



Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield: Co-production Learning Report 1 - Understanding the Approach to Co-production

October 2019

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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 City.

This is the first of a series of **Co-production Learning Reports** produced as part of the Evaluation¹ of ABiS. It focuses on **understanding the ABiS approach to co-production and identifying wider lessons** for co-productive approaches within and beyond Sheffield. It draws on a series of interviews with staff from SYHA who have been involved in co-production at different stages of the ABiS programme.

Future Co-production Learning Reports will provide critical reflections on the ABiS approach to co-production from the perspective of older people and partner organisations and consider the implications for work being undertaken around an Age Friendly City.

What is co-production?

What co-production is and isn't, how and when it should be undertaken, and how it can meaningful, have been debated by academics, policy makers and practitioners for many years. Although there is no formal definition available some key common features that are present in co-production initiatives have been identified:²

- They view service users as assets with skills that can be put to effective use.
- They seek to break down pre-existing barriers between service users and 'professionals'.
- They are strength based, and aim to build on people's existing capabilities.
- They are reciprocal – meaning people get something back for having done something for others; and mutual – meaning people work together around a shared interest or objective.
- They embed peer and personal support networks alongside professional networks.

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.

² See <https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide51/what-is-coproduction/defining-coproduction.asp> for more detailed discussion of these points.

- They enable organisations to contribute to change themselves, rather than only being service providers.

During our interviews with SYHA staff we discussed **what co-production has meant and continues to mean from an ABiS perspective**. The findings are discussed below, and reveal that many of the features identified above do appear to be present in the ABiS co-production model.

Defining co-production: an Age Better Perspective

It is important to note that ABiS represented a departure for SYHA as the lead partner. It was the first time SYHA had led a major programme which wasn't about people living in housing association homes. As such, they had to ensure that the views and experiences of older people living in different tenures and different areas of the city were fed into the design and delivery of the programme. In this sense, it was clear to SYHA from the outset that co-design and co-production had to be a central feature of the programme.

So what did that mean in practice? SYHA staff put forward a number of definitions and explanations of how they understood co-production.

“ It is about getting people who are going to experience any programme or service that we offer, so any people that we work with, to be part of the design and development and then the delivery of the service we are offering. ”

“ Co-production is engagement with those intended to benefit from the delivery of the service or whatever you're hoping to design, it's including them but it's actually including them at an equal level, so it's working in partnership...you're truly making a service work for the person intended to benefit. ”

“ Co-production is about creating things with people. ”

“ It's about coproducing with all the relevant stakeholders, so beneficiaries, partner organisations, friends and family, like a networked approach. ”

Within ABiS co-production is separated into four distinct elements in which service users and wider stakeholders are engaged and involved:

- **Co-design**: shaping what will be delivered, and how, at different levels. *Formally, at a programme and project level*, for example through co-design workshops, events and activities at a community level; but also *informally, at an intervention level*, through the person-centred and tailored nature of individual programmes of support.
- **Co-delivery**: playing a role in service provision, for example as funded delivery partners or volunteers.
- **Co-evaluation**: collecting and acting upon feedback, so that services are revised on an ongoing basis in response to emerging needs and requirements.
- **Co-governance**: having top level oversight of the programme, including setting priorities and resource allocation, through membership of the Core Partnership; and also through involvement in project level steering groups.

So, from an ABiS perspective, co-production is about **involving end-users and wider stakeholders in all stages of the design and delivery of services as equal partners**, but in a way that builds, develops and sustains partnerships over the longer term. Within this definition a number of principles underpinning the ABiS approach to co-production are also evident. These included **being inclusive, flexibility, creating a safe space, listening** (beyond the usual suspects), **showing that people have been heard**, and **ensuring that power is shared or dispersed** (as evenly as it can be). Explaining the importance of co-production, and what it meant in practice, one interviewee described their approach to engaging with specific sometimes 'harder to reach' or 'seldom heard' communities in the city.

“ ... we knew we wanted to reach really specific groups of people, we wanted to work with some specific BME communities or people with some very specific long term conditions, we don't already work with those groups, we don't know them inside out, we haven't got those close links, we couldn't have delivered it, we didn't have that knowledge base so it was essential that we coproduced with people to be able to achieve the ambition of the programme. ”

This required a diverse, multi-method approach to engagement that provided a variety of ways for people and organisations to input into the programme in a meaningful way. This included designing approaches that took account of diversity, rather than expecting a one-size-fits-all model to be appropriate.

“ I think you’ve got to have a really, a diverse approach, multi-method approach to engaging people that allows people to interact in different ways, so taking into account some people won’t be able to read and write, some people won’t be able to speak English, some people will hate being in a group setting, how then are you going to go about reaching those people and allowing them to have a meaningful input? ”

This viewpoint reflected an understanding that, in the past, approaches to co-production had been misplaced and were often considered tokenistic.

“ Sometimes that’s a mistake that’s made with coproduction, it’s assumed it’s listening to people and getting the majority consensus and going with that and I absolutely think it’s not, it’s about looking for diversity and difference and trying to design around and for that. ”

In response, a range of innovative and creative approaches have been developed, particularly associated with co-design, with a view to making the process as enjoyable and engaging as possible.

“ So there was an open mic night where people could come and sing or read poetry about their experiences of isolation, that was one element, and we also had different tea parties and stuff like that, we posed questions in cupcakes, we said if you were the king or queen of Sheffield what would you do to reduce isolation and loneliness. I think we were specific in some ways but then we were quite open with our approach, cos I think the more open you are, you just don’t know what you’re going to get. ”

Although the approach to co-production within ABiS was extensive and far-reaching, staff also highlighted the importance of being clear about the limitations, being realistic and managing expectations during the co-production process.

The Age Better motivation and rationale for co-production

As mentioned above, ABiS was a first for SYHA, in that it involved engaging beyond social housing tenants to include the wider population of the city. For SYHA this meant **changing how they thought about co-production**, from a model of ‘co-regulation’, whereby they involved tenants in the management and governance of housing stock, to a more service focussed approach, whereby users of different services provided by SYHA have become more involved in decisions about what is delivered (and how). However, as one interviewee reflected the underpinning principles were very similar. For SYHA, co-regulation had involved considering:

“ How can the organisation and their tenant have an equal relationship? ”

So, whilst the approach to co-production within ABiS was necessarily different, there was a sense that it was in-keeping with an older ‘founding’ principle of SYHA. In this sense interviewees reflected on how co-production underpinned the whole approach of SYHA as an organisation. Co-production was seen as a **value** and part of the **ethos** of the organisation and its approach.

“ We know that professionals don’t always know the answers and you can’t know what somebody else wants and needs. One of our visions is for people to settle at home, live well and realise their potential, but the only way you’re going to know how to do that for somebody is to ask them what they need and take that personalised, individualistic approach...Working with our customers in the best way and in the right way. ”

Linked to this, interviewees discussed a **strongly held belief in co-production**, and that it would make the programme better. Although co-production now forms a key foundation for much of the project work undertaken within SYHA, this has not always been the case. Previously, funders have not explicitly required or provided significant resources for co-production. ABiS therefore provided a unique opportunity to combine funder requirements with organisational ethos and values and embed co-production in a programme from the very beginning.

“ What we’d not had before that was a project that we were starting from scratch, where we could embed co-production from day one. ”

However, it is important to note the requirements of the funder were not the central motivation for the embedding of co-production within ABiS.

“ I think there was a real understanding that to deliver this well it *needed the partnership* approach and the best way to do that would be through a co-governed body. So that’s always been a strong principle. Interestingly, I think the least it’s been about is the funding requirements. ”

Indeed, there was a sense in which SYHA went ‘over and above’ funder requirements, because they believed in the process and wanted to do a really good job. This was seen as a real benefit for the programme, its service users and wider stakeholders in longer term.

“ I think they got to shape the programme, we weren’t just looking at engaging with people who’d be the beneficiaries but also the organisations so they got to have a lot of input to tell us what were the things in their local area that matter the most, so they could represent their local communities and their special interests. ”

Having a funder that was committed to and understood the importance of co-production was important though, and interviewees reflected in the importance of the funding allowing time and resources for meaningful co-production during the bid development phase.

“ We had an initial stage, like a vision and strategy stage, so we got a small amount of funding, like seed funding, to coproduce the bid, so it wasn’t you as an organisation...then got a period of time to really coproduce it. ”

Finally, it is important to note that SYHA’s involvement in co-production extends beyond ABiS to other projects such as ‘Over to You’ and ‘Co-Create’. This was important, as it enabled SYHA to build on learning across a number of projects develop its understanding of and approach to co-production on an ongoing basis.

The evolution of the ABiS approach to co-production

Given the length of the ABiS programme the approach to **co-production has inevitably evolved with time** and in parallel with the broader SYHA approach to co-production. Linked to this, interviewees suggested that co-production had become more significant and central to their work in recent years, describing it now as more of a ‘default’ approach.

“ It feels quite a *natural part of how we develop services now*, whereas when it was first introduced I’m sure it felt like quite an unusual way of doing things, that’s just the norm now. ”

Key people (SYHA staff) were discussed as being important to the development of the approach to co-production. The decision by SYHA to recruit an individual to develop this way of working demonstrated a purposeful decision to adopt this approach, and a commitment to co-production at the most senior level within the organisation.

“ No other organisations have a role that’s really focused on delivery and co-production and holding yourself as an organisation to account, that was pre-Age Better. ”

“ It was new, but it was saying ‘*this is what we think is important to the business*’ and then allowing that person the tools and resources and whatever was needed to introduce that to the business and then start to embed it as normal practice. ”

One important factor in the evolution of the ABiS approach to co-production has been the commitment to a ‘test-and-learn’. As one interviewee pointed out, this way of working has meant that co-production has been able to evolve based on experience.

“ There’s been a real freedom to try different ways of doing things, so it’s less about the tick box of ‘you’re doing this or you’re doing that, so I think co-production has been allowed to emerge. ”

This ‘test-and-learn’ approach enabled ABiS to make a number of changes to the way it approached co-production. For example, from initially talking about co-production in quite general terms, staff now refer to the four elements of co-design, co-delivery, co-evaluation and co-governance discussed previously. This has the advantage of **breaking co-production down into more understandable activities and processes** and can enable people understand their role in co-production more clearly. In a more practical example, the approach to co-governance was adapted, from having separate groups for older people (the ‘Age Better Board’) and professional partners (the ‘Core Partnership’), to a combined Core Partnership Board that included representatives of both. It was suggested that this approach ensured that decision making – and thus ‘power’ – was distributed and shared far more equally and openly.

Why do it? The benefits of co-production for the ABiS programme

So why should programmes like ABiS undertake the sort of co-production described in this report? Interviewees suggested that whilst co-production

could be seen as a ‘good thing’ in and of itself, it also brought **real benefits for the programme, its partners, and service users**. Note that the benefits for partners and service users will be explored in more detail, and from their own perspectives, in subsequent reports.

Benefits for the programme

The **importance of co-governance** was discussed in some detail, with interviewees suggesting that the ABiS Core Partnership was an important part of the programme’s ‘success’. The co-governance approach meant that decisions made about which services to commission and how resources were allocated were made by a committed partnership through which a broad range of views and interests were represented, rather than just SYHA staff. One interviewee highlighted how important the Core Partnership has been.

“ So for me, it really gave me the strength or it made me feel stronger in my understanding that we were doing the right thing. ”

Case Study: enabling Delivery Partners to co-design through the Innovation Fund

Through the ABiS ‘Innovation Fund’ potential projects were encouraged to apply to an initial ‘seed funding round’ for funding to enable them to engage in additional co-design activities with possible service users. Training in co-production methods was also provided. The revised projects were then commissioned by ABiS, with each one having evolved and developed quite considerably in response to the codesign work.

One example was ‘Together’, delivered by Enrichment for the Elderly, which worked with people living in four care homes in Sheffield, along with their families and care home staff, to help improve the social contact and relationships between families and their relatives living in those care homes.

The initial proposal was for monthly workshops which people could attend in a group setting. However, during the seed funding co-design stage it became clear that this approach was not what families wanted: there was a wide variation in the times and frequencies that family members visited, so finding times that would be suitable for all those who might benefit was difficult, and the aspirations and preferences of families differed.

In response, the service was revised so that each family received a bespoke offer tailored to their circumstances, with advice and support, a ‘go-between’ to mediate with care home employees where necessary, and one to one and group activities organised around their interests. Group activities were arranged around the preferences and timetable of one family, with other residents and families invited to take part if they were available.

For more information see:

<https://www.agebettersheff.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Together-end-of-project-report-FINAL.pdf>

Co-production therefore has been perceived as a vital component of effective, accountable and stronger decision-making. However, it is not easy to embed and maintain, nor is it as straightforward as more traditional models of governance.

“ Delivering co-governance is really hard, it needs time and investment to get it right, it needs really good chairing of the board, it needs really good honesty and respect and space for people to air their views and sometimes there are clashes but we come out of the other side. For me, the board is one of the gems of the whole programme. ”

Thinking beyond co-governance, embedding co-design throughout the programme, and not just undertaking it at planning and bidding stage, has enabled ABiS to respond to new needs as they emerge. By commissioning Delivery Partners at two points in the programme, and on an ongoing basis through the Innovation Fund, ABiS have been able to respond to what older people say they want and need throughout the programme as part of the test-and-learn process. As such, whilst some key projects have remained the same or been tweaked slightly, other entirely new projects have been developed in response to feedback following co-design processes.

Benefits for delivery partners

Interviewees believed that delivery partners benefited from their involvement in co-production through ABiS. For example, they have received training, and have access to a co-production toolkit. Some **delivery partners had expressed how much they have learnt** from the co-production approach underpinning ABiS, and how this learning has begun to inform other areas of their work.

“ I think some organisations, they did co-production, but now it's more ingrained, they've got more tools to use now from working as part of ABiS. ”

However, interviewees were also keen to note that they also learnt a lot about co-production from the delivery partners, emphasising the two-way nature of co-productive processes.

Benefits for service users

ABiS staff were able to point to a number of examples of how the co-production model that

underpins the programme had directly benefited service users, primarily through the co-delivery element. Start-Up, one of the projects funded through ABiS was frequently cited as an example of effective co-delivery, as it **gives older people the opportunity to take an idea about how to address isolation and loneliness and deliver it themselves**. Some people involved with Start Up also went on to support other people to set-up new groups, contributing to sustainable and multiple impacts in the longer term. Given that these projects were led by people who in some cases were previously lonely and isolated, and for whom their sense of agency (i.e. belief that they can make change) was limited, this example was particularly powerful.

What are the lessons learned from co-production across the ABiS programme?

Interviewees reflected on a number of lessons that had been learned by SYHA and the ABiS partners through the range of co-productive activities undertaken during the ABiS programme.

1. Flexibility and responsiveness

Although there is a clear approach to co-production within ABiS – based on the four elements of co-design, co-delivery, co-evaluation and co-governance – interviewees also emphasised **the need for approaches to be flexible and responsive to context and people's circumstance**. Therefore, co-production should not be carried-out in a standardised, overly-formal way, because “*you then don't get that true engagement, it can't look like it's too professional*”. Key to this was having a toolbox of creative methods and approaches that could be adapted, refined and added to accordingly.

2. Terminology

It was acknowledged that **the language of co-production could appear technocratic and be off-putting** and has in the past been associated with tokenism and top-down decision making. With so many different terms being used, and a lack of real understanding or explanation of what they mean and how they differ, could end up distancing the very people you are trying to engage. Therefore, **using language that people understood and describing activities in ways that made sense** to people is vitally important.

3. Listening and feeding back

In order to ensure that co-production isn't tokenistic, or viewed as such, interviewees highlighted the importance of first, (really) **listening to what people are telling you**, and second, **communicating back to people how things have changed** as a result of their involvement.

“ So it's not just taking it away and then the professionals wrap it up in a bow and say 'we've done what you said you wanted', when in reality it's the professional doing what they want. It's saying 'this has all stemmed from what you told us and these are the results. ”

4. True co-production takes time and resources

Interviewees emphasised that to do co-production well takes **a lot of time and resources**. As such it can feel like a slow process at times.

“ it takes a lot of time and effort and in existing services where the margins are really small, staff are out one to one working with people all the time, you can make marginal improvements but in terms of really transforming, it just takes time. ”

5. The importance of trust, transparency, honesty

The way that the ABiS services were commissioned by SYHA has evolved through the course of the programme. The developmental approach was a challenge for some delivery partners, and trust was raised as an issue with newer relationships. A key piece of learning related to this project development process is that *“co-production takes a lot of time and trust and you need to allow that to happen.”*

Linked to the idea of trust is the transparency and honesty needed to make co-production

a reality. It was suggested that it needs to be clear from the outset that coproduced services will evolve as the programme develops. This was a challenge in the early stages of ABiS that has been overcome, to a certain extent, over time.

“ So learning is, if you're going to use co-production in your commissioning model you need to be really explicit...you have to be really open and encouraging that change is what we actually want to see cos we want to learn...It's a really difficult conversation to have sometimes when people aren't used to that. ”

6. Having a good mix of people involved

Interviewees reflected how it is important to **involve people from a broad range of perspectives in the co-production process**. Different people will bring different things to various stages of the work. Therefore, matching strengths, experiences and skills with different opportunities to engage in co-production – through co-design, co-delivery, co-evaluation or co-governance – was an important but challenging task.

Next steps

This is the first of a series of evaluation outputs focussing on co-production across the ABiS programme. Future Co-production Learning Reports will focus on drawing-out some more critical reflections on the ABiS approach to co-production from the perspective of older people and partner organisations and consider the implications for future co-production activities with older people in the City. 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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