

A guide to co-producing with local communities

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Part of the [Enhancing Research Culture Project](#) 'Building an enriched co-productive research environment in the South Yorkshire region' (2022).

Introduction

This resource offers a few suggestions around how to connect with local community and charitable organisations to coproduce research. It is aimed at researchers who have some knowledge of coproduction and are looking for ideas on how to apply it.

The suggestions are informed by ongoing work within the Healthy Lifespan Institute (HELSI) to build reciprocal relationships with communities across South Yorkshire (funded under the University of Sheffield, Enhancing Research Culture project).

1. Before you start out

Get to know the community you wish to work with

Spend some time finding out about the people you wish to work with and identifying potential sources and contact routes. We wanted to work with underserved (and underheard) communities, to enable them to contribute to the development of, and benefit from products, practices and policies that seek to prevent multimorbidity. We therefore carried out an evidence review to help us better understand what is already known about this group, followed by a mapping exercise to identify relevant local organisations to contact directly.

Ideally, you should involve the people you wish to work with prior to writing bids or designing research – so they input into how this will look (this can be challenging as funding models tend to offer PPI type resource once a project has started).

Adopt a reflective approach

Power sharing is at the heart of coproduction approaches - where all partners feel comfortable speaking openly, and confident that they can influence the process and outcomes. As academics our work is often framed within a scientific rationale – yet by its definition coproduction can be messy and complicated. Community groups may have different political interests and these may compete with that of the University. This makes it hard to achieve the right balance – indeed, some academic researchers have reflected that despite making attempts, they have struggled to remove the perception that they continued to hold the power.

Some community representatives we spoke to held negative connotations around universities – with a perception of researchers “holding all the cards”, “dipping in and out” or applying coproduction in a tokenistic way. We addressed this through giving ourselves time to develop relationships and trust. We designed a flexible framework which allowed for change as learning was built through the communities we worked with.

2. How to ‘do’ coproduction

Link in with trusted local intermediaries

Take time at the beginning to identify a trusted member of the community you hope to work with. Book in an initial chat to help you: plan out the approach, find out how they might like to get involved, where they feel they can add value, and any foreseen barriers that may be encountered. You should also share any longer-term aspirations and communicate this as clearly and openly as you can.

Local intermediaries can also offer pointers around potential ‘hooks’ to capture interest, such as provision of refreshments, or an opportunity for people to get together socially.

‘Go where people are’ and create a comfortable environment

Prioritise a ‘reaching out’ approach and travel to community venues known to groups, where the emphasis for them is on belonging and known networks. Community venues are where people know, have built trust and feel safe and better able to open up and ask questions. People referred to a university setting making them feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

If a venue needs to be accessed – ensure it is a neutral “non-judgemental” environment – this relates to the building, but also how things are set up/how academics present. Based on our learning this may include: using first names and not titles, casual dress, including facilitators who share some of the same characteristics of the audience. Follow resourcing guidance such as that offered by [INVOLVE](#).

Explore ways to make sessions interactive and offer something that is also enjoyable, such as providing participants with the opportunity to talk in small groups and meet and learn from each other.

Consider the practicalities

Below are some pointers around what to consider when delivering a session.

- Provide plenty of notice and identify suitable times. Be mindful that community partners with impairments may need to add extra time to their day to prepare and travel.
- Find out about accessibility needs prior to the session though be realistic about what can be achieved (e.g., there may not be resource for interpreters – but volunteers may be able to help out).
- Share information prior to running a session – such as a plain English overview. Bear in mind that the intended audience may struggle with more familiar everyday terms, as well as academic jargon. This is where working with a peer or key intermediary will prove particularly important. Consider how information is provided, give regard to written and digital literacy/access for example.
- Offer payment – this is not necessarily important for its own sake – but can help participants feel valued and part of the team – this can also benefit researchers who feel good knowing that community members are being remunerated for their time. See INVOLVE’s guidance on [‘Participatory Budgeting’](#).
- Ask people what they want! It may be that things get missed, it is part of a learning process and you don’t have to get everything right at the beginning.

Reassure people that you want to listen and learn from what they have to say

Deprived communities in particular may have had previous negative experiences of coproduction, In our case, residents provided examples of researchers “*parachuting in*” and developing end products and breaking contact. A typical comment we received: “*the community has been consulted to death and didn’t see a lot of results – they have got a bit weary.*” Offering frequent reminders to community members that we were also learning worked well, as did encouraging participants to provide open and honest feedback. Asking trusted community intermediaries to co-facilitate sessions also helped people feel more comfortable opening up and sharing concerns.

Make it clear that learning will also be used to tailor future sessions – ensuring they are delivered in an inclusive way and which fit in with the needs of staff, volunteers and clients.

3. Maintaining an ongoing partnership

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges around nurturing partnerships is the short term nature of funding - meaning there can be limited resources to maintain contact outside of specific funding bids. Yet taking steps to maintain contact will help keep the momentum going and support the community to feel part of the university.

Ideally – identifying resources to support communication which isn’t attached to a specific project should be sought. Some ideas include offering free training and development, and/or regular meetings with community intermediaries to continue sharing ideas on how to work together in the future (setting out ways to action these). Within this, consider how people can get in touch with researchers. Ensure this feels accessible, and where possible offer a range of entry points.

As a minimum be sure to follow up swiftly once a session has been run – ideally use ideas shared by participants to frame a way forward that benefits the researcher and organisation. In our case this was setting up and supporting the training of “research champions” and working with the charity to include them as a partner on a research bid.