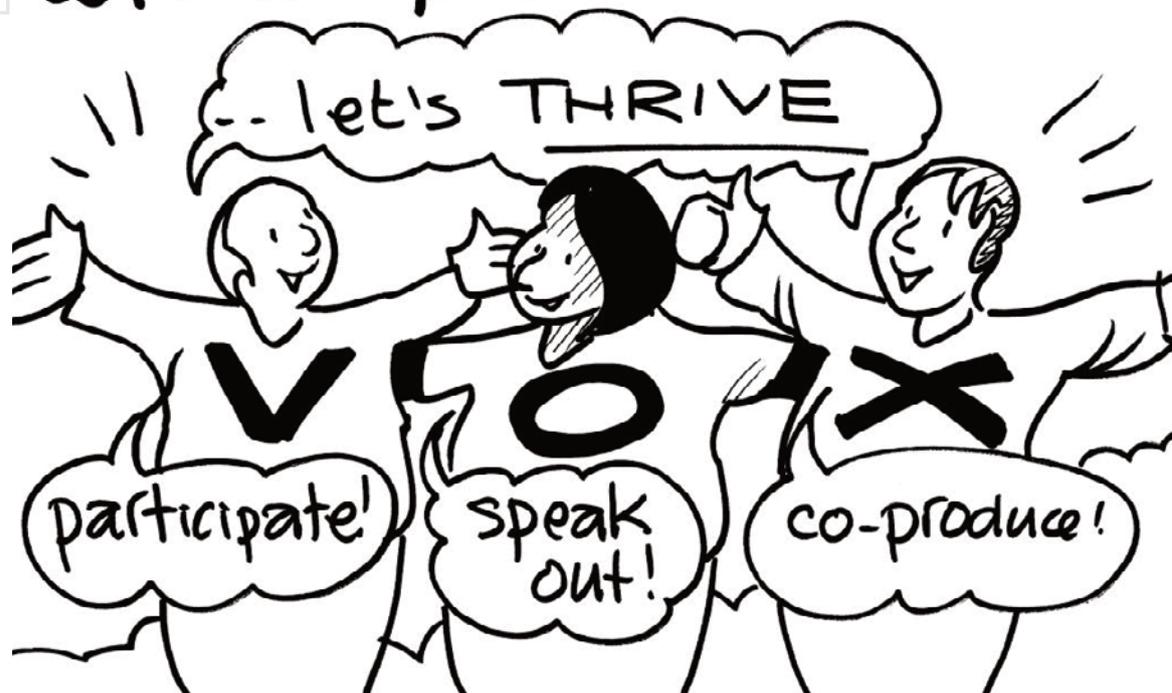


# Making Co-production Work

## Back to Basics

What people with  
lived experience need  
for co-production  
to be authentic  
and effective

Let's not just 'survive'...



## This Resource

Voices of Experience (VOX) Scotland members created this resource to help raise awareness of what needs to be considered in relation to co-production and mental health. It will support professionals and organisations to genuinely co-produce with people who have lived experience of mental health problems.

## About VOX Scotland

Voices of Experience (VOX) is Scotland's mental health collective advocacy charity, run by and for its members. We represent members' views to Scotland's politicians and health professionals to ensure our laws and mental health services reflect their needs and interests.

Co-production lives and breathes in the work we do. It breaks down barriers and establishes the ethos that we are all equal.

VOX is run by people with mental health problems, for people with mental health problems. We are the 'voices of experience' and we make sure our members' views are heard loud and clear!

## Why did we create this resource?

Our members are frequently asked to be involved in shaping mental health policy and practice developments. However, this participatory work can leave people feeling undervalued, and unable to influence the changes they wish to see.

Too often, engagement with people with lived experience can feel like a 'side show' where people are wheeled on to give their views.

Members emphasised that co-production can help avoid tokenism through, for example, properly analysing and addressing power dynamics. Ultimately, there is a need to take co-production back to basics. To focus on doing with, rather than doing to.

This resource has been designed to enable professionals and service providers to truly develop good co-productive practice, based on the experience of our members.

" How Power is held matters. Without looking at this, co-production doesn't work "

## What is Co-production?

VOX members view co-production as a way of ensuring an equal partnership, and therefore equal say, between those who use services and those who provide them. When co-production is carried out well, it is a dynamic approach which genuinely and authentically focuses on people and their human rights.

*Our members highlighted the following as co-production principles:*

- **Synergy:** People coming together in a positive way to produce or create something. It is the interaction involved in this process which ultimately makes it work.
- **Power:** As one VOX member astutely stated, 'How power is held matters. Without this co-production doesn't work.' Power dynamics can make or break relationships and, as such, empowerment is essential to the health and social development of people and communities.
- **Values:** The principles of equality, diversity, accessibility, and reciprocity are key values for putting co-production into action. Each of these are vitally important in every individual's life.

## Ladder of Co-production

It is important in this resource to recognise the Ladder of Co-Production.

<https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/Co-production-The-ladder-of-co-production/>

This ladder describes co-production at the top of the ladder where an equal relationship between people who use services and people responsible for services work together from design to delivery. Slightly further down the ladder is Co-Design, where people aren't as involved in the delivery or "seeing it through" stage of a service or initiative. Further down again, Engagement – where there is not an equal say on all areas of influence.

Whilst this resource is focussing on co-production as a goal, it is about the steps required to climb the Ladder of Co-production. Many of the points mentioned by our members are the fundamentals required to climb this ladder.

*"People, Power,  
Potential.  
That's what's  
important"*

## What is the purpose of co-production?

By empowering those that access services to have meaningful involvement in how their care is designed and delivered, co-production can ensure resources are used to develop the services that people really want and need. Co-production also helps build stronger communities, develops citizenship, and is linked with better outcomes both for people who access services and for their carers.

## Why do we need to think of co-production specifically for mental health?

In mental health there are already significant power dynamics which exist between those who provide services and those who use them. Issues relating to validation, trust, and communication become even more important when you are involving people with lived experience of mental health problems, and we want these issues to be given the focus they need and deserve.

# What do VOX Scotland members think?

What are their perspectives  
on Co-production, how  
we can best ensure their  
voices are heard, and  
what we can do to make  
it work for them?

## How we developed this resource

We held 6 gatherings with VOX members (group and individual members) to create this resource, we captured views and ideas through both one-to-one meetings and group discussions.

We asked our members the following questions:

What would make you feel equal to policy makers and service providers when you are working together to create change?

How do we make genuine connections and shift to a more relational approach in co-production?

**Things to remember and 'Keeping it Real'**

*'At the heart of it, it's about feelings... Don't get lost in the blah, blah, blah!'*

## What works?

From our discussions members identified four key areas they felt mattered to ensure authentic co-production.

These were:

Relationships

Communication

Power

Language

The key areas outlined in the following pages provide advice from our members on how to deliver better co-productive practice for people with lived experience of mental health problems. We hope this can help service providers and other professionals think through how they co-produce with people with lived experience.

# Relationships



**Trust, empathy, and connection** were felt to be at the heart of creating the authentic relationships which allow co-production to flourish.

Issues such as a lack of self-disclosure (where you tell a person something about your life, and the person responds with a bit about their life) was highlighted as being at the root of the barriers which can exist.

Members identified a 'blind spot' where professionals and service providers can have rigid professional boundaries which make them feel distant and unwelcoming, and this can mean working relationships feel inauthentic and unbalanced. It was felt that this doesn't need to be the case.

There was a sense that there needs to be a 'reconstructing of the relationships' between those who use services and those who provide services to enable honest engagement.

## Trust

An imbalance of trust was a common theme mentioned by our members. People with lived experience are asked for information about themselves but often don't get anything in return from service providers. Members stated that trust is built through people sharing a bit about themselves, and when you get something back in return it helps you to feel safe.

*'A bridge needs to be built. They have to understand that people have been hurt in the past.'*

*'Living with complex trauma, it takes so much time to build trust.'*

Members also noted that trust has often been broken in the past, and that for this reason trust is fundamental to enable a safe space for people to contribute.

Members didn't want, or expect, to know the details of professional's personal lives. However, sometimes simple things such as hearing about someone's hobby, or about their pets, or what they like to watch on television, helps you to see the human side of someone and build trust.

Members noted that expressing empathy is both valuable and powerful. It is essential to build healthy relationships, reduce anxiety, and improve health outcomes.

When stories are shared, members may express difficult emotions. Having a sense that people understand, appreciate, and can relate to some extent to how they feel in this situation is fundamental.

*'Empathy is putting yourself in the other person's shoes. It takes time and patience to get to know the individual.'*

Members stated that without empathy it can feel like the person is not fully heard.

## Connection

Developing two-way interactions makes you feel heard and understood and gives you a sense of belonging. Being connected to others is important for our mental and physical wellbeing.

If we are connected, communication will be much easier and more effective.

*'Having a connection with new people (matters)... express how you feel and ensure that what is exchanged is in a safe and comfortable way'*

When we connect effectively, we are then able to understand others' needs, communicate better and demonstrate reciprocity.

*'Connection and support is about someone walking alongside you.'*

## Empathy

*“ Avoid the tokenistic, the pre-determined, the already decided, shift to a more relational approach. “*

## Tips for service providers and professionals:

### **Be willing to be vulnerable.**

Sharing something personal sends a signal to the other person that we trust them. (It doesn't have to be something too personal, just something that helps them see you as another human rather than just a professional).

### **Think about who you talk to at meetings or events relating to co-production (is it always work colleagues?).**

Whether it is during break time, or before/after meetings, it's a good way to get to know someone with lived experience in a less formal way.

### **Listen to understand.**

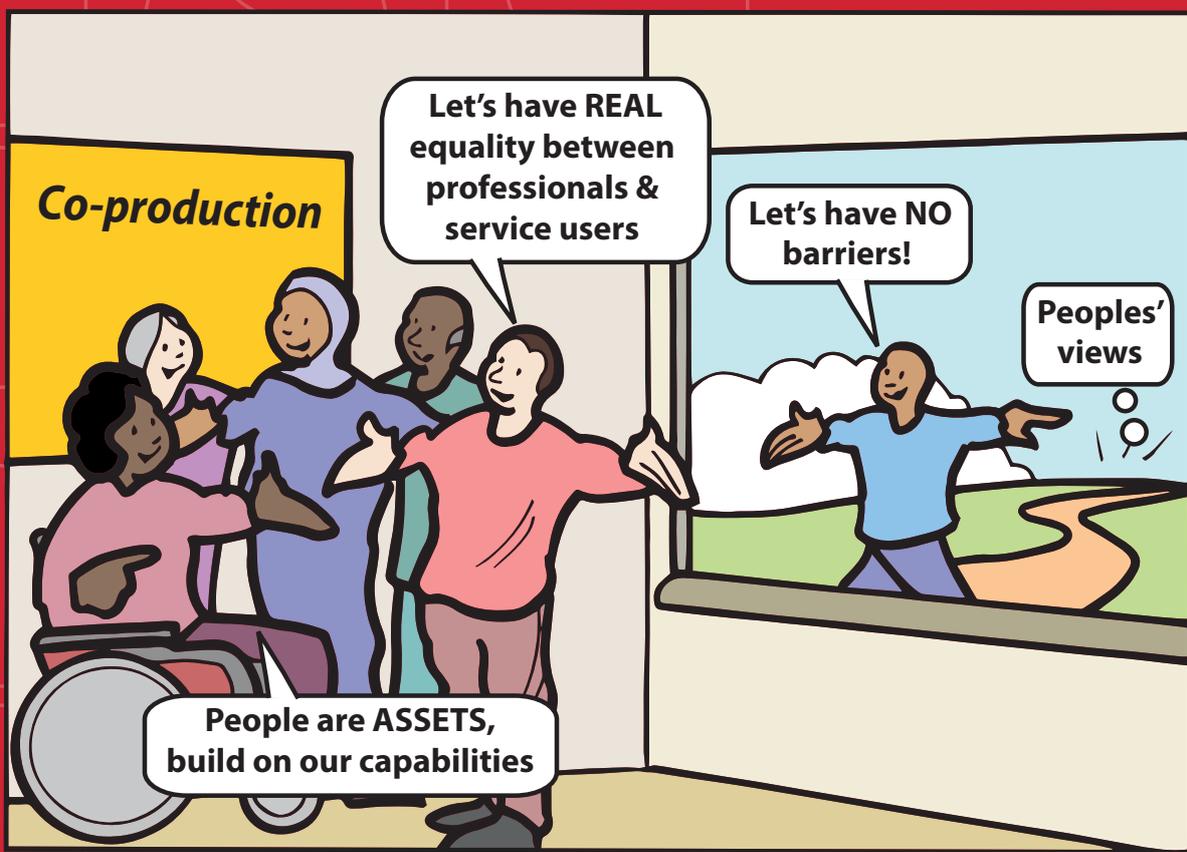
Rather than listening to think about what you want to say next, try to understand how someone is feeling.

### **Be aware of your own judgements.**

Think about the labels you may be placing on someone so you can try and counteract them.

# Power

A key principle of co-production is sharing power through an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals and service users.



## Power

"Recognise that I am an Expert by Experience."

"Be nice, be kind, it's simple as that. I will always respect the professionals; however, the power balance has to shift as it is intimidating."

"It is important that getting something back is considered, such as experience, training, new skills, financial gain, or remuneration."

## It can feel as though professionals are often slow to take on board new ideas or ways of working.

People's views can be seen as a threat to how they work and the sense of 'this is the way it's always been done' can be a barrier to change.

Within mental health the power imbalance can be even more noticeable than in other fields. Some people have felt very damaged or let down by services and participants can feel angry, upset, and unheard. This adds complexity to the power dynamic and should be recognised.

*To address the imbalance we need to look at:*

- Where power is held in meetings, and actively find ways to address power imbalances.
- When people with lived experience are working on projects alongside service providers we must look at inequities in payment and remuneration.

Without accepting the power dynamics which exist, and actively finding ways to address them, co-production is not taking place.

Additionally, without considering fair and equitable reciprocity (whether that be vouchers, payment, training, support and opportunities) in relation to lived experience input then co-production is unlikely to be genuine.

Payments can seem tokenistic when they are much lower compared to the amount clinicians are paid (sometimes for similar roles).

Reasons are sometimes stated such as 'the benefits system makes it tricky to pay someone' or 'it's complicated due to the way our system is set up'. It would be good to think about ways to get around these problems.

Many people with lived experience do not want payment for a range of reasons, but please don't assume that is the case.

Appropriate training can help to build a more equitable and knowledgeable environment for co-production to thrive. It's important this is not seen as a way of seeking to fill any gaps people with lived experience are seen to have (for example in their knowledge of structures or systems) and recognise all are equal and have different skills, assets, and knowledge to bring to co-production.

*" How Power is held matters. Without looking at this, co-production doesn't work "*

## Tips for service providers and professionals:

Recognise people as assets, building on people's capabilities.

Acknowledge power dynamics that exist at a meeting or event.

Encourage people who have less power to lead and participate.

Offer to remunerate people with lived experience fairly and in an equitable way. There should be equal payment for equal roles: for example, is the lived experience co-chair receiving the same payment as a clinical co-chair?

Encourage people with traditional kinds of formal power to do more listening and facilitating rather than speaking.

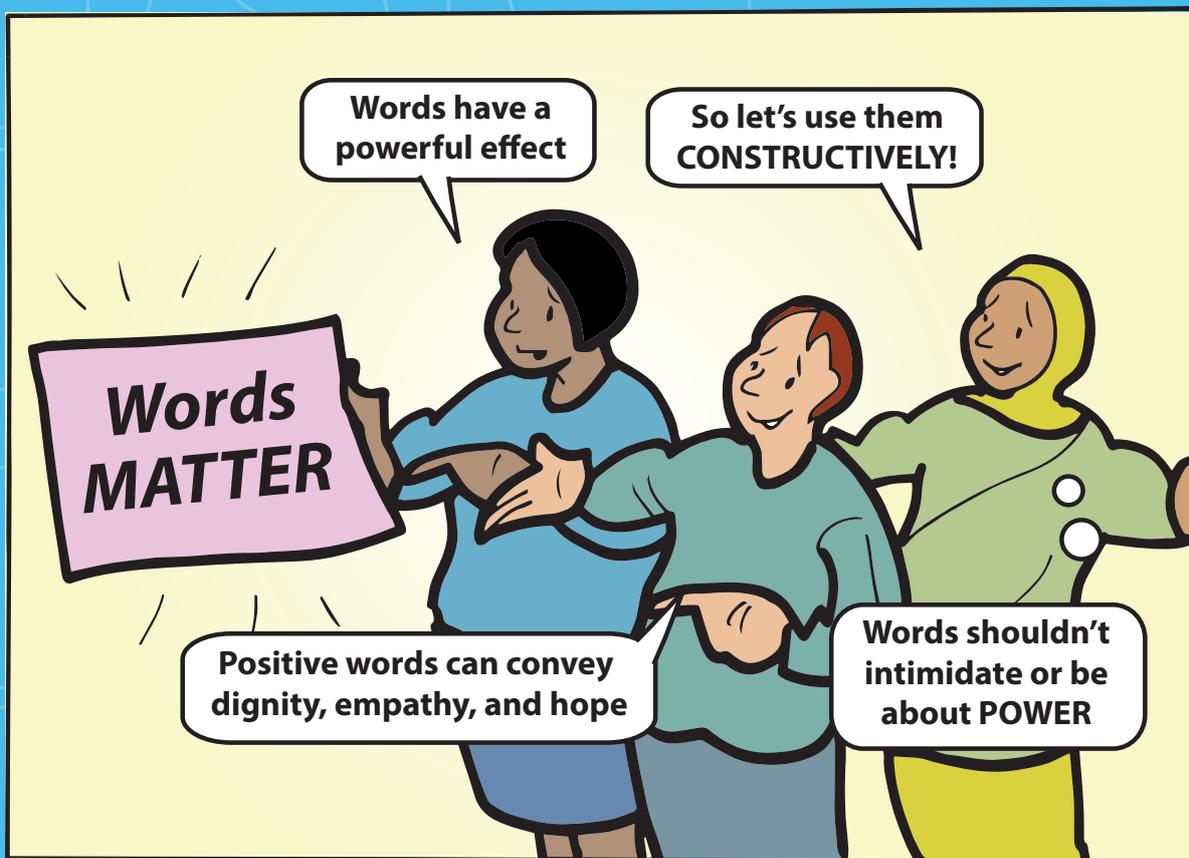
Ownership should be shared, with all contributions valued.

Don't jump to the conclusion that the benefits system means you can't offer payment.

Appropriate training to build on everyone's skills, assets and knowledge base can be an effective way to create a good environment for co-production to thrive.

# Language

Language matters in mental health. Our words have a powerful effect on people living with mental health conditions.



## Language

# Language can also be seen as creating a barrier and exacerbating power dynamics.

Specific terminology (or jargon) used during meetings makes it difficult to understand, challenge, or raise questions. Some people can feel intimidated by language and dialogue, and jargon can sometimes be used as a way to maintain and exercise power.

Language must be on an equal level of understanding for all to enable co-production to work effectively.

Used in a constructive way, language can have a substantial impact on people's lives. In the context of mental health and wellbeing, positive words can convey dignity, empathy, and hope.

*'You can feel as though you are the only one who doesn't know or understand, and confidence issues feed into this.'*

## Tips for service providers and professionals:

Create a culture of speaking and explaining things in a clear, simple way.

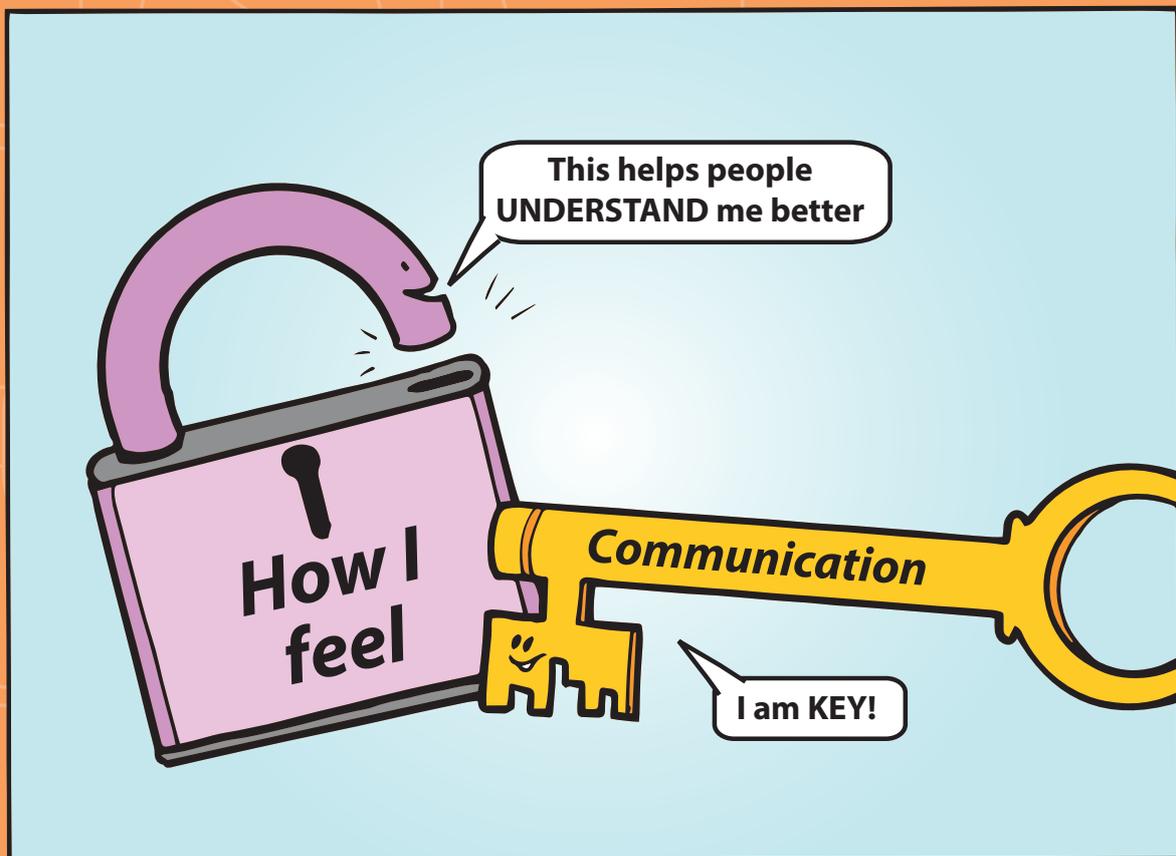
When you need to use jargon always explain what the term means.

Consider all communication needs e.g. translation service and interpreters.

Think about visual and other creative ways of representing facts/figures and ideas.

# Communication

Communication is key in mental health. Being able to communicate how you feel can help others to understand you better.



# Communication

## For good communication we must ask and implement what people need, try to avoid making assumptions about peoples needs.

*It is time you listened to patients, listen to us... one for all, all for one! It is not NHS or patients, it's about everybody, they have listened to us in the past but done their own thing.'*

With good communication you get to know people's strengths, abilities and needs. For co-production to work there needs to be effective discussions to create joint aims of the project, agreed terms of reference, possibly pre- and post- meetings, paperwork on time and clarity of roles. It is important to remember that good communication is essential for all this to work effectively. Asking questions and getting to know each other underpins this.

Finally, the impact a project or development is having or will have in the future should be clear. There needs to be feedback loops built in throughout the work so cause and effect is understood and communicated effectively to everyone involved in developing the work.

Ask and implement what people need to communicate effectively

Stick to the planned topics, ensure minimum distractions, make sure everyone has the same information, and remember breaks

Clarify the roles and aims so everyone has a shared understanding

Tips for service providers and professionals:

# Thank You

to everyone who helped to create this Co-production resource, including the Mental Health Network Greater Glasgow, Lanarkshire Links, The Scottish Community Development Centre, and all our individual members.

Without your input, ideas, and enthusiasm we would not be able to move towards authentic and positive changes to services and society.

Find out more on our website:  
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