

Co-production – a new definition



There is a growing recognition among health staff and commissioners that actively engaging people with long-term health conditions and disabilities in co-production can lead to services and support being more fit for purpose. There are multiple potential benefits to individuals, the staff and the system when everyone's experience and expertise is recognised and valued. People with lived experience can bring different perspectives and offer different insights and solutions to those more traditionally provided.

Co-production can be a slippery concept to grasp because it has often been muddled up with other types of participation. In order to explain co-production, drawing on our extensive experience, we've developed a new definition, new graphics and explanations of both what it relies on and what it can achieve.

So, what is co-production?

Co-production is a way in which organisations can relate to people, which enables people's meaningful contribution to:

- *agreeing joint priorities for action;*
- *influencing decision-making; and*
- *determining quality indicators.*

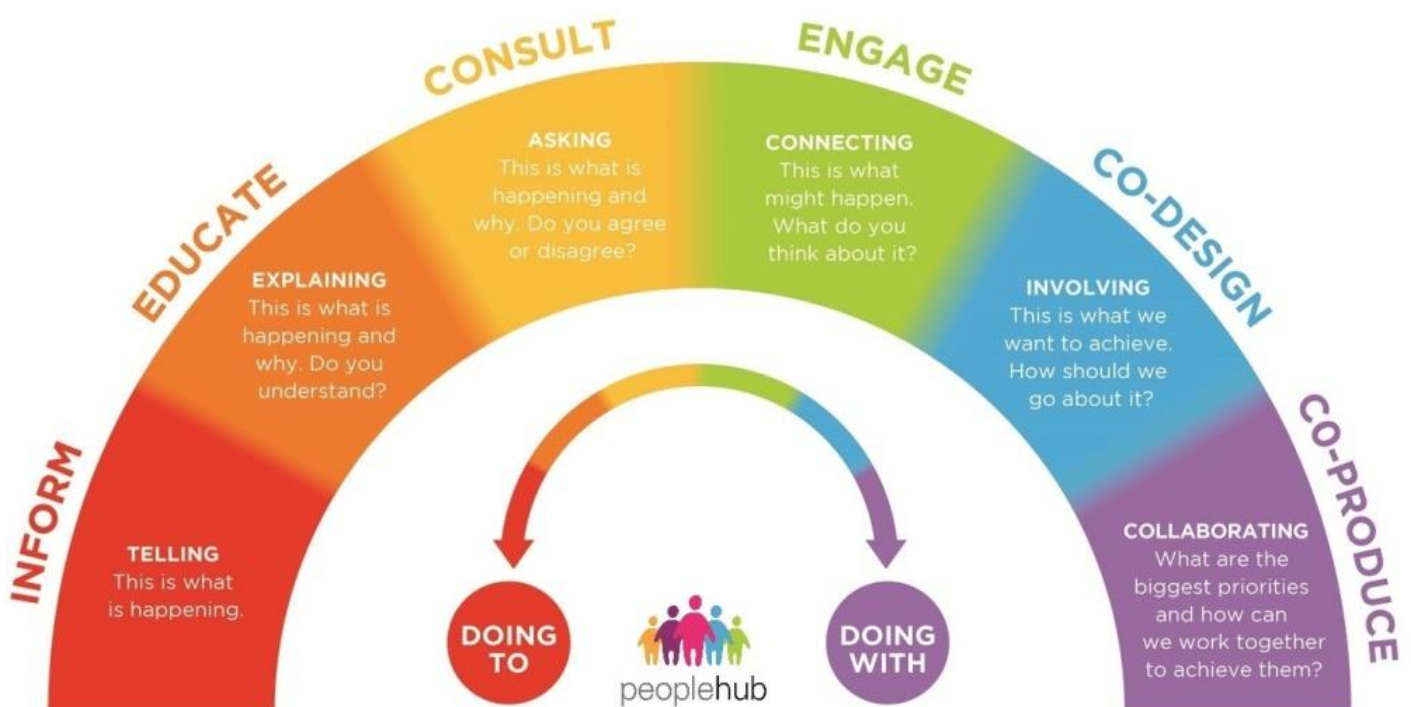
Co-production is one of the many ways in which organisations and people can interact. When organisations want to actively relate to the people who use their services or products, there's a range of ways in which they can do this. Each of these has different purposes and can work well in different circumstances.

Different types of participation

In order to explain what co-production is all about, we feel it's useful first to show where it sits alongside the other types of participation. For clarity, we have developed a ***Spectrum of Participation***. This builds on Sherry Arnstein's 1969 [Ladder of citizen participation](#) and Sarah White's 1996 work on the [forms and function of participation](#).

Our spectrum illustrates how each type of interaction differs. It's a spectrum because it moves between doing "TO" people and doing "WITH" people, and because of the variations in function and input. Each element has its own distinct purpose and value and each type of interaction has different functions and is useful in different circumstances.

We set out to describe the key questions that are asked across the spectrum. People have told us that the questions are useful to help them choose which type of participation is going to be most appropriate for what they want to achieve.



➤ **INFORM – This is what is happening.**

The spectrum starts with a statement rather than a question, because the organisation is simply telling people of a decision that has already been made. There is no expectation or opportunity for a response. Information sharing can readily happen across large populations.

➤ **EDUCATE – This is what is happening and why. Do you understand?**

The organisation explains a decision that has already been made, and takes the time to interact with people to ensure they understand why the decision has been reached and the impact on them. There is no opportunity to debate the decision.

➤ **CONSULT – This is what is happening and why. Do you agree or disagree?**

The organisation is asking a broad population of people for a yes or no answer on a decision that has to be made. The purpose is often to try to reach as many people as possible, so it's about breadth of participation. When done well, the organisation takes the time to lay out the potential positives and negatives of the yes or no answer. There is likely to be opportunity to influence the outcome of the decision.

➤ **ENGAGE – This is what might happen. What do you think about it?**

The organisation wants to connect more deeply with people and gather opinions and ideas on a decision rather than just seeking a yes or no answer. This means it is likely to reach out to a smaller group of people which will enable the organisation to collate and respond to more in-depth feedback and opinions. People's input will be influential in the decision because the organisation starts from a more open position.

➤ **CO-DESIGN – This is what we want to achieve. How should we go about it?**

The organisation involves people in deciding with them how best to achieve an objective which has already been set. Since the discussion and input is about the process of implementing something, this will necessarily involve people in influencing multiple decisions. For co-design to be efficient and effective, the number of people involved is likely to be a fairly small group.

➤ **CO-PRODUCE – What are the biggest priorities and how can we work together to achieve them?**

The organisation collaborates with people to explore and set priorities and objectives for change, together. People are participating at a strategic level and are able to influence the use of resources through a collective voice. In order for people to be able to contribute meaningfully at this level, the organisation will need to invest in people's knowledge, skills and confidence. Therefore, this will mean working in-depth and long-term with a select group of consistent people.

The key factor in determining which type of participation is most suitable is the degree of openness that an organisation can offer to people in terms of influencing a decision.

What co-production needs to work well

Co-production relies on:

- *an appreciation of different perspectives;*
- *the acknowledgement of different amounts of power;*
- *the investment of necessary input; and*
- *the gathering of independent feedback.*

Co-production takes time and commitment to some fundamental principles to develop and thrive. It can be done both within a single organisation, and with many organisations that are part of a whole system. In any interaction between people and health systems, there is a historic power imbalance. People are reliant on the information that the system chooses to share and often are also reliant on the services that the system provides. In order for people to feel safe to work collaboratively with systems, this power imbalance needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

As systems move from doing "to" to doing "with" people, the amount of input by the system, into people, needs to increase. This is because, in order for people to be able to co-produce meaningfully and effectively, people need:

- An understanding of the challenges the system faces and the resources available;
- Knowledge of the scope of what is open to change, and what isn't;
- Information on any relevant policy, and opportunities to influence the direction of travel;
- Skills to engage constructively and collaboratively with decision-makers; and
- To know what effect their input has had.

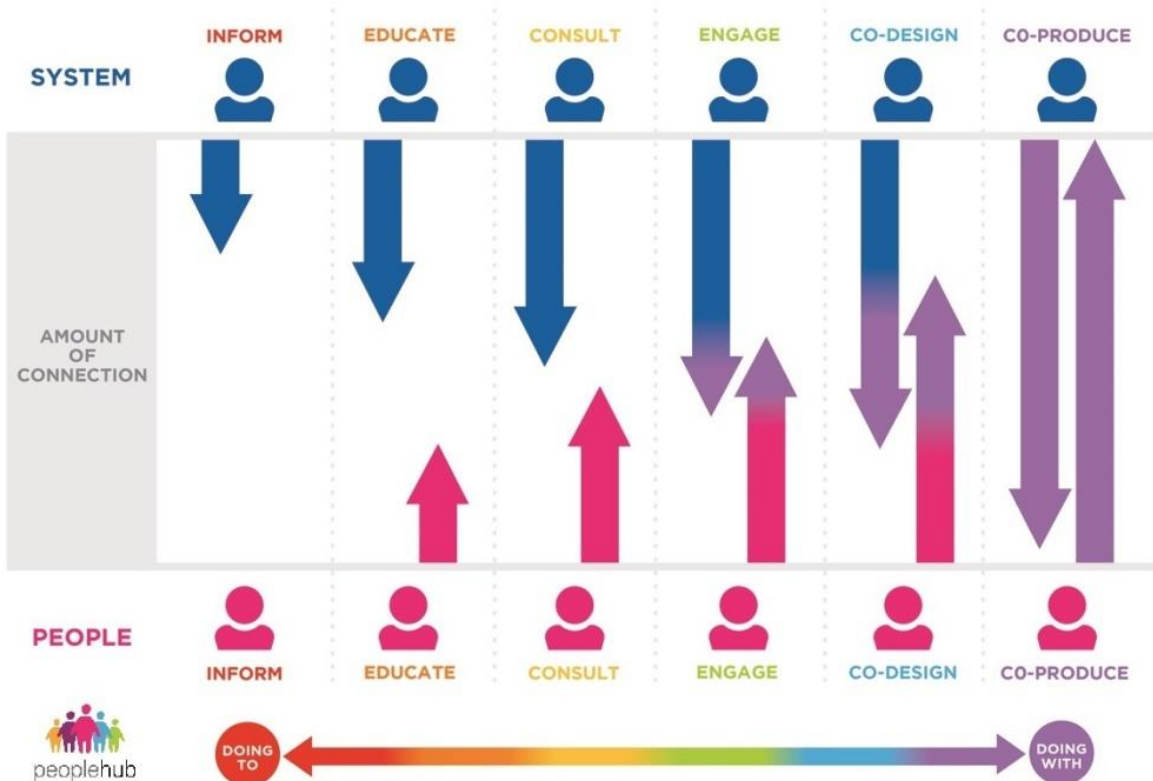
None of these essential elements happens for free. For example, it takes time and preparation from staff, and resources to invest in people's skills. The diagram below shows the relative amounts of input from systems and from people across the spectrum of participation.



For example, when an organisation wants to simply inform a population of a decision that has already been made, there is no expectation of a response - or input - from people, and so the only input is coming from the system in order to provide information. Conversely, when systems want to work collaboratively with people to co-produce, there is significant input both from people and to people.

The amount and quality of input that people are able to offer is directly related to the amount and quality of input by the system.

As the amount and quality of input increases, it's likely that the relationship between people and systems will become stronger. In the graphic below, you can see that once people begin to be able to share their opinions and actively influence decision making, the relationship starts to develop.



In the doing “to” side of the spectrum, the system is acting as expert with no or very limited opportunity for input from people and there is no real relationship or conversation. As interactions move into the doing “with” side of the spectrum, a more open dialogue develops, conversation begins and people’s expertise is invited. People move from passive recipients to active participants. Power and decision making begins to be shared.

The strongest relationships take time to develop, and rely on honesty, good communication and a willingness to collaborate.

Effective co-production relies on a strong and trusting relationship, and both partners need to be able to see the difference that working together has made. When people and systems value each other’s input and perspectives, then an authentic relationship can grow.

What co-production can achieve

When done well, co-production produces:

- *a combination of thinking to achieve change;*
- *a mutually beneficial relationship; and*
- *a service, policy, process or product which is more fit for purpose.*

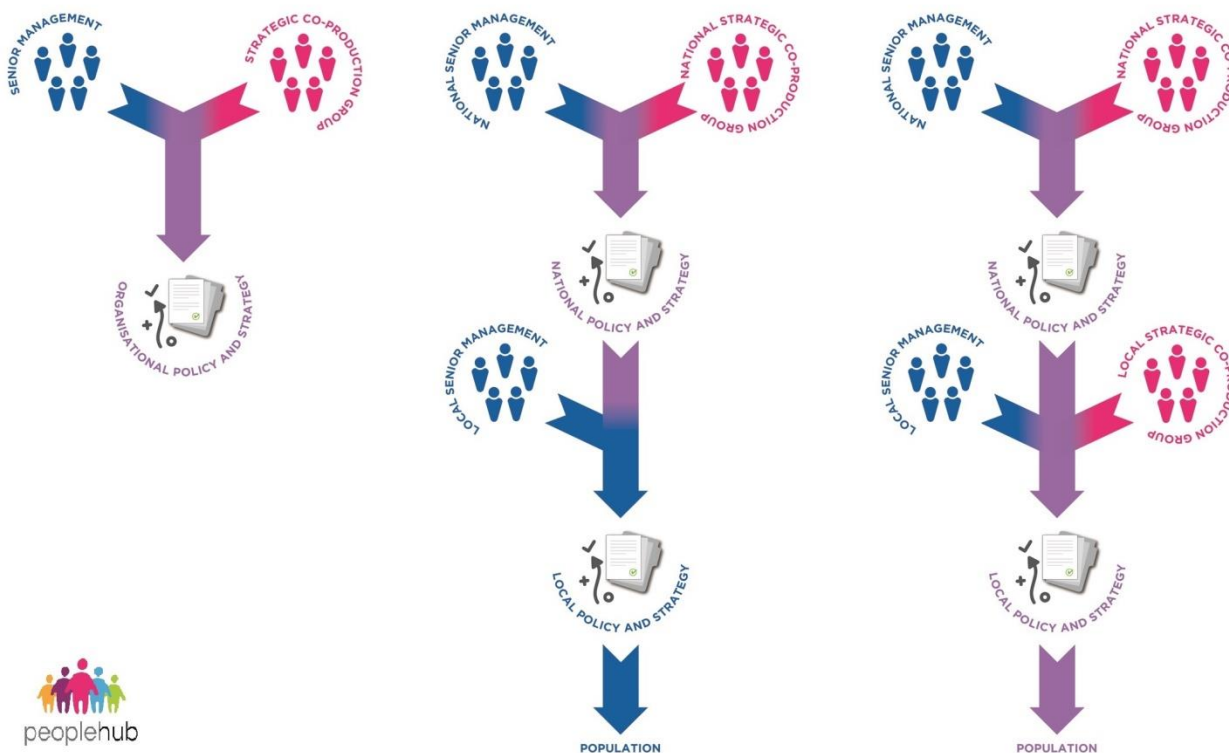
Co-production aims to balance system or organisational priorities with what matters to people. It’s about agreeing shared priorities and working together towards achieving them. It’s also about jointly agreeing the criteria for success, or quality indicators, which will help determine the degree of impact.

When co-production is effective, what flows from that dynamic interaction works well for both people and systems. The difference with co-production, from other types of participation, is that people are actively engaged in creating the agenda, not only responding to it.

The graphic below shows the impact of co-production at both a national and a local level.

- The first part of the graphic illustrates how people’s input combines with system input to create a new joint output. **Blue and pink becomes purple.**
- The second part of the graphic shows that when policy and strategy is co-produced on a national level, but is implemented locally without local co-production, people’s influence is diluted. **Purple returns to blue.** The system can revert to its traditional way of doing things and the implementation of the national policy can lose what matters most to people.
- The third part of the graphic shows that when people’s voices are fully part of local implementation through local co-production, the original national policy intent is kept true to purpose. **Purple remains purple!**

Even with local co-production in place, it’s vital to gather independent feedback from the wider population that the system or organisation is serving. This feedback will be based on the quality indicators that have been co-produced, and is to ensure equality and integrity across the whole population.



In summary

Co-production is a way in which organisations and systems can relate to people, which enables people's meaningful contribution to:

- Agreeing joint priorities for action;
- Influencing decision-making; and
- Determining quality indicators.

It relies on:

- Appreciation of different perspectives, knowledge and experience;
- Acknowledgement of different amounts of power and responsibilities;
- Investment of necessary input; and
- Gathering of independent feedback.

When done well, it produces:

- A combination of thinking to achieve change – either by innovation or adaptation;
- A mutually beneficial relationship which affects the way organisations and people see each other; and
- A service, policy, process or product which is more fit for purpose from the perspective of both the organisation and the people using it.

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