

We're all in this together: harnessing user and community co-production of public outcomes

Chapter 4

June 2013

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Introduction

Co-production is big – it is rapidly becoming one of the most talked-about themes in public services internationally (Bovaird, 2007; Alford, 2009) and in the UK (nef, 2008; Loeffler, 2009; Department of Health, 2010).

In this chapter, we set out what co-production is, why it matters and its implications for public services, as part of the INLOGOV model. We argue that the movement towards co-production can be conceptualized as a shift from 'public services *for* the public' towards 'public services *by* the public', within the framework of a public sector which continues to represent the public interest, not simply the interests of 'consumers' of public services.

Why public service co-production matters

The movement to user and community co-production is built upon increasing realisation of one of the key characteristics of services in the public and private sectors – that the production and consumption of many services are *inseparable*. The service is produced *if and only if* the service user agrees to and takes part in the process. In this way, the quality of a service depends upon close interaction between the customer and provider. If the service user does not contribute fully and creatively to the service process, or does not make full use of the potential of the service, then it is likely to be less effective in its outcomes.

This model of the interaction between public sector and citizen inputs is set out in Figure 1, which has been developed in a joint research project with Birmingham City Council (Bovaird and Kenny, 2012). This 'cause-and-effect' map is being developed in detail in order to help decision makers in the local authority and its partner agencies to develop an understanding of how inputs from all parts of the public, private and third sectors are relevant to modelling outcomes achieved in the local area. The approach models the key relationships and inter-dependencies between interventions, inputs, outputs and outcomes across the local area, using the best available evidence, as a whole system. By working backwards from outcomes it is intended to provide greater understanding of how those outcomes can be achieved, what alternative pathways to outcomes might be more cost-

effective and what is the best available evidence to demonstrate the impact of current council and other public sector activities.

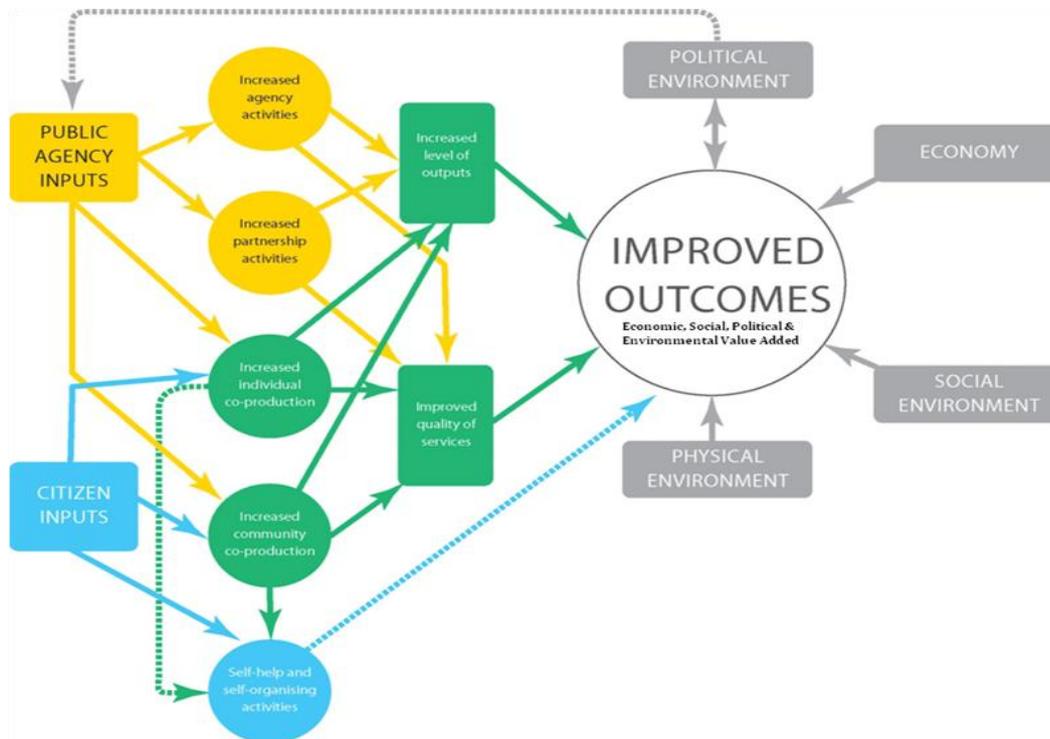


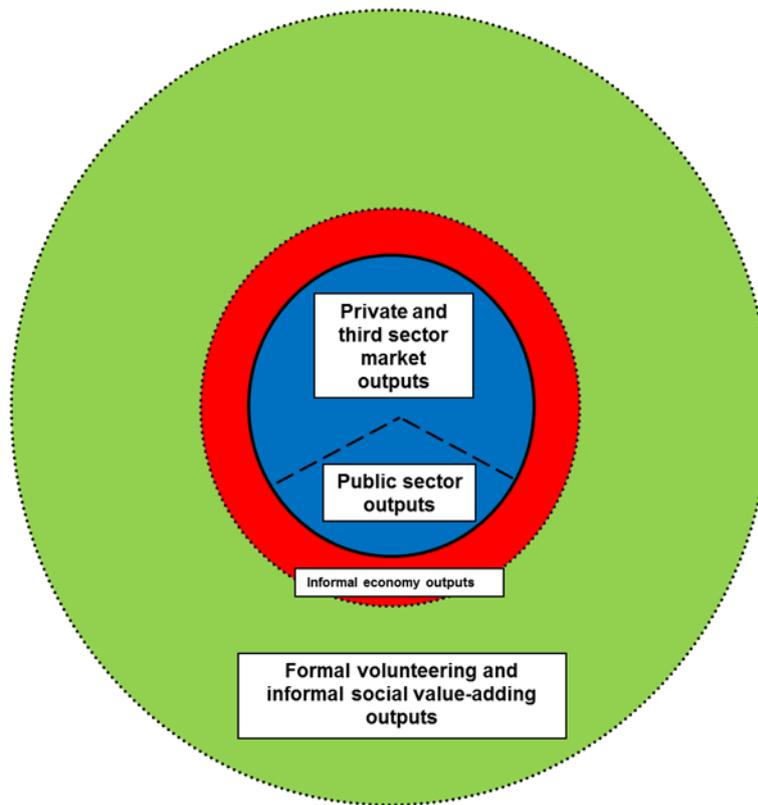
Figure 1. The conceptual framework for Modelling Birmingham

This interdependence of producer and consumer of services has three other implications. First, it means that systematic involvement of service users in the service process gives them the chance to influence the outcomes which are prioritised in that process. Although this potential is often neglected because of the paternalistic way in which services are commissioned and delivered, it can be a major benefit of properly co-produced services – under co-production, the *right* services are more likely to be commissioned and delivered.

Second, it means that customers do not evaluate service quality by simply judging the final quality-of-life outcomes (e.g. the mobility given them by a medical treatment in a hospital) – they also place considerable weight on the process of service delivery (e.g. how friendly and responsive the hospital medical staff were, how comfortable the ward was, how well their dignity was respected in the process). This reinforces the old adage that ‘the ends do not justify the means’: because the customer journey is important in itself, customer care variables may be at least as important as the quality of the final destination. Co-production, by emphasizing the contribution of the service user at all stages, increases the likelihood that the service user’s criteria and weights (rather than just the producer’s) are applied in the evaluation of what should be produced and how.

Third, there is great scope for mobilising citizen inputs to help create public value. As illustrated in Figure 2, much of the value-adding activity in our society is not captured by the GDP measure, which

only counts the transactions for which there is monetary payment. The contribution of formal volunteering and informal social activities to the overall value added in society is not clear; but it appears likely to be very high – and potentially much higher – if it is systematically managed through a co-production strategy.



**Figure 2
Value-adding
outputs in
market,
public and
third sectors
and in civil
society**

So co-production is not a new concept – it has always been intrinsic to services. What is new, however, is that its importance is increasingly being recognised. Moreover, in recent years in the public and private sectors we are seeing strong interest in intensifying the level of co-production by increasing the involvement of customers in services.

As Table 1 shows, this is likely to have been for a range of reasons – co-production brings a range of benefits to different stakeholders and the importance of these is likely to differ from place to place and time to time. In recent times, especially, the public sector has turned to co-production not simply in order to improve service quality by ‘bringing the user in’ but also in order to cut costs, by making the user do more for themselves. Clearly, this is now a major issue in an age of austerity.

For users

Improved outcomes and quality of life

Higher quality, more realistic and sustainable public services as a result of bringing in the expertise of users and their

	networks
<i>For citizens</i>	Increasing social capital and social cohesion Offering reassurance about availability and quality of services for the future
<i>For frontline staff</i>	More responsibility and job satisfaction from working with satisfied service users
<i>For top managers</i>	Limiting demands on the services Making services more efficient
<i>For politicians</i>	More votes through more satisfied service users Less need for public funding and therefore lower taxes

Table 1. Potential benefits from increased user and community co-production of public services

What is co-production of public services?

Co-production puts the emphasis on the contribution made by the service beneficiary in the service delivery process. For example, in schools, outcomes not only depend on the quality of teaching delivered by school teachers but also on the attitudes and behaviour of students. If students are not willing even to listen, or not prepared to carry out the follow-up work at home, the amount that they learn will be very limited.

In a public sector context, the ‘co-operative behaviour’ of service recipients may even extend to their acceptance of constraints or punishments – for example, improving community safety involves citizens in obeying speed limits or parking restrictions and being prepared to pay a fine when they have been caught ignoring these restraints. Speeding fines and parking restrictions would be unenforceable, if nobody paid any heed to them. ‘Compliance with the coercive power of the state’ may be a very low level of citizen engagement but it is nevertheless an example of citizens making a contribution to the publicly valued outcomes sought by the public sector.

At the same time, citizens may engage in the delivery of services on behalf of other people, which we typically refer to as ‘volunteering’. This activity may have many motives, some of which may be altruistic (e.g. to help others who cannot help themselves) or selfish (e.g. to widen one’s acquaintance network or to get experience to put on a CV). Not all such volunteering improves publicly valued outcomes, of course – bringing back from the shops a six-pack of beer and a hundred cigarettes for an alcoholic neighbour who is housebound may be well-intentioned but its public value is at least debatable. Nor is all such volunteering ‘co-production’

Consequently, we define user and community co-production of public services as, ‘professionals and citizens making better use of each other’s assets, resources and contributions to achieve better outcomes and/or improved efficiency’. Put simply, it takes two – both the professional *and* the citizen – to produce these outcomes by ‘milking’ each other’s capabilities.

A corollary of this definition is that pure self-help by individuals or self-organisation by communities, while it may be enormously valuable to those who benefit, is not 'co-produced', as it does not make use of the resources, assets or contributions of professionals. For example, most social care in the UK is not provided with significant public sector input but rather by family members looking after their elderly parents or children with care needs. Here we can say that co-production is *not* taking place but we can explore the strong possibility that such unpaid labour would benefit enormously from more support by public services, for example, by providing occasional 'respite care' to exhausted mothers, so that they can take a holiday.

The core principles of co-production, defined in this way, are that (Bovaird and Löffler, 2011):

citizens know things that many professionals don't know ... (*customers as innovators*)

... and can make a service more effective by the extent to which they go along with its requirements and scrutinise it (*customers as critical success factors*)

... and have time, information and financial resources that they are willing to invest to improve their own quality of life and into helping others (*customers as resources*)

... and have diverse capabilities and talents which they can share with professionals and other citizens (*customers as asset-holders*)

... and can engage in collaborative rather than paternalistic relationships with staff, with other service users and with other members of the public (*customers as community-developers*).

Types of co-production

We can distinguish a wide range of service activities which can be included in the co-production umbrella:

Co-commissioning of services, which embraces:

- **Co-planning** of policy – e.g. deliberative participation, Planning for Real, Open Space
- **Co-prioritisation** of services – e.g. individual budgets, participatory budgeting
- **Co-financing** of services – e.g. fundraising, charges, agreement to tax increases

Co-design of services – e.g. user consultation, service design labs, customer journey mapping

Co-delivery of services, which embraces:

- **Co-management** of services – e.g. leisure centre trusts, community management of public assets, school governors
- **Co-performing** of services – e.g. peer support groups (such as expert patients), nurse-family partnerships, meals-on-wheels, neighbourhood watch

Co-assessment (including co-monitoring and co-evaluation) of services – e.g. tenant inspectors, user on-line ratings, participatory village appraisals.

Distinguishing these different service activities allows us to identify a wide range of different approaches to co-production – and in most public agencies it will readily be apparent that at least

one of these of these types of co-production is already present. At the same time, this list also serves to make public managers aware that a much wider range of co-production activities is possible.

Co-commissioning of public services

Commissioning of services has become the major approach in the UK for thinking about what needs to be delivered, to whom, and to achieve what outcomes. At the heart of commissioning is the issue of priorities – *Which outcomes are priorities? Which groups of the public are priorities? Bringing these together, which services are priorities, in order to ensure priority outcomes for priority service users?*

Traditionally, commissioning has been a core public sector task, which was essentially undertaken by politicians and top managers. However, those days are now over. In an era of fiscal austerity, service users and their communities have to be involved from the very beginning of the process – co-commissioning what is needed, not just applying for the services that are available.

As always with co-production, the basic idea is simple: nobody knows better which public services are most important for their own welfare than service users themselves, their families, their friends and the communities they live in. Where these are the *only* outcomes which matter, then ‘micro-commissioning’ through personalisation and individual budgets can be a powerful way of delivering them. Here the contribution of the public sector to the co-production process is sometimes only the provision of the budget, but more frequently it consists of providing advice and brokerage services to help improve the effectiveness of the decisions made by the micro-commissioner. However, there are often also outcomes which are important for a community as a whole, or an area as a whole, not just for individuals within it – for example, social cohesion, social inclusion, contribution to climate change, or economic prosperity. Here, political priorities have to be decided, over and above the priorities of individual citizens.

Bringing service users and other citizens into the commissioning process makes it much more focused on the outcomes that people want, rather than the activities that the public sector is used to providing. Users want services to be commissioned which are relevant to them, based on the outcomes that make sense in their everyday lives. Services that don’t clearly lead to improvements in their quality of life are challenged. New ideas surface about what services might be more relevant and might more directly improve the outcomes that people want. As it becomes clear that some service budgets are likely to be cut because the service is not a high priority, the service users involved are likely to suggest ways in which the service can be changed, so that they and other citizens can contribute more through self-help and self-organising or by co-producing more of the service with service professionals.

Co-commissioning is already happening in many forms. Strategic needs analysis in the UK now typically involves detailed community research through surveys and customer insight techniques. Young people are sitting on commissioning bodies for young people’s services, to make sure that the services keep up to date with what young people want. For a decade or more, participatory budgeting exercises in neighbourhoods have been giving local people a say in the priorities among new projects being developed in their areas – the Community Empowerment Fund was a major

example of this – and nowadays this mechanism is often used by councillors to distribute the ward budgets which they are allocated by their councils.

The UK Government's Localism Act has provided a number of ways of giving the public more power over service decisions, including promoting independent provision, developing new rights for communities to buy and run services and public assets, and developing a new 'right to provide' for public sector workers, e.g. through mutuals and co-ops, all of which are aimed at strengthening co-delivery than co-commissioning. Two provisions of the Act specifically promote co-commissioning: one is a set of proposals for extending innovative payment and funding mechanisms, such as personal budgets and payment by results. Payment by results emphasises outcomes, with the possibility that service user perceptions may play a significant role in the measurement of these outcomes. Secondly, the Bill gives communities the 'right to challenge' local authorities, where they believe they could provide services differently or better (Bovaird, 2012).

'Community budgeting' (the new version of 'total place' initiatives) is intended to give local public service partnerships the power to influence (or even to pool) all the public sector budgets in their area, enabling the redesign and integration of frontline services across organizations. The initial pilots were undertaken in 16 local areas, around the quality of life of 'families with multiple problems'. In 2012 six 'whole-place' and 12 'neighbourhood-level' community budget pilots were launched – the latter in areas selected to develop smaller scale community budgets that would give the local community a leading role, working with the local council and other services, in shaping the services they received. However, one of the key early findings of the neighbourhood community budgets evaluation (NCB Research Team, 2012) is that culture change is needed, so that public-sector organisations do not see the devolution of mainstream budgets as a threat or risk and to foster communities that are seen, and see themselves, as assets, expected to co-design solutions and think strategically about the needs of their neighbourhood.

Co-commissioning does not necessarily involve all service users and communities. That would be wholly unrealistic. As always in innovation, it is essential for public agencies to work with the right people when co-commissioning services. Of course, in commissioning, it is critical to have a clear picture of the overall priorities of citizens in an area and users of particular services; and for this, surveys are essential. Moreover, these preferences can also be explored by getting people to vote for different service packages that might be offered; and there is now a range of interesting ways of undertaking these voting exercises. However, surveys and voting exercises are very dangerous in relation to the service cuts that are facing many public agencies in Europe as a result of the fiscal crisis from 2008 onwards. They can lead to the highly undesirable situation in which people are encouraged to suggest cuts in services about which they know little and care less. This often results in serious threats to essential services that only a minority of people use (e.g. services for people with disabilities) but which are essential for their quality of life.

This demonstrates that, when investigating preferences in greater detail, trying to achieve the intense involvement of people who are not interested or who are not likely to input new insights into the process is potentially a waste of time for the public agency and an even greater waste of time for the service users and other citizens who are meaninglessly brought in. In involving citizens in detailed co-commissioning, it is essential to ensure that people are asked intelligent questions about their own needs and about services with which they are familiar and which matter to them – a

much more demanding process but one which is far more likely to lead to results which actually represent the preferences of people who live in the area. In this way, co-commissioning can help to identify those who know most and care most about services, so that their views and insights can be given special weight in the co-commissioning process leading to spending changes.



Figure 3 The target groups of citizens for co-commissioning

Co-commissioning demands that service users and other citizens spend time discussing their priorities. They are likely to do this partly because they care about the services, sometimes because they benefit from them personally, but also, sometimes, because they feel it is a public duty to get involved. However, personal self-interest only goes so far towards getting people to work with public agencies in productive ways. Even with those service users and communities who start off very enthusiastically, other commitments often get in the way. Moreover, even dedicated citizens can suffer from 'burn-out' or can fall out with each other and give up. There is likely to be a 'life-cycle' in the way in which different groups get involved in co-commissioning and this has to be planned for and managed sensibly. In particular, there is likely to be a high level of participation at any given time from those groups who believe that their services are particularly under threat – and correspondingly a low level of participation by groups which think their services are 'safe'. There needs to be a balanced representation of these different voices in the process of setting priorities, requiring proper incentives to all citizens, but especially 'expert users' and front-line staff, so that they continue to contribute to the co-commissioning process.

Co-commissioning in a council or public agency will only work if it is clear from the outset that the views of service users and other citizens about priorities are going to be taken seriously in the final spending decisions. So a key way of incentivising citizens and staff to take part is to have visible commitment from top management – both politicians and officers – that the priorities which emerge from the public will be respected and that any deviations from them will be fully explained.

Co-commissioning is already widespread in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. But like most great ideas, it has not spread as quickly as its advocates originally hoped. Although it is likely that many excellent initiatives in co-commissioning are already happening in any given area, they generally only cover a relatively small proportion of the budget. These activities need to be identified and disseminated, and, where they are working, they need to be rolled out and scaled up. This is clearly one of the main challenges facing co-commissioning.

Clearly, there are some risks from widening the service commissioning process to all service users and the general public. They are not the conventional experts on the service. However, there may well be even bigger risks from *not* involving the people who actually need the services, experience how they work in practice and have ideas for what might be better or more relevant to their needs. Moreover, co-commissioning does not mean that *all* the responsibility for service commissioning is suddenly placed with users and their communities: it is a *joint* responsibility with the same politicians, service managers and professionals who were involved previously.

Co-design of public services

The idea of co-design is simple: nobody knows better how public services should be designed than service users and their families, friends and the communities they live in. Co-design goes way beyond traditional consultation. It is about bringing in the experience of users and their communities to the design of public services

Bringing an 'outside-in' perspective to public services leads to revealing insights. For example, it reveals that what most elderly people want is *not* 'independent living'. Most elderly people actually suggest they are desperate for contacts and friendships – they want 'interdependent' living (Willis and Bovaird, 2012). And the way a service is delivered may be as important as the quality of life outcomes to which it gives rise. Many people entitled to benefits don't apply because they have experienced the application process as disrespectful or even humiliating.

The user and community perspective often triggers public service innovation. For example, user co-design can add value to council and public agency websites. Most public sector websites appear dull, daunting and difficult – designed *for* users but certainly not *by* them. However, this can be changed. For example, the adult care website of Stockport Council shows what open and inclusive government means in practice: not necessarily more information but relevant information! It has been designed *with* service users and Stockport Council estimates that it has already saved £300,000 by cutting down avoidable contacts.

A wide range of specific techniques are used in co-design, including tools such as storytelling, diary studies, personas, crowdsourcing, scenario building, etc. They often involve getting service users to imagine situations in which the normal constraints on service design have been relaxed, so that more imaginative approaches are suggested and can be built on by other members of the co-design group. Again, many co-design exercises involve letting service users experience a prototype of the service and then critique it and discuss ways it might be improved.

The idea of co-design is obvious – and that is why it is already widely used in so many different forms in the private, public and third sectors. However, it also brings risks. Not all the citizens who get

involved in co-design are really knowledgeable about the services they use. And some of them may have vested interests in certain changes. However, it is also true that services which are only designed by professionals bring risks: they may be way out of line with what people want and they may try to 'design out' the kinds of risk which come associated with 'thrills'. The awkward fact is that many of the experiences which delight people do have some risks attached to them – falling in love, visiting an old friend for a holiday, going for a walk in the countryside in uncertain weather, making a cup of tea in a kitchen surrounded by potentially dangerous equipment (and boiling water), or even becoming friends with a paid carer (Birrell, 2012). Eliminating all risks would also eliminate much of the joy of life. The very fact that services have been co-designed, in knowledge of the risks involved and with ideas from both citizens and professionals as to how the risks and the 'thrills' can be balanced, is likely to mean that a more appropriate balance is struck.

Co-delivery of public services

Co-delivery of public services is about citizens and the public sector actually *performing* the services *together* in collaborative ways. This joint working between professionals and service users, building on each other's assets, experiences and expertise, enables the service to be delivered more efficiently. Indeed, a [Community Survey](#) by Governance International and TNS Sofres of a thousand people in each of five European countries shows that today's citizens, their families and friends already play a greater role in improving public services than many professionals realise.

Their contributions to co-delivery can include (full case studies can be read at www.govint.org):

Expertise and knowledge – e.g. young offenders in Austria who tell their peers at driving schools about the consequences of drinking and driving.

Skills – e.g. young peer educators co-delivering education on sexual relationship issues with Lambeth youth services to reduce under-age pregnancies in Lambeth; or members of disadvantaged communities in Sandwell working with health agencies to improve their health and well-being through the time bank 'Time2Trade'.

Time and effort – e.g. citizens who work as environmental champions with Solihull Council, doing clean-ups in their local neighbourhood or painting community centres; or citizens in South Somerset who run 'speedwatch' checks on speeding cars in villages or residential areas of towns.

Co-operation with the service process – e.g. elderly patients in the Madrid region who work with the Health Agency to develop personalised medication regimes so that they don't forget to take their pills.

Legitimation of the service through testimonials and public displays of support – e.g. the co-running of the Mosaic Clubhouse in Lambeth by people who use the mental health services provided in the Clubhouse, demonstrating to local people and potential users of the service that they strongly support and identify with it.

Bringing service users and communities into the service delivery process has immediate direct benefits in terms of opening up new resources for service providers to work with and improving the way in which the service is delivered. In addition, it can improve the quality of the services, by

focusing on the features and outcomes that users value most highly; and it may bring savings to public budgets, by substituting contributions from users and volunteers for activities previously undertaken by staff. Finally, it can bring greater transparency to services, in line with the principles of open government, so that service users and communities understand more fully the role and value of public services – and the constraints they face.

Co-assessment of public services

Traditionally, monitoring and evaluation in the UK public sector has been undertaken by professional inspectorate and auditing bodies or by external consultants. This offers objective and quantifiable assessments of public sector performance. However, these assessments do not necessarily cover the burning issues of most interest to citizens and communities. Moreover, they cost a lot of money and are regarded by many insiders in public services as out of touch and lacking in insight into how the services are actually performing.

Co-assessment involves citizens working alongside professional staff and managers to help organisations better understand how they feel about services. It therefore offers the ‘insider view’ that is often lacking in formal assessment. A good illustration of this is when statistics point to reduced crime rates in an area, but local people still feel unsafe. Only through co-assessment can we find out why this is happening, and act to bridge the gap between hard facts and the perceptions and feelings of local people.

Citizen and user surveys have traditionally been used for co-assessment, often supplemented by focus groups and user forums. However, more intense approaches such as ‘citizen inspector’ systems have been used by the Audit Commission in England and Wales and by Audit Scotland (especially for housing inspections).

Co-assessment nowadays can be technologically very savvy, making effective use of social media and community websites (including ‘hyperlocal’ web forums), as well as more traditional face-to-face encounters, all offering valuable opportunities for undertaking assessments together with citizens. A particularly popular tool for internet-based co-assessment is user on-line ratings (e.g. for GP surgeries) – often referred to as ‘Trip Advisor type applications’.

Citizens don’t just care about the outcomes of services – it is also important *how* services are delivered, both in terms of the acceptability of the service process (access, suitability, responsiveness, reassurance, empathy, etc.) and the open governance principles which underpin the service (transparency, participation, collaboration, etc.). People may not talk about these issues using academic language but they really care that local authorities act in an open and fair manner when making decisions that affect their lives. Consequently, it is important that co-assessment explores people’s views of local governance issues and customer care practices, as well as the outcomes which are achieved (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2008).

Conclusions

User and community co-production has been a well-kept secret over the past few decades – always important but rarely noticed, never mind discussed or explicitly managed. One of its great strengths is that it is already happening. This means that the greatest challenge is not triggering it but rather managing it and making it more systematic.

A major positive from the fact that co-production is already up-and-running is that high levels of effort are often already being put into it by users and communities. Moreover, there appears to be a high latent willingness among citizens to become more involved – but only if they feel the latter can play a worthwhile role.

However, these positives will only be fully realised if the public sector learns to work in a very different way with co-producing users and communities. In particular, the co-production efforts of citizens and service users must be harnessed, not wasted, by public agencies. Up to now, public sector accounting and evaluation systems have encouraged public agencies to be profligate in the way they have viewed citizen inputs, while being very parsimonious in their use of public sector inputs. This has meant that many opportunities for improvements of public outcomes have been lost or mismanaged. Co-production will only be well-managed when public sector managers and staff have started to see what citizens are actually contributing to outcomes, rather than being fixated solely on their own contributions.

Moreover, most citizens are only likely to throw themselves wholeheartedly into co-production in a relatively narrow range of activities that are genuinely important to them personally. This is a great challenge to public agencies, which typically have little experience in tailoring their marketing to specific market segments. Moving from a ‘blunderbuss’ to a ‘rifle’ approach to citizen involvement will require a huge change in attitudes and skills on the part of staff.

Of course, co-production is not a panacea for all issues in the public sector. In particular, the role of users and other citizens in co-production will usually demonstrate some conflicting priorities, which only political decision makers can resolve.

Finally, it is important to recognise that, while user and community co-production can achieve major improvements in outcomes, service quality, and service costs, there are likely to be resource consequences. Initiating such approaches is fundamentally an investment, often involving substantial set-up and support costs. Co-production may harness resources from outside the public sector but it always requires some public inputs as well – it is not ‘free’.

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