Co-production: quiet and silent voices

How do we identify those we aren't hearing from, and how can we connect with them?

The Big Conversation

The Big Conversation is an approach developed by Community Catalysts as a way for public sector organisations to engage, consult and coproduce action plans for change. The approach is flexible and adaptable and makes it possible to engage and work with large numbers of people from different stakeholder groups with potentially competing perspectives.

To ensure that quieter voices are included in the process, the Big Conversation approach firstly defines the stakeholders, and then identifies the best methods to engage people. This involves being creative and using a range of tools to connect with people and record and collate the answers.

Some of the engagement methods and communication channels used are:

- Local authority and other websites (ensuring information is accessible).
- Social media channels.
- Via a broad range of partners.
- local newsletters and publications.
- Email footers.
- Personal connections.
- Physical notices (such as village hall noticeboards, healthcare settings, religious buildings).
- In-person 'listening events'.

Some of the ways to **ensure that quieter or 'easy to ignore' voices are heard** include:

- Connecting via local peer support groups or community groups.
- In-person visits to services (such as adult education, supported living, day services).
- Using a variety of methods to enable people to complete surveys.
- Employing easy read and photo symbols.
- Collaborate with close family, carers or service providers to be the voice for people if needed (**while remembering to ensure that the person's voice isn't 'steered'** by others).
- Accessing information via personal passports (with permission).
- Using BSL versions/interpreters where appropriate.
- Adapt sessions as needed for people who use adaptive technology or devices to communicate.
- Printed rather than online versions of surveys.
- Phone calls or personal visits.

> *People like to feel listened to but it is really important that they are HEARD too and the outcomes of their input reflect their contributions.*
>
> Debbie John – Community Catalysts

Lived experience

Luke Nash kindly provided us with a perspective from someone with lived experience of taking part in co-production activities. Luke emphasised that **if communication isn't** tailored to suit individual needs, **it can't really be considered true co**-production.

As a person who sometimes communicates via an assistant, Luke stressed the importance of ensuring that the message conveyed by a third party does accurately reflect the intended wording. Sometimes more time is needed to ensure a point has been expressed correctly.

> *Use all forms of communication to connect with people. Also, be aware that some nonverbal users use other forms of communication such as devices to be able to express their thoughts.*
>
> Luke Nash

Identifying the quiet voices

Our group discussion examined which groups of people might be identified as quiet or under-represented. Some of the key points raised were:

- Every project and every geographic region will likely classify different groups as seldom heard.
- **It's important to start** each project with an open mind, conduct research and gather evidence to work out which community groups are at risk of remaining unheard.
- **It's important to drill down into** umbrella terms (**such as 'disabled people'**) to identify relevant subgroups as these may have differing requirements to enable participation.
- The further into these harder-to-reach communities we reach, the less they understand about what we are asking and what they can be part of: people who are unfamiliar with co-production may not realise the value they can bring.
- Although statutory guidance mandates co-production, there is sometimes little accountability when it comes to truly ensuring all voices have been heard.
- Quieter voices **can sometimes be identified as 'the people who don't come to GPs'.**
- Trying to identify which people are the priority to reach out to can feel overwhelming.

Connecting to quiet voices

In addition to the Big Conversation techniques listed above, other suggestions for ways to enable all voices to be heard include:

- Building up trust in identified communities, including feeding back after co-production activities so that participants can see the results of their input.
- Provide multiple ways of giving feedback, including providing privacy and a safe space for people who may feel inhibited (such as enabling young people to talk without a parent present).
- Ascertain **people's support needs** BEFORE activities are undertaken, so that you are prepared in advance.
- Ask for feedback on proposed activities or survey questions before distribution, and be prepared to modify questions or language based on any suggestions.
- Be mindful that **some people haven't got the confidence to speak within groups,** and take steps to enable them.

- Employ non-questioning information-gathering techniques, such as observation, when people aren't able to take part themselves.
- Consider using non-direct methods of obtaining information such as playing games or using movement.
- Anticipate and budget for the extra cost and time involved in reaching people and recompensing them so that resources are in place from the beginning.
- While we may be able to reach people via established community groups, we need to remember that these groups have been set up for their own reasons and be mindful not to 'hijack' them for co-production activities.

> *We asked a young person who was selectively mute if they wished to use an iPad to write down their responses or thoughts. They used the technology to express their thanks because no-one had ever offered them this before and usually spoke to their parents instead.*
>
> Workshop participant

Resources

The Big Conversation – video from Community Catalysts

The Impact of Changing Places toilets – blog about Luke Nash's campaign Link to blog

Listening to young children: the Mosaic approach – Open Research Online