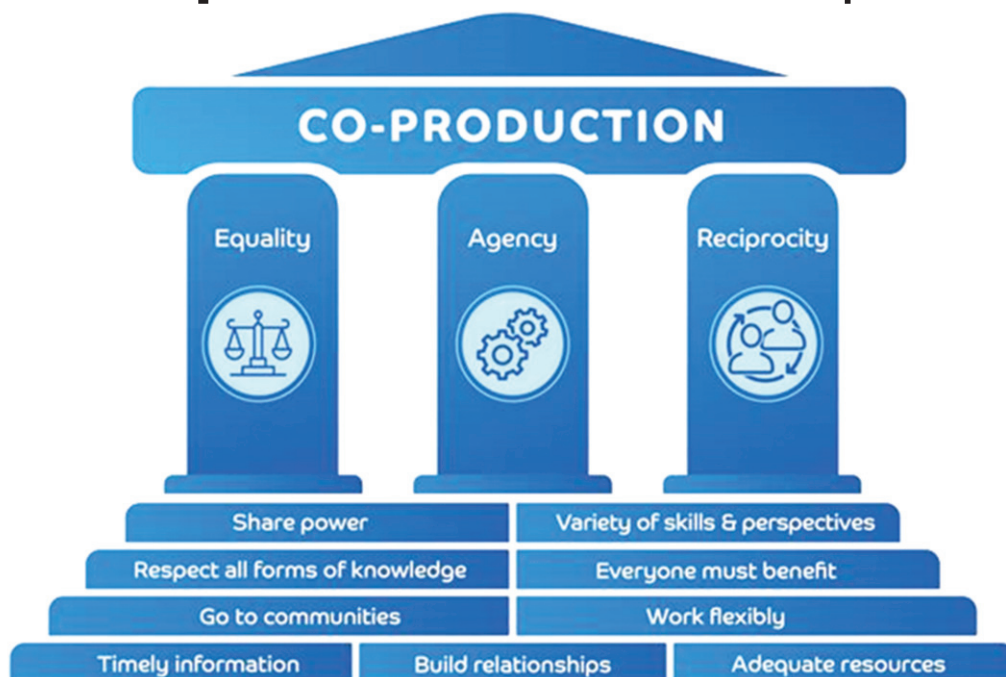
“ I think it has to be resourced and I think to make a meaningful difference in this district it has to be built into commissioning and grant making, so that people are resourced to be able to work in that way and that's thought about in terms of how people are procured, how people are commissioned. ”

Practical Tips

Funders and research institutions should consider ways to provide long-term resource for developing and maintaining community infrastructure to enable effective co-production. This resource should include a proportion of staff time to co-ordinate activities, and appropriate budgets to enable reimbursements for community efforts (see principle 4). Research and statutory organisations should 'act as one' to work together to reduce burden on communities and to explore how to sustain community partnerships beyond short term topics and funding. The following are specific practical tips on how to do this:

- Researchers applying for grant funding should consider including local organisations as co-applicants and include adequate funds for them to contribute in a co-productive way.
- Research teams should co-ordinate at a departmental and institutional level to co-ordinate community engagement approaches and ensure a consistent approach is adopted, and communities are not over-burdened.
- Researchers should aim to establish links with local organisations relevant to their programmes of work and communicate regularly about priorities, plans and progress.
- Regular community engagement activities should be planned either using face to face or online methods and all members of the research team should take an active role in facilitating these.

Co-production Values and Principles



6 Next Steps: A Commitment to Action

An important difference between strategy and tactics is that the former involves designing an overarching plan which shows the 'means' by which the 'end' will be achieved; tactics on the other hand, are all about the smaller individual steps that can help achieve the desired end goal. In writing this strategy we have made every effort to provide both the strategic values and principles along with the tactical and practical steps. The nine strategic principles have emerged from our appreciative inquiry which involved speaking to people in a diverse range of organisational settings about 'what works well', 'who it works well for' and 'why'. The principles from this research are firmly rooted in the values of equality, agency and reciprocity which, as identified earlier, are crucial components of co-production.

Turning this strategy into a practical reality that is both inclusive and effective will require effort, energy and resource. Co-production is not a single method that offers a ready-made solution to fit all situations; instead, it is an ethos which is built on values and principles. In practice, co-production is an attempt to mobilise civil society: using the public services infrastructure to create opportunities for people to design research and initiatives in a democratic and inclusive manner. But this will only happen if co-production ceases to be a matter for marginal experimentation and becomes the standard way of getting things done²⁸.

For this ambition to be realised we need all our partners to draw up plans to show how they will make strides towards achieving what has been documented in this strategy. This will provide a springboard to action which will facilitate a cultural shift from marginal experimentation, where some members of the public are involved in some things, towards a co-productive future where community members take up the role of partners as a standard way of getting things done. Progressing and delivering this agenda is everyone's responsibility, however, the work of monitoring and overseeing the development of action plans will sit with the Co-production and Citizen Science theme. The same theme will provide guidance and support where it is required.

Some of the actions that arise from this strategy have a natural home with this theme group, such as planning and establishing a Centre for the Development of Peer Research where members of the public could access training on co-productive research systems as discussed under principle two.

The Co-production and Citizen Science theme will work closely with the Evaluation theme to establish a system for monitoring and evaluation which can gauge progress being made with co-production. This will need to determine ways to monitor progress made across the ActEarly programme, and at a more granular level, within the Core Theme Groups and associated partnerships. It will be necessary to plan and deliver this evaluation in a co-productive way.

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