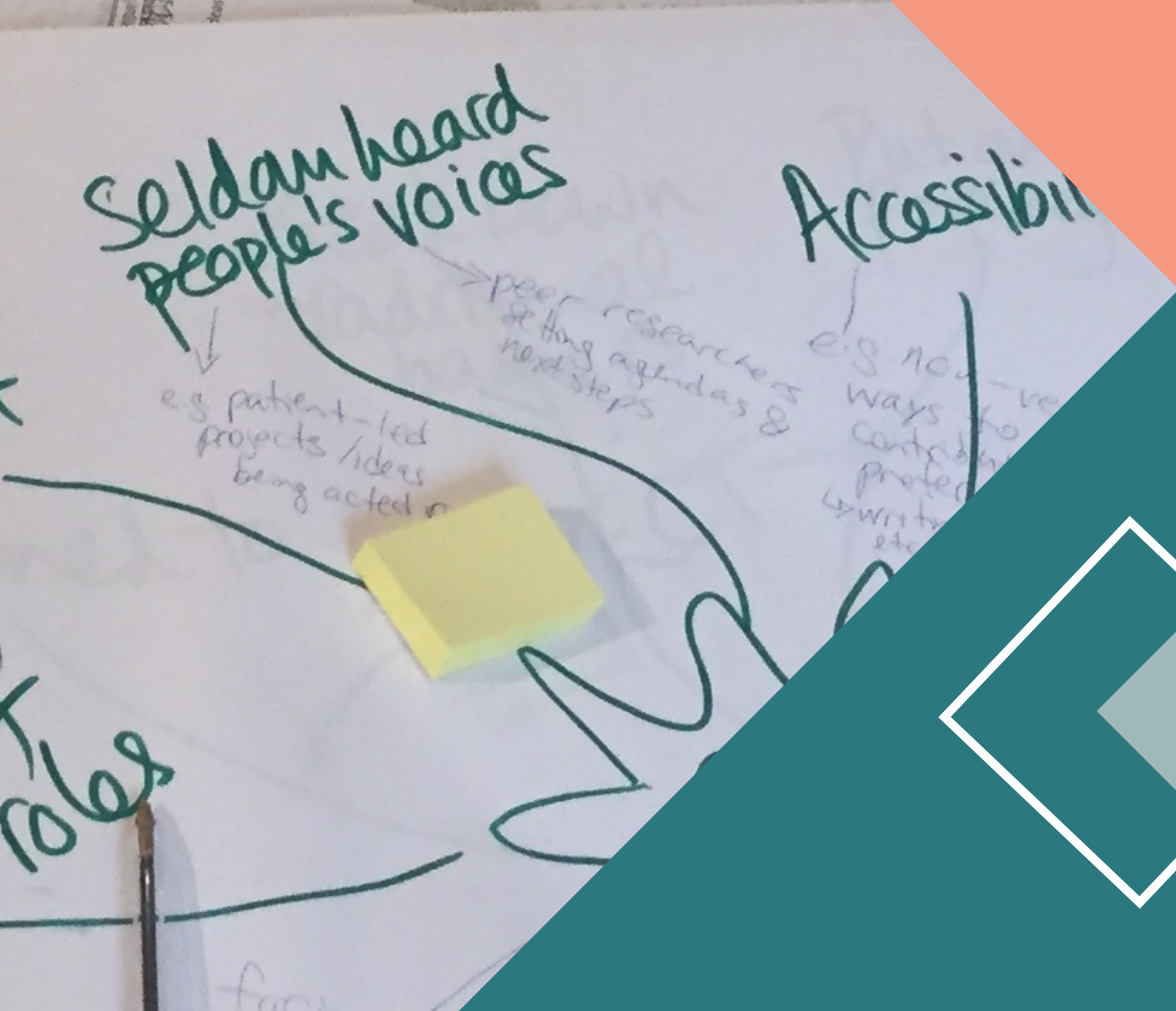


# Co-Pro Stories

Exploring lived experiences  
of co-production

November 2020





## About Co-Pro Stories

The Co-Production Collective wanted to explore people's lived experiences of co-production. Working with People's Voice Media, they used Community Reporting – a pan-European storytelling movement that supports people to use digital technologies to tell their own stories – to capture a series of dialogue interviews with people who identified as 'co-producers'. These co-producers come from different sectors, work on different projects, and participate in different ways in co-production.

The stories they told shone light on what co-production is, what it feels like, and what it can achieve. As part of this piece of work, the co-producers participated in a sense-making session in which they analysed their stories and identified a key set of insights from them. This short report summarises the learnings from the stories.

## Key Findings

The key findings that emerged from the stories are:

- Co-production should be approached as a practice governed by a set of values, rather than an exact science or process.
- Co-production can bring real value to research projects and be key to ensuring that services are more effective and better meet the needs of the people who access them.
- Co-production can be challenging but with support and encouragement, embracing continual and shared learning and by creating spaces for co-producers to connect, barriers can be overcome.

Co-production “really does help get the best value for public money that we are investing on the public’s behalf”, another co-producer told us. These stories resist a narrative that casts co-production as more expensive or wasteful compared to traditional research methods or standard ways of managing projects. Instead, the stories suggest that, because its outputs are so tailored and the community already have a stake in them, they are more likely to provide value for money than other ways of working.



# How do you do co-production?

The stories highlighted particular ways of working that create the conditions needed for good co-production. The Co-Production Collective sees co-production as an approach to working together in equal partnership and for equal benefit that is underpinned by living out the core values of being human, inclusive, transparent and challenging. People's stories reflected how these values are a core part of co-production.



## Human

Relationship-building forms a huge part of the work of co-production, and it is through this that trust is created. Building trust is key to helping people to get through the messiness of co-production, which *"can be challenging for some people... you have to ride with it, run with it, know that it's going to be messy"*. Strong relationships help to navigate this journey and provide people with the strength of connections to steer through it together.



## Inclusive

The stories emphasised that *"diversity"* of voices was very important – *"having conversations with people that you wouldn't normally"*. Co-production, therefore, is not just about working as a team. It's about building a team out of people who wouldn't normally work together. This means that co-producers should be pro-active in terms of inclusion and accessibility. As one co-producer stated, being *"stamped down"* or having needs overlooked *"is not co-production"*.



## Transparent

Being transparent means addressing the power imbalances and hierarchies that exist, not simply trying to disguise them. A key part of this is not bringing people *"as a tick box exercise"*. As one co-producer reflects, *"by the time that people are involved, it's almost too late to have a really meaningful impact"*. Co-production should not be about confirming pre-existing ideas but instead be *"a blank canvas"*.



## Challenging

Co-production is challenging because it is more a practice than a process – *"a state of being, not a state of doing"* – and due to this on-going learning is needed. As one co-producer states, *"just get your hands in and get messy with it... just iterate over time and see what works well"*. This can be challenging but as many co-producers have said, it's *"so worth it"*.



# What are the challenges of co-production?

Although the stories highlighted the many positive elements of co-production, they also provided space for co-producers to reflect on some of the challenges of this way of working.

The stories explored the emotional impacts of co-production. One co-producer pointed out that researchers need to “**examine their motives**” before they start. They pled with researchers not to do it “**because it's the thing to do or a box-ticking exercise**”, because that can “**do harm to people**”. Similarly, if people approach co-production “**with an agenda, knowing what they want**” then co-production can feel disheartening and leave people feeling that there was not a proper attempt made to engage, change and share (or shift) power.

Time was also considered a barrier to co-production. “**Recruiting and supporting people to co-produce is a big job**” reflected one co-producer. Availability or perhaps suitability of funding was another big interlinked concern of many of the

contributors. Co-production “**doesn't cost a lot of money, but it does require resource**”, reasoned one co-producer.

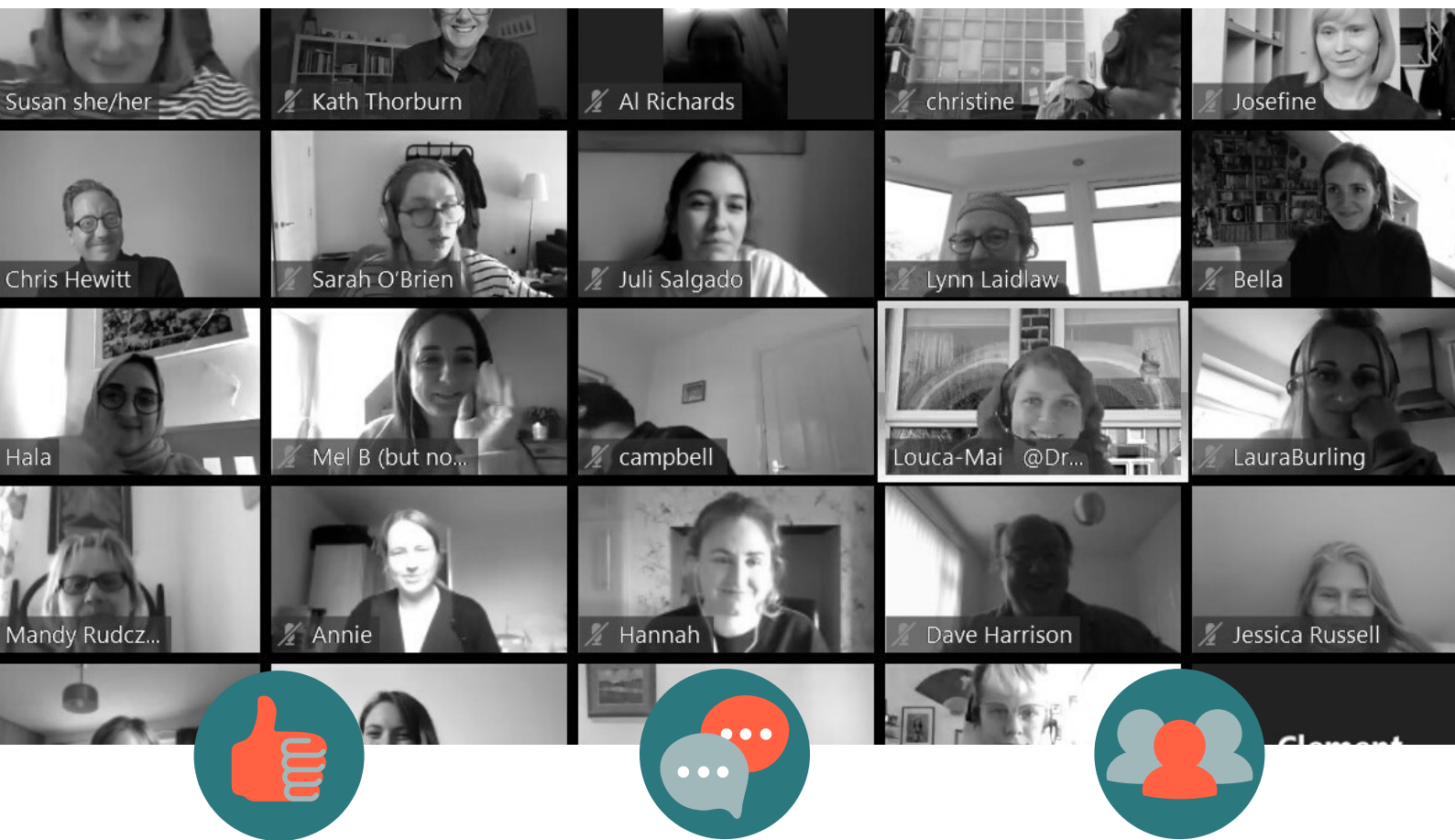
Furthermore, co-production rubs up against standard established working patterns and practices in institutions such as healthcare, funding bodies and universities, which often have quite rigid ways of working. As one co-producer explains:

“**Academic systems and structures are not set-up for co-production... [we] wanted to collaboratively apply for funding, but the application had to be through an academic institution, so the power automatically goes to the institution, even though the point of co-production is about sharing power.**”

The other challenge that emerged throughout the interviews was that co-production can be “**messy**” and can sometimes not go as well as you'd hoped. Co-producers should be open to fail and then learn from this.



# The future of co-production



## Support

## Learning

## Spaces

All of the co-producers were hopeful about the future of co-production. Co-production is “vital” and there is “real value” in it, they told us. To support co-production’s development and expansion, the co-producers identified the need for the following:

- **Support and Encouragement:** Co-production can be hard work so continued encouragement is needed. Specifically, co-producers felt support to stay engaged, deal with the emotions or challenges that co-production can bring (particularly for people with disabilities or conditions), were particularly needed.
- **Continued Learning:** There was a strong sense that “we all need to learn from each other” and that co-producers wanted to share experiences, failures and learnings with others working in different fields to them.
- **Spaces to Connect:** To be able to share learning, the co-producers felt that more spaces – online and offline – needed to be created to allow this to happen. It was felt that the Co-Production Collective has a role to play in creating “a sustainable community of co-producers”.

# Want to explore more?

You can read the full analysis of the stories here: <https://rb.gy/hwtsit>

You can also watch some extracts from the stories here: <https://shorturl.at/uJPQV>

Thank you to the storytellers and Co-Production Collective for providing the images.