Our Place Guide to Co-design

THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This short guide aims to provide an introduction to co-design in public services: the reasons to do it, the principles that underpin it and some practical approaches for making it work. It focuses on co-design as opposed to co-production, although there are clear overlaps and links between the two, and much that is said here is relevant to both.

Above all, it seeks to make the case that co-design implies something very different to ‘consultation’ as its often understood, and it urges councils and other public bodies to think carefully about the ways they set about planning and undertaking engagement activity with service users.

What is co-design?

Traditionally, public services just existed. It wasn’t clear who designed them or why they looked exactly as they did, we just found out about them when we needed them and used what was provided (or not, if we found them hard to access or unappealing). In recent decades, we have become more familiar with the idea that public services should be informed by what local people say they want, based on some degree of consultation. This could mean being presented with a set of near-finished products, before telling someone in charge what we like or don’t like about them.

Co-design takes citizens deeper into the shaping of those services. Rather than being presented with a set of options and being asked for our views, citizens work alongside the professionals to discuss and shape what a service could look like. It is a response to the charge that for too long, public services have been planned and delivered from above for the passive consumption of citizens. Not only is that ‘top down’ model now recognised as disempowering, but also potentially costly, as it can result in service interventions which professionals assume will work but which may not generate the change envisaged, or which service users may fail to engage with.

“The UK public sector is wasting millions of pounds on services that do not meet people’s needs. When people’s problems go unresolved, their needs remain the same or get worse, creating unnecessary demand and spiralling costs.”

- Saving money by doing the right thing: Why ‘local by default’ must replace ‘diseconomies of scale’, Locality and Vanguard, March 2014

Co-design embodies a set of approaches and a way of thinking to help us tackle this challenge.
Why should public sector bodies do co-design?

Helping us to understand better

— Understanding the system that exists now and how it works for people.
— Understanding how people experience the system and the impact this has on outcomes (for them and wider communities).
— Understanding what changes to a service would enable it to achieve more.

Helping us to grow the skills, capacity and motivation to tackle a challenge: understanding the system that exists now and how it works for people

— Unlocking new ideas and new resources from service users & citizens – whether as individuals or groups.
— Motivating interest and support from frontline staff & service users in change that’s underway.
— Building commitment in a service or facility (e.g. a local park through involvement in its creation).

Developing more effective responses to challenges

— Through better services which are more joined-up, easier to navigate, that don’t make false assumptions and avoid duplication.
— Through more active, involved individuals and communities which are better networked, sharing skills and ideas, more confident and resilient.
Helping us to understand better

To understand the best ways to address a need or tackle an issue that has been identified, we need to understand not only the facts and figures about service users and their needs, but also:

- how people interact with services
- how people are motivated to or deterred from using services
- the impact of those interactions on their lives.

The service itself may be perfect on paper, but if people aren’t using it in the way they’re expected to, it may not be having the right impact.

Through co-design, service providers can seek to understand better how and why people use certain services. As a result:

- They can start connecting up their interventions more effectively (e.g. links and overlaps between different services might become apparent, or clashes and duplications might emerge which need to be avoided).
- They can appreciate more fully why people need services in the first place, which leads to thinking about ways to reduce the need for a service, rather than just tinkering with the supply of that service.
- They can be clearer about what it is that service users or communities really value – and that might not be the first answer they give. Focus groups are commonly used to understand user experience, but they often stop short of empowering the participate to create, along side experts, options for a service or policy.

Co-designing a befriending service in Martock

The Martock Our Place Project has the wide remit of improving the health, wellbeing, skills and financial security of residents through the following aspirations:

- Co-ordinating service provision more effectively
- Targeted local commissioning
- Reducing social isolation
- Increasing employment opportunities

“So far, setting up our project has involved quite a lot of strategic-level activity with organisations like the CCG, our local authorities and voluntary and community groups. Throughout the design and initial phase we’ve been very keen to involve local people in co-designing the specific activities that make up the project.” (cont.)
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“For instance, the new befriending service is being developed with the community and older people in particular, who will be members of the steering group and will shape the types of service they think would work best for them.

We would also like the young people who are part of our youth project to help us design the outcome measures that we can use in future to monitor the impact we’re having. That will be an exciting and quite different way of working for us.”

- Roger Powell, Project Lead, Martock

Helping us to grow the skills, capacity and motivation to tackle a challenge

It’s important that citizens have a voice in the shaping of public services. But as well as feedback and opinions, those citizens might bring their own ideas, skills and energy to make things happen. If we only invite citizens to have a voice, rather than to actually have a role, then those ideas, skills and energy might go untapped.

Co-design can be valuable as a route into capacity-building, encouraging people’s active involvement in addressing personal or community challenges. This in turn not only has the potential to build people’s confidence, support networks and resilience, but can help to surface and connect-up new sorts of ‘resources’ in communities which over time reduce pressure on public services.

- Co-design brings people together with peers and professionals who have a shared interest in achieving something – getting involved is less daunting when you’re part of a wider team.
- By coming together around a specific service, a challenge or interest, people may learn new skills, build new social connections, and develop confidence in the simple act of participation. All these benefits have the potential to build someone’s capacity and resilience.
- The process of co-design can throw open the inner-workings of a service, a topic or a challenge that previously seemed opaque and ‘owned’ by other people. Developing that insight into how services work or how outcomes are achieved can help individuals to realise how their own skills, capacity and ways of behaving can make a difference – whether in their own lives or as a support for others.
- Greater involvement in the creation of something often leads to greater interest and commitment in it in the future. Psychologists call this the Ikea Effect.
Cheltenham inspiring families project

Cheltenham’s Our Place project – run through the Inspiring Families partnership – aims to develop and provide peer-led groups to enable people who have experienced and overcome problems in their lives to support people now going through similar issues.

As part of the project, a ‘trusted individual’ works with the family to create an asset map of the family’s current strengths, networks and the family’s story. They also create an aspiration plan with the family for key areas of family life that outlines what the family’s goals are, and sets out what the family members need to do for themselves, what they need support with and what they need someone to do for them.

“Our project is rooted in the ideas of parents and the interests and capacity of parents – with some seeking support and some able to offer it. As such, the project very consciously takes an asset-based approach, starting from the belief that communities can and should provide some level of support for individuals who may be finding it difficult to cope with aspects of family life.”
- Tracy Brown, Project Co-ordinator

How to co-design

Approaches to co-design can vary depending on where you’re starting from, where you’re working and what’s already happened. You may be starting from a relatively narrow position of wanting to change or replace an existing service because you know it isn’t working as well as it could – that will generate a different set of questions and conversations to a more ‘blank canvas’ starting point of wanting to build the capacity and resilience of a community. Wherever you start from, there are some important principles to bear in mind:

1. Involve service users early
   – don’t wait until you have a set of polished options to ‘present’:

Have the confidence to open conversations with service users before you’ve fully developed any plans of your own for how an outcome could be achieved or a challenge addressed.

In practice, this could mean starting to have different kinds of conversations with people currently using a particular service or set of services, either through the interactions you already have or through generating new ones via informal meet-ups, perhaps arranged with a trusted partner organisation (a nursery, a community group etc.)
Example: Kimberworth Park Community Partnership

The Kimberworth Park Community Partnership sees co-design and co-production as central to its approach to working with local people, which is reflected in its Our Place project focusing on addressing isolation amongst older people. Early discussions to shape the project were not held with the public sector, but with local older people and voluntary organisations such as church groups, a walking group and several others.

“We don’t have very formal meetings as a Partnership – a lot of what we do comes through conversations with people over a cup of tea.” - Denise Butterel, Kimberworth Park Community Partnership

2. Create an environment where service users and service professionals can talk and work on an equal footing:

Traditional consultation processes are about ‘asking people what they think’. A consultation can imply that there’s someone in charge, having the ideas and making the plans, then sharing those with stakeholders to inform the final cut.

Co-design has to be more than that – the people ‘in charge’ need to be able to work together with the potential beneficiaries of a service, side by side, rather than just asking them what they think and gathering up the feedback.

In practice, this could mean:
- involving service designers in one-to-one conversations with service users to help them understand people’s personal experiences and their ‘journey’ through the system.
- organising workshop sessions where those designers and service users start to map out design ideas together in small groups.
- making the co-design process feel like a co-owned discussion, not just a question and answer session.

3. Start by understanding the outcomes not just the service:

When seeking to redesign an existing service, there’s a risk that we start by asking people about the service itself – what do you like about it? What don’t you like? What would you change? This can narrow the range of people’s responses and limit our thinking.

If we start by asking more open questions – about what people want to achieve and change in their lives, and what gets in the way – we could realise that the service we have in mind isn’t the best approach after all. As a result, after a series of conversations with different people, we might end up co-designing something which looks very different to the service concept we started with.
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Example: Ageing Well

You ask a group of older people what they’d like to change in their community. They all tell you they want the bus service back. It’s unlikely that anyone in that room will have the money or the power to make that happen, in which case it’ll be a very short and disempowering conversation.

Or, you could dig deeper and try to understand what made the bus service so valued – which is what we did when the issue came up at a village workshop we ran a few years ago in the east of England as part of the Ageing Well project. The bus service enabled people to get to the nearby town, they told us, where they did their shopping and met their friends. None of us there could bring the bus service back, but it was suggested that people could meet at the village hall and, with some help, use the newly installed PCs to do their shopping online. It was by no means a complete alternative, but it was a way to maintain social interaction and get the shopping done without the bus.

This is just one example of how, through the questions which underpin co-design, we can better understand a challenge and focus on the assets a person or a community already have to come up with a different response.

4. Take an asset-based approach:

It’s impossible to really harness the full power of co-design if you only see the needs and problems of a service user or a community. Focusing on the assets that people bring to a situation can have very tangible benefits, surfacing different kinds of resources which can help tackle a challenge or achieve a shared goal.

Its value can also be psychological, encouraging people to realise their strengths and skills rather than just their problems, enabling them to feel more confident about contributing to a discussion, offering help to someone else or playing a more proactive role in their family or community.

Asset-based approaches can therefore build the resilience and capacity of individuals by raising their self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as building the capacity of whole communities by augmenting their collective resources.
Example: Kimberworth Park Community Partnership

The project aims to engage isolated older people by starting with their interests and ideas, and based on the Five Ways to Wellbeing, it recognises the value of inviting people to contribute as well as to receive. So whilst the project aims to recruit a team of 50 volunteers to reach people in need of support, the long term ambition is that those lines between the supporters and the supported become more blurred, with isolated older people more actively involved in the life of their community and able to contribute.

“We have an older people’s singing group. They come 45 minutes before the instructor arrives because they like to talk to each other – the singing is just a part of it. They love to go out and perform locally – to feel they’ve got something to give.”
- Denise Butterel, Kimberworth Park Community Partnership

Tools and methods

Customer journey mapping
Customer journey mapping is a process of mapping out, on paper, the journey that a service user makes through a particular service or set of services as they work towards resolving a challenge or achieving a goal. It can be a simple but painstaking process, the success of which rests on the quality of the questions asked and the ability, or willingness, of the service user to be accurate and open about their experience.

Preparatory work for this could include ethnographic researchers getting to know an individual / family and understand their day to day lives in more depth, or working with those people to keep a diary of their service interactions – and their feelings – over a period of time (e.g. a month) prior to undertaking the mapping process itself.

Ideas Farms
An Ideas Farm is a format for structuring a workshop with local people when you’re beginning with a ‘blank canvas’ in terms of issues and potential projects. It aims to:

- bring a range of local people together – not just those who like attending traditional meetings
- build new connections between local people and groups
- surface exciting new ideas that people in the community can work on
- create a situation where people feel more able to take action themselves, as a community, instead of just being asked for their opinion.
At this sort of event, there’s no one ‘in charge’ who is consulting or seeking feedback – so there’s no point in people using the time just to raise gripes. A key question for participants should be ‘so what can we do?’

Some of the ideas that emerge will be projects that can be driven forward by people in the community, with a greater or lesser degree of support from a council or partner organisation. Other ideas may point towards the need to change the way that particular services work, leading to further conversations and a workshop event where service designers work with some of those interested local people to start redesigning those services together. You can read more about how to organise an Ideas Farm at OPM’s website.

Scenarios
Depending on the topic, some service users may find it difficult to reflect on their own personal experiences – particularly once you get into the group conversations of a workshop setting. Even when people are happy to share, the very process of getting everyone up to speed with each other’s backstories can be time-consuming in a workshop situation. Scenarios can be a way round these challenges, fixing everyone’s attention on a realistic but fictionalised (or anonymised) case, and using that as the basis for a discussion about where a certain kind of service or help from friends and neighbours could make a positive impact. It also helps to level the playing field with the officers around the table, with all participants working with the same information in front of them.

OPM has used scenarios in recent work with Merton CCG, where the aim was to shape a new community services tendering process with service users and professionals.

They were also a valuable tool in work with Barking and Dagenham’s public health team, focused on the development of a new Dementia Needs Assessment. In both cases, scenarios were used to bring different stakeholders together around a single story as the starting point for discussions about the way services need to work to be effective, who should be involved and what a good outcome would look like.
What does co-design look like in practice?

This model suggests what co-design might involve at different stages, depending on where you’re starting from. It is important to emphasise, however, that there is no single, rigid process to follow – co-design above all is a way of thinking and working in pursuit of better outcomes for individuals or wider communities.

‘We want to improve an existing service’

- Talk to current & potential users of the service
  - Understand their service experience: what motivates / deters engagement?
  - Work with them to map out their journeys through the system
  - Host co-design workshop(s) where service users / citizens and designers plan a service together

‘We want to make progress on a specific outcome’

- Talk to existing local groups/networks
  - Gather some initial data about issues that matter to / interest local people
  - Host open space style community events, such as an ideas farm, so people can start generating project or service ideas together

‘We want to build capacity & resilience in a community’

- Talk to current & potential users of the service
  - Understand their service experience: what motivates / deters engagement?
  - Work with them to map out their journeys through the system
  - Host co-design workshop(s) where service users / citizens and designers plan a service together

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- Continue to support emerging community-led projects and the networks that are enabling them
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