

GMCVO

Research



Critical Success Factors for co-production in VCSE organisations

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a partnership project between Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO) and Manchester Metropolitan University Business School on co-production in the voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. The project was funded by the Community University Partnership Initiative (CUPI). CUPI is a partnership of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, University of the West of England, Power to Change, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Connected Communities programme.

There is a significant, and growing, interest in co-production among VCSE sector audiences, as well as among Greater Manchester policymakers. Co-production can be defined as the *active involvement* of end-users in various stages of the production process (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In the context of the private sector, co-production is often framed as a mechanism to improve efficiencies and as a source of product and service innovation (Voorberg et al., 2015). For the VCSE sector the impetus is different; co-production allows organisations to increase citizen involvement by working with those that are using the service to ensure that the offer is fit for purpose and meets the needs of a wide and diverse population. Yet there is a gap in empirical research about how to achieve co-production in VCSE organisations, and of good practice examples detailing how co-production can be incorporated into VCSE operations. Further, due to the fast pace of the sector those involved in co-production often do not get the opportunity to reflect on their experience in the co-production process, meaning that relevant learning cannot be taken into account when moving forward. This research study used self-described examples of co-production by VCSE organisations in Greater Manchester as a starting point to develop a more nuanced understanding of how co-production works in practice.

We selected 5 VCSE organisations in Greater Manchester that were willing to work with us to document self-reported examples of co-produced services. We conducted dyadic interviews with a representative of the VCSE organisation and a service user who had jointly been involved in a co-production project together. By adopting this approach we were able to share in and understand the co-production journeys, and also offer a space for reflection on the key learning from co-producing services together.

Our findings illustrate a huge commitment to co-production from the 5 case study organisations. We show how co-production is of benefit not only to the VCSE organisation, but also to those involved in the process. Increased self-confidence, more developed organisational skills and a deeper connection to local communities were some of the benefits that were reported. Co-production also allowed organisations to expand their service provision and to ensure that their services were fit for purpose and sustainable.

We also found that motivations and initial expectations for service users becoming involved in co-production were varied. Some had a personal interest, others were keen to support service improvement and for others the rationale was less clear. It was definitely not 'one size fits all', which is an important point for VCSE organisations to consider when encouraging service users to become involved in co-production.

We present examples of how co-production was carried out across the 5 VCSE organisations by focusing on the enabling factors, skills and processes. We also consider the advantages and disadvantages of the co-productive approach to service design and delivery. We conclude the report by outlining the critical success factors for co-production in VCSE organisations.

Introduction

Background

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Methodology

The study was preceded by a focus group supported by 'Thinking Funding' from CUPI. The focus group comprised 15 VCSE organisations that provided health and social care services in Greater Manchester. Focus group attendees were invited to talk about their own examples of co-production and the types of research approaches and outputs that they would see as appropriate. The findings from the focus group informed the research design that was submitted for 'Follow-on Funding' to CUPI. This application was successful.

The amount of funding awarded allowed us to include 5 case study examples in the research. A call for participants was publicised using established GMCVO communications channels and generated an enthusiastic response. We were able to select 5 examples based on the types of services delivered, the geographical location of the VCSE organisation and the availability of service users to be involved in the research (Please refer to Appendix 1 for details). Based on these selection criteria we were able to explore a variety of different types of co-production examples. For each case study we conducted a joint interview with an organisational representative and a service user who had been involved in a process of co-production together. This approach to data collection enabled us to share in the co-production stories of both partners, creating a valuable space for reflection, and potentially unlocking learning at a personal and organisational level. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed to establish emerging themes within and across the 5 case examples.

The research was a partnership project in the true sense, as both partners worked together in all stages of the research; design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. Alongside this report we also produced a set of 5 posters, which feature the case study examples from the 5

VCSE organisations. These posters can be used by the research participants to showcase their work on co-production, as well as to serve as inspiration for other organisations.

Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows:

- we begin by exploring the definitions of co-production as derived from the interviews; we then go on to explore the reasons for engaging in co-production from the perspective of the service users and the VCSE organisations;
- next, we examine how co-production was carried out by drawing on specific examples from the case studies;
- we then discuss the challenges of evaluating co-production and also consider the advantages and disadvantages of the co-productive approach;
- we conclude the report by outlining the critical success factors for co-production in VCSE organisations.

Definitions of co-production

Co-production has become a buzz word in VCSE and policy circles. With widely popular concepts, there can be lack of clarity about what they actually mean and different actors may have different definitions. We therefore started each interview by inviting participants to share their definitions of co-production.

It is not easy to distinguish between the definitions of users and of staff as their views were similar. Co-production was viewed by all participants as a particular form of partnership or team working that was focused on valuing lived experience equally to more formal forms of expertise. Research participants emphasised:

- The non-hierarchical nature of co-production.
- That co-production constitutes a long-term process, which includes service users in all its phases.
- How co-production typically brings “like-minded” people together.
- Mutual benefit as a feature of co-productive processes.

Definitions included:

“Working with anybody who is involved with the project to make it work for those who use the service” (Circle).

“It’s working in partnership with customers throughout that design process. So you’ve always got the customer’s perspective in the room, whether you’re thinking about what the end product is going to look like, and because they’re the experts as a customer of Stockport Homes” (Stockport Homes).

“It was about me coming forward with my experiences, voicing my experiences, and knowing that I was being given a voice and something would be done” (LGBT Network).

“Like-minded people coming together to influence change and so something that is mutually beneficial for all parties involved, and from the very planning stages to the end” (Diversity Matters).

“Working together as a big team...and no-one’s different. Everyone’s the same” (Booth Centre).

Reasons for engaging in co-production

The data does not suggest significant differences between service users and staff with regard to definitions of co-production, yet there were important differences between the organisational rationale for using co-production and the reasons why service users decided to get involved.

Why users became involved

Becoming involved in co-production was not always a conscious decision. It was something that users became interested in based on a recommendation, because they were already involved with the organisation or because they generally wanted to be helpful. Initial expectations of what users would get out of engaging in co-production were often superseded or exceeded by the actual benefit.

Initial expectations

Users often framed their participation in co-production in a wider context of holding pro-social attitudes, rather than as a conscious step to improve services. A Circle member who has been involved in co-production by volunteering as a host for the social events pointed out how this role is a good fit for her, because *“I don’t like to see anybody left out and if somebody’s sitting on their own, I’ll say ‘Come and sit with us.’ I’ll introduce them to people that they might not have seen before. Because you get a lot of people who want to sit together ... but it’s nice to sit with somebody else and have a bit more feedback.”* A member of the Stockport Homes Customer Panel noted how she is already engaged with the organisation through her membership on other panels and that *“I just like to know how the company works and by doing different things you get a feeling ... if you can do anything to help.”* A former service user of the Booth Centre noted that serving as a peer mentor is a way of giving something back: *“I just really wanted to give something back to the Booth Centre and that’s what I could give back by supporting other people.”*

At the same time, taking part in co-production cannot only be seen as a way of providing support, but also as receiving support. At the Booth Centre, the peer mentor described the role as *“It’s not just me supporting them [people who use the Centre], it’s them supporting me too.”* This is echoed by a participant of the Macmillian LGBT and Cancer Programme, who originally joined the programme because *“I think [my friend] had suggested it as being something, not that would be a counselling group for me, but it would give me something to do, really. Because I was sinking in a hole of just feeling really sorry for myself. And so, my expectations were not particularly clear, I was just going to a group to talk. And that’s what I did, just go to the group and talk. And it was fine, so I didn’t really have any expectations at all. And I certainly didn’t I don’t think at the time think that it would be as useful to me as it was emotionally, but it was very useful.”*

The interviews found that the motivation for participating in co-production was also sometimes the desire for things to change. Examples included the introduction of new services or activities, as in the example of Diversity Matters. Here, volunteers were recruited from among a group of ladies who had previously articulated the need for female-only sports provision in their locality. Rather than being attendees of the new sports club, they subsequently became volunteers who helped to coordinate the weekly club and make it sustainable. At the Booth Centre, peer mentors worked to improve existing services and introduce new ones (e.g. different activities, new modes of communication).

Motivations and initial expectations were therefore varied, and an important point for VCSE organisations to consider when encouraging service users to become involved in co-production.

Benefits to users

It is important to recognise that benefits to service users do not always accrue directly or exclusively to those who have been involved in co-production. There is no linear input-output relationship between engaging in co-production and gaining some kind of personal benefit. Rather, co-producing users often help ensure that services are suitable for a wide and diverse range of service users. Co-producing service users can also form a bridge between service users and the organisation because they enjoy more trust with fellow users than staff, and may have access to other service users' opinions and be able to feed these back to staff. This was the case at Circle and at the Booth Centre, where interviewees commented specifically that other service users trusted their peers, and will tell them things that they would not tell staff directly.

In addition to these wider benefits the personal benefits were also a theme that came through strongly in our research. Examples included co-producing service users:

- Feeling valued by the organisation and those that used its services.
- Feeling empowered to use their expertise to develop more appropriate services.
- Feeling able to raise awareness of lesser heard client groups.
- Improved self-confidence.
- Developing skills through the training and support received.
- Becoming more connected in their communities.

These examples may be beneficial to VCSE organisations in outlining the personal benefits of engaging in co-production to interested service users.

Why organisations chose co-production

The organisational benefits of co-production are often discussed and documented e.g. ensuring that services are fit for purpose and sustainable (Needham, 2008; Best *et al.*, 2018). In the VCSE sector, co-production can be seen as normatively desirable, and hence co-production activities lend legitimacy to organisations and the services that are offered. Our research echoed these themes and interviewees discussed how co-production helped to achieve their organisation's mission and also to highlight where and how services can be improved.

VCSE organisations also noted the additional resources that co-production brings. For example, Diversity Matters were able to offer numerous services that were initiated through co-production and then evolved to be volunteer-led. This approach enabled Diversity Matters to expand its service provision without requiring additional resources. Similarly, peer mentors at the Booth Centre allowed regular and meaningful interactions with more people who used the Centre and the hosts at the Circle events ensured attendees' needs were understood and thus supported repeat attendance at these events. All VCSE organisations in the study discussed the huge support received from the co-producing service users, many of whom had become integral to the day-to-day running of the organisation.

Doing co-production

In this section we examine *how* co-production was carried out. We focus on the enabling factors, skills and processes.

Enabling factors

A clear theme to emerge across the 5 case studies was how co-production needs to be embedded in the culture of the organisation and to be fully supported by the organisation's management. The staff from our participating organisations frequently mentioned how their management allowed them to 'get on with things,' for example the Circle project coordinator referred to the fact that: *"We're lucky here, [our director] doesn't breathe down our neck, [putting pressure that] we've got to deliver X, Y, Z. We can say, 'Actually, this event is just not working, it's not what people want. We need to tweak it,' and he'll just say, 'Yeah, tweak it, get on with it.' So, we're lucky we can just keep making improvements all the time"*. In the case of the Macmillan LGBT and Cancer Programme, the coordinator lauded Macmillan's willingness to start a project with a very flexible remit: *"I applaud Macmillan for being brave enough to put it out there and say, 'You've got time to explore the needs and then do something with it.'"*

There has to be a willingness by the staff involved to share power with their co-production partners, the service users. Considering service users as co-production partners who have a valuable contribution to make implies receptiveness to their input as well as a willingness to follow up on their recommendations. As one participant from the Macmillan LGBT and Cancer Programme put it: *"It is about nothing being imposed from the top and it all being a journey that we're on together"*. A Stockport Homes engagement officer describes how co-producing with service users is *"about taking everything off the table, that organisationally, we had an idea about, because as soon as you walk into the room with an agenda, by saying 'This is the end point we want to get to', I think you limit the room for creativity ..., the room for debate about what the product should look like."*

It appears that embedding a co-productive ethos in the culture of the organisation allows staff engaged in co-production with service users to be flexible when it comes to undertaking co-production. Flexibility supports creativity, learning and the continuous improvement of services. Hence, co-production necessarily requires a commitment to organisational learning and adaptation. VCSE organisations were clear about the role of the service user in the co-production process. This may be as a co-designer and/or as a co-implementer. In the majority of the examples the co-production partnership jointly co-designed and co-implemented the activity or service.

As co-production takes time, there needs to be an organisational commitment to resourcing the process adequately. Although service users participated in co-production without being paid, co-production did have resource implications for staff and was quite demanding on their time. In our examples, organisations were rarely given funding for the specific purpose of co-production, but more often had to draw on existing resources. This was often underpinned by a belief that co-production was part and parcel of the organisational mission. However, it was noted that funders were usually unlikely to fund the true cost of a service that has been co-produced. This reinforces the sense that co-production is simply what the VCSE should do or, as our focus group attendees said when we were developing this study: *"It's in our DNA."* This may be one of the reasons why funders choose to work with the VCSE, rather than with the public or private sector. However, this ethos may also prevent a critical examination of costs and benefits and subsequent resourcing by funders.

Another enabling factor for organisations wanting to explore co-production with service users is the existence of established communication channels with service users who might be

interested in co-production. The organisations in our sample utilised existing relationships with service users, rather than trying to establish new ones. Therefore, co-production often means deepening and broadening existing relationships, rather than developing new ones.

Skills

There was a surprising consensus among our interviewees that co-production does not require specialised training. Although some of the service users had experience with other forms of engagement, the general understanding was that what service users brought in abundance was their lived experience and that this alone was sufficient to qualify them for participating in co-production. Moreover, some organisational representatives explicitly stated that any type of formal training would only serve to water down this quality. As staff from Stockport Homes stated: *“There wasn’t any training and there’s a reason for that, because we wanted the [product] to represent our customers ...”* When asked about the potential for service users to contribute skills beyond their lived experience, one group coordinator remarked that this would have clouded the ability to provide what is genuinely needed: *“In other co-production projects it might be really good for [service users] to take on more roles. In this one, I was very aware that a lot of what people had to give was quite personal, because we’re talking about personal experiences ... And that was as much as I would expect people to give...I was aware that there was a certain emotional input there. So, I didn’t want to cloud that with ‘please share your experiences with us today. But also, please can you take the minutes of the meeting?’ ... I wanted to free the group up to be able to be themselves”* (Macmillan LGBT and Cancer Programme).

However, whether training was deemed necessary or not also depended on the type of role service users played. Participants typically did not consider training necessary when service users participated in co-design of services, as this mainly benefited from their lived experience. It was when service users participated in co-implementing the service that training was sometimes considered necessary, because participating in service delivery entails contact with other service users on behalf of the organisation and hence requires a certain degree of risk management by the organisation. The two cases where training was given was where service users had become volunteers and hence had become involved in delivering the service to others. It therefore appears that service user involvement in co-implementation entails a slightly more formal relationship between the service users in question and the organisation. The only exception to this was the case of Circle, where service users co-implemented the service as volunteer hosts, but this was an organic extension of their natural role as member and participation in social get-togethers, rather than a role that required training. It therefore appears that co-design is a more informal form of co-production than co-delivery.

Most interviewees struggled with pinpointing specific skills, but often implicitly referred to the types of personality traits that might be conducive to being in a co-productive relationship. These included the willingness to:

- listen
- learn from other participants
- compromise
- participate
- adhere to formal agreements, i.e. meeting times
- acknowledge and embrace the expertise they themselves had to offer to the process.

Generally speaking, the co-productive processes we encountered in our study were underpinned by a belief that co-production is a worthwhile exercise and were informed by a set of complementary competencies that were mutually valued and shared accordingly.

However, co-production, by virtue of bringing people together who come from different perspectives, is not without its difficulties and requires the ability to deal with conflict in a constructive way, as well as the ability to facilitate a discussion without dominating it.

Processes

We asked the organisations that participated in the study about the processes that they had developed in order to facilitate co-production. The data suggests that important aspects of these organisational processes were the balance between setting boundaries and keeping the process open-ended, the spaces where co-production happened, the types of communication channels used to stay in touch with service users, and the long-term nature of co-production.

Despite the inherent openness that facilitated genuine co-production in our case study examples, boundaries were also set to ensure that the purpose and outcomes of the co-production activities were clear. For example, when developing the activity schedule Circle had parameters about how many events would normally be expected per month and an idea of the geographical spread of these events. The interview stressed that the co-production activities were not 'free reign' and that certain parameters were set and adhered to. The business decision as to whether certain events would be viable was always included in the process. Study participants were conscious of the tension between the open-endedness of co-production and the need for setting parameters, but it was their view that co-productive processes could take place within a framework and, indeed, that it was part of the non-hierarchical co-production relationship to be transparent about what aspects were actually open for discussion and which aspects were non-negotiable. Managing expectations seemed to be an important part of engaging in co-production with service users. For example, the chief officer of Diversity Matters, an organisation that uses co-production with prospective service users to identify and try to fill gaps in service provision, commented on the importance of managing expectations that can inevitably be raised by a co-productive approach: *"So my approach would be, for the staffing team, if you're going out there, be realistic in what we can offer and not to promise the world because we cannot do everything."*

Spaces for co-production were often kept deliberately informal for the service users involved, with staff shouldering the main administrative burden, such as chairing, minute-keeping and meeting organisation. The rules of engagement were often implicit or verbally agreed, rather than written. For example, a Stockport Homes engagement officer pointed out that there were no written terms of reference for the service users who co-produced: *"We wanted transparency for panel members, so you know what your role is. Just through experience again, there's nothing written down, there's no process."* The Macmillan LGBT and Cancer Programme coordinator pointed out that co-production meetings were held at the LGBT Foundation, which is widely recognised as a safe space by the LGBT community. As the coordinator points out: *"I didn't start out with any kind of safe space policy or a strict confidentiality policy or anything like that. ... I was taking the implicit nature of meeting at LGBT Foundation, the fact that we might all have shared experience around discrimination, etc. Like being in that building, it's implicit that you are sensitive towards other people's identities, experiences."* He contrasted this with a previous co-production project that he had been involved in, which according to him did not have the desired support from service users because it was not hosted in a 'LGBT safe space', nor was a safe space agreement created together with service users.

Creating a safe space can also involve turning on its head the usual power dynamics. A powerful statement was when service users dictated the terms on which they met with service providers. Rather than service users coming to a venue that had been identified by the professional staff, this meant that providers had to meet service users on their 'home turf'.

Most interviewees commented on how their co-productive space was welcoming and inclusive. For example, interviewees from the Booth Centre described the atmosphere as follows:

“Service user: Everyone has a say, everyone’s treated equally and there’s not a person out of place.

Staff: So it’s like everyone ... feels their worth ... it’s just more of a family way of working rather than it kind of [being]... top-down.”

Although most interviewees pointed to the congenial atmosphere of their co-productive spaces, some also acknowledged that it might not be suitable for everyone to participate in co-production in a group setting. At Circle, for example, the project coordinator observed that at the meeting where the event calendar was co-produced *“some enjoyed...having a go at putting it together. Others...found it difficult because, well, they’re maybe not used to working in a group.”* The organisation therefore emphasised the need to have a variety of communication channels in order to enable less vocal members to be heard.

Co-production is often an iterative/long-term process and requires persistence and ongoing awareness of the types of issues that have been raised by service users over time. For example, Circle’s ‘open door policy’ means that members can always get in touch with the coordinator to raise concerns, give feedback or make suggestions, which can be daunting: *“So, it’s just asking all the time and being aware of what’s been suggested already and just, when you have a conversation with people, just, ‘Oh, such a body has mentioned this, is that something you’re interested in as well?’ And then I ... make sure I keep a note of it until I get a bit of a build-up ...it feels a bit like [having a million things in your head all the time]. But ... the day feedback stops coming in, it’s me trying to plan a calendar for 500 people that I have no idea what they want. So, actually, I’d rather have lots of little ideas to pursue.”* In the case of Diversity Matters, it took several years before there was an opportunity to put into practice the idea of a women’s sports club: *“We had ... people wanting to do it with their contact details. So we had that, but ... nobody would invest anyway to put on anything, and it was quite disheartening because we were still waiting and this is going back ... six years ... So anyway, we still had that on the backburner. Then recently, last year, there was an opportunity and we jumped at it. So our local infrastructure organisation applied for a fund for us to Sports England, around increasing physical activity levels with BME women. That is exactly what we do, our expertise, our specialism...So we said, ‘... let’s touch back base with the women’s sport club and see if there is a demand.”*

Evaluating co-production

Measuring the success of co-production may be slightly different from measuring the success of other pieces of work, as sometimes the measure of success may equally be about the quality of the co-productive process, rather than only about the outcomes. With co-production, the aim is precisely not to set out to achieve something very specific, but rather about a process that is in itself rewarding. In this sense, measuring the success of co-production may be slightly antithetical to a narrow focus on outputs, outcomes or targets. On the other hand, articulating the success of co-production might go right to the heart of many VCSE organisations' contribution and the added value they create, above and beyond that which is typically resourced by funders. The staff members and service users we spoke to often commented on how the outcomes they had experienced were in addition to what might have been the declared aim of the overall process. For example, as a participant of the Macmillan LGBT Cancer Programme said *“One of the reasons I joined the group was because I needed to have an outlet for the way I was feeling about things. ... And this group actually gave me the emotional support I needed, at the time. And it wasn't there as an obvious thing, it was just something that happened.”*

One might expect that participants would define success differently, depending on whether they were service users or paid employees. However, this was not the case in our sample. To the contrary, it seemed as though service users, through co-production, had actually begun to feel a high degree of ownership of the organisations' work and, as a result, often defined success from an organisational perspective. The organisational perspective, on the other hand, always had the improvement of the service for service users at heart, which is why the organisation probably decided to engage in co-production in the first place. It therefore seems that there is considerable overlap between the measures of success from the perspectives of the service users and the VCSE organisation. We did note, however, that involving service users in the evaluation of the co-production process was not explicitly stated in the interviews. There was much discussion about co-design and co-delivery, but far less on co-evaluation. This may be something for co-producing partners to consider as part of their co-production journey.

What was often emphasised was the enhanced inclusivity or accessibility of products which had been informed by service user perspectives. This is in line with the fact that those who are co-producing the service, i.e. the service users, are often from lesser heard groups and hence bringing their views to the table may have the effect of making the product more responsive to the needs of this particular group. For users this was a sign of success, because their opinions had actually been heard and acted upon; for organisations this was a necessary precondition for one of their measures of success, which was often the popularity of the service.

One measure of success that was implicit in how organisational representatives spoke about co-production was that it results in building relationships with service users, which could in turn constitute an asset for the organisation, facilitating recruitment of volunteers, enhancing organisational reputation and widening reach and ability to promote their services. VCSE organisations are often encouraged to consider their asset base and relationships with service users as an important asset to be nurtured.

Advantages

Participants articulated several advantages of using co-production with service users.

As co-production enabled close relationships to be built and maintained between organisational staff and service users, the organisation had continuous access to the opinion of users. This enabled the VCSE organisation to use available resources more efficiently by

targeting them directly to what was needed and/or wanted. Organisations were able to do more with less, because they could draw on the additional skills, ideas, and sometimes manpower, the service users brought to the table.

Co-production with service users also meant that staff were not alone in trying to design services, and could instead benefit from an almost collegiate relationship to service users, who constituted an ongoing source of ideas, inspiration and advice. Staff commented surprisingly often that because they were in dialogue with service users they felt less 'alone'. The project coordinator at Circle noted: *"When I initially started, it was very much asking everybody, you know, what they knew...So, it's just everyone's got something to offer so it's just being aware that I'm not on my own."* The staff member from the Booth Centre referred to her increased confidence in doing her job as a result of co-production: *"I think I've got more confident really, because I'm a natural wimp (laughs) you know, and [my co-production partner is] like, "We can do this," kind of thing, and okay and we just get things done, don't we? So I think for me it's the confidence thing."*

Staff also thought that co-production enhanced their professional practice, as one participant commented: *"As a professional, working with customers on something and doing things slightly differently and seeing different points of view and working in a slightly different way, it adds to my ability to be a professional. I really enjoy the process"* (Stockport Homes). Hence, although co-production tends to be seen as a way of empowering service users, it appears to be mutually empowering.

Engaging in co-production together also holds the promise of generating mutual understanding and trust. Service users felt valued, because their lived experience was appreciated and considered as analogous to a particular level of expertise. At the same time service users may also begin to appreciate the perspective of staff and the constraints they encounter in doing their job. Co-production partners commented on how useful it was to understand the process of co-production from their partner's point of view. It enabled challenges to be understood more fully and joint solutions developed. The following quotes from the interview with the Circle coordinator and service user give a flavour of this. The service user comments: *"But that was interesting, doing that, I found because some of them didn't like it but I thought, you know, at least you can see what [staff name] has got to put up with, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' sort of thing. I think they think, 'Oh, we can just do it any day, any time,' but it proves that you've got to work round where she can go, where she can get..."* From the coordinator's point of view: *"Because the members had been involved and the members knew it was member-led because we put that in the calendar to say, "You know, we did this at the suggestion time," I think people maybe appreciated it a bit more. I don't know."*

Disadvantages

As with any service design and delivery approach, co-production exhibits risks and disadvantages. One main risk inherent in co-production is its open-endedness. By definition, opening up the process to service users creates uncertainty about the potential outcome. However, interviewees did not tend to phrase this as a risk, but rather as an opportunity. This may be due to the perspective in the VCSE sector that co-production is as much of a process as an outcome. Further work in examining the outcomes of co-produced services would be helpful in developing our understanding of co-production and its associated outcomes.

A relatively significant risk is that co-productive processes may enable only those who are already relatively vocal to be heard. However, participants seemed to be aware of this risk and pointed out that they tried to offer additional channels for service users to provide ideas and feedback. Yet, this strategy – which often amounts to the 'open-door policy' mentioned above – may be ad hoc in nature and can be time-consuming for staff.

Organisations can build a co-productive ethos into their culture by providing multiple ways for service users to engage with co-production and by being opportunistic about using every interaction to gather intelligence on service users' opinions. In the absence of appropriate systems to capture such information, however, there is the likelihood that it resides in individual staff members' heads. This can be a risk for the knowledge management strategies of the VCSE organisation. For example, if the staff member has additional roles other than engagement, this can be quite demanding in terms of remembering all interactions, and it poses the risk of losing knowledge and learning if that staff member leaves the organisation.

Co-production ultimately depends on finding service users who are willing to engage in the process and bring with them the attitude and personal qualities to successfully engage in co-production. It can be difficult to find service users who are ready to commit their time in this way and our participants appeared to be of the opinion that it would not be possible to acquire the concomitant skills through training. As the Stockport Homes engagement officer noted: *"I don't think there's any one set of experiences or set of skills which would work in that environment. As I say, I like the fact that you all think a little bit differently and that you all come with slightly different opinions on different things..."*

Co-production is time and labour intensive and, although the services that are co-produced may ultimately be funded, it is unlikely that the funding will reflect the true investment that has gone into producing them in the first place. This means that VCSE organisations have to evaluate very closely when co-production is necessary and useful and when it is an unnecessary drain on resources. There is the risk that funds for other services are used to cross-subsidise exploratory co-production activities. It is interesting that when asked about financial implications, interviewees were usually reluctant to talk about this. This may be because of the role the staff had in their respective organisations, which tended to be an operational role, rather than a strategic role. The only exception to this was the chief executive of Diversity Matters, who did mention that co-production can constitute a drain on resources if not utilised appropriately.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that becoming involved in co-production was not always a conscious decision. For service users it was often motivated by the desire to help, rather than by a desire to bring about change. Organisations rarely chose co-production consciously as one strategy among others that were available, but saw it as something that was essential to their mission and that characterised the way they had always worked.

Rather than emphasizing skills and training as enabling factors, interviewees saw it as crucial that there was an enabling environment for co-production. Such an environment was created when management was willing to empower staff by giving them flexibility and adequate resources for co-production, which in turn enabled staff to share power with their co-production partners, i.e. service users, and follow-up on the suggestions that co-production generated with service adaptations and improvements. Managing expectations and balancing open-endedness with being transparent about the constraints was essential throughout the process.

When it came to evaluating co-production, there was considerable overlap between the measures of success of service users and staff. This points to a key potential outcome of co-productive processes: rather than seeing themselves as being on the receiving end of services, users became part of the team and felt a high degree of ownership of the end product. Engaging in co-production generated mutual understanding and trust, and the ability to understand an issue from a partner's perspective. As such, engaging in co-production allows VCSE organisations to build, enhance and transform relationships with service users and hence invest in one of their key organisational assets.

Co-production also poses risks. By virtue of its open-endedness, co-production creates uncertainty about the potential outcome. This can pose a problem for organisational planning and evaluation. Further, finding service users who are willing to engage in more intense co-production processes can be difficult. This is perhaps why the organisations in our study tended to rely on existing relationships with service users. Such an approach can in turn open up co-production to the criticism of amplifying the loudest voices further and meant that organisations had to provide a multitude of different feedback channels to allow other, less vocal service users to be heard. Utilising a range of different interactions with service users for co-productive purposes in order to enable all service users to be involved often created high volumes of intelligence about what service users thought, creating challenges for organisational knowledge management.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that a co-productive ethos and way of working is embraced by VCSE organisations despite the fact that there is reason to believe that if co-produced services are funded, it is currently unlikely that the level of funding will reflect the true investment that has gone into designing and producing these services. Nevertheless, the benefits to the co-production partners of engaging in the process were broad and varied, and often exceeded initial expectations. VCSE organisations interested in exploring co-production can draw on the reflections in this report to inform their co-production strategies.

Critical success factors

To conclude, we draw on the findings of our study to present what we perceive to be the critical success factors for co-production in VCSE organisations. These factors may form a framework for VCSEs to consider i) whether co-production is appropriate, ii) the aims of the co-production process, iii) the resources required for co-production, iv) how co-production can be carried out and v) how the co-production process and outcomes can be evaluated. We invite VCSE organisations engaged in, or considering, co-production to use this framework as

a starting point and to adapt, extend and develop these critical success factors as they move through their co-production journeys.

Critical Success Factors for Co-production in VCSE Organisations	
Enabling factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management (and funder) support • Power sharing with all co-production partners • Embedding a co-productive ethos in the VCSE organisation • Commitment to organisational learning and adaptation • Adequate resourcing • Established communication channels for engaging with interested co-production partners
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service users have lived experience of service context • Training from the VCSE organisation as considered necessary • Co-production partners share particular personality traits e.g. willingness to listen, learn, compromise and participate
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries set to ensure clarity and delivery of purpose and outcomes • Managing stakeholder expectations • Use of informal and safe meeting spaces • Use of a variety of communication channels • Maintaining engagement with needs of service users, and potential service users

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Appendix 1

Organisation Name	Description	Geographic Remit
Booth Centre	An organisation that supports people who are homeless or who have experience of homelessness. Peer mentors act as a co-production 'bridge' between those new to the Booth Centre and the activities available.	Greater Manchester
Diversity Matters	A community-led organisation focused on providing support and activities to benefit the local community, among them a women-only sports club.	Northwest
HMR Circle	A membership organisation that organises social events for older people. The events calendar is informed by an ongoing dialogue with members. Most events are hosted by members who act as hosts on behalf of the organisation.	Rochdale
Macmillan LGBT and Cancer Programme	The programme worked with a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people living with and affected by cancer to raise awareness about the inequalities faced by LGBT cancer patients and to instigate service improvements.	Greater Manchester
Stockport Homes	The housing organisation's Customer Engagement and Inclusion Team worked with a panel of residents to redesign the criteria for their Community Fund, a grant scheme that supports small community-based organisations. Facilitated by an engagement officer, the panel now reviews bids and awards grants.	Stockport

