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Co-producing research: the Blackpool way

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Over the last 10 years, Blackpool has been developing and embedding a whole town approach to co-producing change. This work has been made possible by funding from The Big Lottery Community Fund and other funders.

Various projects, such as Fulfilling Lives, A Better Start and the HeadStart Blackpool Resilience Revolution, have all had co-production as a fundamental part of their approach and learning from these pilots and programmes has paved the way in Blackpool being selected as the first National Institute for Health & Care Research funded Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) in the North West.

[More information about Health Determinants Research Collaboration \(HDRC\)](#)

Blackpool has moved from a consultation-based approach where we ask residents what they think about policies, systems and services, to what we would define as authentic co-production, where people with lived experience are at the heart of changing services and systems, to improve the lives of our community.

Blackpool Researching Together, Blackpool's HDRC, has committed to a model that has commissioned two community organisations to recruit community members to join the team as co-researchers. We have a commitment to providing paid roles for 10 youth and 10 adult community co-researchers and this document outlines our principles and approaches to co-producing research, the Blackpool way.

Our principles

Be honest and open about everyone's level of involvement

What we do

We recognise that it can take time to get the right people together to work on co-producing evidence-based solutions. Being clear from the beginning about who will be involved, the estimated timescales if applicable, people's roles in the work and the expectations for those roles means that everyone can consider if they are able to commit to the work involved.

This also includes being honest about what we are asking people to be involved in. Not everything we do can be co-produced, but we need to be open about this and use the right language to describe the activity. For example, if we are conducting one-off focus groups, that would not be co-production because it is not an ongoing process.

How we do it

We know that change moves at the speed of trust, so ensuring we are open and honest in all our communication fosters trusting relationships and in turn supports change. We understand that there are different levels of engagement activity, all of them valuable in different circumstances. Our aim is to be clear about which level we are using and why, to use consistent language for these activities, and to ensure everyone is clear about the approach. This makes clear our commitment to ensuring that engagement is meaningful and can impact co-production, and that there is a clear feedback loop whenever people take part in a consultative or co-productive process.

Be creative and use different approaches

What we do

Ensuring that everyone in the space is able to express themselves and contribute to the session is important and using different approaches can make this possible.

For example, when sharing learning, we make sure that this is done in ways that are interactive and engaging so that everyone's different needs and learning styles are considered. This can include visual minutes, infographics for data, vlogs and blogs, podcasts, animations etc.

How we do it

People know themselves best - they know how they learn and work most effectively. Having open communication and trusting relationships is imperative, as it will enable people to tell you what approaches they need to engage best. Being able to then respond and offer different types of approaches is key, as well as having the budget to support this offer.

Value all experiences and challenge assumptions

What we do

The research principle of "do no harm" applies equally in co-production, and ensures that nobody feels their contribution is being devalued. It is extremely important and applies as much to someone contributing their lived experience, as it does to a researcher or senior leader.

Understanding and exploring the different power dynamics that may be at play is critical as it gives everyone an opportunity to check their potential biases and assumptions. Understanding the power different stakeholders bring to a space and how this can be useful is more helpful and moves away from dismissing the fact that there will undoubtedly be people that have more power and influence than others in a co-research space.

How we do it

A core principle of Blackpool's approach to valuing all experiences is paying people for their time, either through formal employment as co-researchers, or valuing it through other means such as gift vouchers (either one-off or continuous), providing food at sessions, etc. This also goes some way to addressing imbalances in power in a group where some people are paid and not others. Validating people's experiences in this way can also help to draw out those who are routinely excluded from opportunities and unlock real solutions.

Clear and consistent communication is critical

What we do

Clear communication is an important part of co-producing research and can help make sure other values are respected. If communication is clear, it is less likely that misunderstandings will happen. For example, being clear about what the group can change is vital. Being transparent about what can be influenced can support with the aim of reducing misunderstanding and mistrust.

Agreeing with everyone how they would like to be communicated with and when is also important to consider. For example, do members of the group prefer a weekly summary email or do others favour a face to face catch-up?

Facilitators may need to support some members in and outside of the space to catch-up if they miss a session.

Finally, communication that is positive, considered and respectful really goes a long way. We know that this applies anywhere, but we believe that this is crucial in a co-production space, where positive relationships, trust and kindness are essential for the group to develop and stand a greater chance of being successful as a collective.

How we do it

We have a range of ways that we keep in touch with people that are contributing to projects and sometimes this is done through community organisations that support people outside of the sessions, or directly by a member of the team. Communicating clearly about the outcome and what the impact of people's efforts has been is a non-negotiable.

Co-produced group agreements ensure respectful and compassionate communication. Acronyms and over professionalised language is challenged in a supportive manner, and Blackpool's "war on words" is used whenever we are working with "our children".

We ensure that people feel valued for their contributions (for example, being co-authors on outputs).

Ensure everyone has an equal influence

What we do

It is important to recognise that power and influence, if not addressed and understood, can undermine co-production and co-research. It is important to fully understand the different experiences in a team, and make sure that everyone is an equal stakeholder with shared power and influence. View people's power and influence as a positive that can help to bring about change.

Having clear roles for everyone is also important as it ensures everyone feels involved in the co-production process.

Beginning the process with a co-produced group agreement, which reflects the values of all those present and includes a commitment to meaningful power sharing, can also help to share power.

Finally, celebrate the little wins and the big wins.

How we do it

Linked to understanding the biases that people may bring, we openly explore and discuss the different levels of influence and power that people can bring to a project and celebrate the different strengths and skills of our partnerships. We look to utilise the different skills and experiences brought into the group and recognise that the buy-in and willingness to do something different and take on board the learning from different co-productive/co-research projects is important. As a result we always make sure we have a senior sponsor directly involved or regularly attending to be kept informed on the progress of the work.

We encourage people to contribute based on their experiences and how this will further our collective ambition to address inequalities, rather than by status or the role of the team members.

Relationship building is key

What we do

Co-research seeks to bring together everyone whose support is needed to achieve a desired outcome.

This could include groups/organisations who have historically faced challenges when working together. Addressing these challenges and building relationships within the team is crucial to any potential success of the project. Focusing on what people have in common is key. Often, people have the same ultimate aim, just disagree about the way to get there. Focusing on the common aim is a useful anchor to help heal divisions and make change happen.

When we talk about building relationships, this can look different for everyone, but doing this in an appropriate way that finds the right balance between being friendly and not crossing or blurring boundaries will ensure positive outcomes and that we keep everyone safe in the space.

Building relationships has to be genuine and ongoing – it is not something you achieve in a one-off session, but during the whole time you are working alongside everyone and getting to know them.

How we do it

Systems are made up of people. Stakeholder mapping should be undertaken at the outset of any co-production process so you know who you need to build relationships with.

The most impactful way of building relationships in a co-research space is by actively listening and ensuring that it isn't just a talking shop - suggestions are taken on board and change is actually made. We have regular supervisions with every paid member across Blackpool's co-production team and across the HDRC. Where we meet with colleagues from different organisations we ensure that we continue to check in/out before and after sessions. We like to recognise everyone's efforts and time to stop and reflect is important for building and strengthening relationships. We regularly host team days where we get the opportunity to learn more about each other and build understanding and trust as a group.

Recognise and build on people's strengths

What we do

When embedding co-research, there will be different perspectives and this is what enriches the approach. With that, a lot of learning and ultimately more informed solutions can be achieved as a result of working in this way.

As facilitators of co-production spaces, our starting point is always exploring and acknowledging the collective strengths and expertise in the group, some of which can be previously unrecognised. Building people's capacity in this way can support self confidence and future employment.

How we do it

With our approach to co-producing research, we strive to make sure that everyone's strengths are recognised and that members of different groups are given the opportunity to use their skills and show their strengths. As part of the HDRC, we have set out to achieve this by being clear about what the different opportunities will entail so that co-researchers can decide whether or not to take part. Allowing co-researchers to choose which opportunities they get involved with is the best way to ensure what they are doing is tailored to their strengths, as they know themselves best.

Be clear about timescales

What we do

We know that research and working co-productively can take time and will require the input of many different stakeholders. Therefore, every effort should be made to outline how long a project could take. Factoring in the availability of community members to be meaningfully involved will go a long way to building positive relationships and will demonstrate the commitment to supporting residents to participate and engage with co-producing research.

How we do it

For each piece of work, we are clear about the time commitment from everyone involved in the group from the outset. We create an overview for each opportunity that aims to be as clear as possible about the commitments that being involved in this project would entail.

We have created a document that allows co-researchers to track which opportunities they are involved in on a weekly basis and how this supports them to achieve their allocated hours per week.

In addition to how long a project or piece of work will take, everyone involved is consulted about where and when the sessions take place.

Co-producing research

We believe that community members should have a variety of opportunities to be involved in engaging with and co-producing research that will impact on their communities.

This below outlines the different phases of research and how co-researchers can be involved.

Planning what to do

Research design

What's involved?

Things like...

- What we are going to research and why
- What our main research questions are
- Who else needs to be involved
- Choosing the research methods to be used e.g. observation, surveys, group interviews etc.
- What information do we need to ask people and why
- What will the end products be – play, film, report, pictures etc.
- Deciding who will do what in the research team

Working out who, where and when

Recruitment and engagement

What's involved?

Things like...

- Deciding who we need to talk to
- Making sure everyone in the communities we need to learn from has an equal access to participate
- How we will approach communities, what ways we will use to gather the community wisdom
- Organising rooms and refreshments and making travel arrangements, agreeing payment methods, providing childcare/carer support, having information in ways that everyone can understand etc.
- Agreeing how we will keep in touch with people afterwards, to keep them updated.

Getting the information you need

Data collection

What's involved?

Things like...

- How we will collect the data/information e.g. audio recordings, flip charts, digital surveys
- How we will keep the information we have safe
- Deciding how to store the information in a way we can easily access for analysing
- Understanding who needs to access the information and why

Working out what it all means

Analysis

What's involved?

Things like...

- Making sense of the information we have collected
- Identifying themes and findings

- Making recommendations based on what we now know
- Checking in with those who provided their insights

Spreading the word

Dissemination

What's involved?

Things like...

- Deciding who to share the learning with
- Sharing the findings with others in ways that are meaningful and accessible to them
- Sharing the information in other ways such as presenting it at a conference

Reflecting and feedback

Evaluation and learning

What's involved?

Things like...

- Considering if we found out what we set out to
- Thinking about the impact of our work
- Reflecting on who did what, what went well and what we can learn from

The NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Blackpool is part of the NIHR and hosted by Blackpool Council. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations enable local authorities to become more research-active, embedding a culture of evidence-based decision making.

Additional information

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