Making the case for co-production

Summary insights, March 2023

> *"I believe in co-production: everyone gets a say and has an equal opportunity to put their view across. It can work and it should be done more."*
>
> **Terry Regan, Custom House resident and steering group member**

Summary insights

Future of London's Rethinking Community Engagement programme set out to explore how the built environment sector could engage with local communities in a more meaningful way. In response to interest from our network, and the resources that were already widely available, we decided to focus on co-production.

Broadly, co-production refers to the joint delivery of projects and services between community members and decision-makers. Whilst it's relatively established in other disciplines like health and social care, it has only started to gain traction in the built environment sector in recent years – and is still not widely understood.

Key to this programme was involving community representatives in the same way as we worked with professionals: as speakers at our events, participants in our workshops and as critical friends.

Rhetoric versus reality: how is co-production happening in the built environment?

- For co-production to be genuine, there are three key principles that underpin the process: sharing power, sharing knowledge and being inclusive. Trust will help to get these things right and getting these things right will generate trust.
- Co-production is already happening as part of housing and regeneration projects across the capital. Our research found that community groups and sector professionals with some experience of it have a similar understanding of how authentic co-production should happen in practice.
- Co-washing is also happening within the sector. This is when practitioners call an engagement process 'co-design' or 'co-production' but do not devolve any decision-making power to community representatives. This risks not only making the term 'co-production' meaningless, but also erodes trust in the built environment profession.

Why is co-production so challenging to do in practice?

- Community members want to be involved in a co-production process before any decisions have been made but often there is no clear 'beginning' in the development process, or a process of urban change.
- Sharing power is the hardest of the three principles to get right, but acknowledging the power imbalance – and being transparent and accountable about it – is critical to a co-production process.
- Much of the current planning system, and as a result the development process, does not facilitate or value co-production. To do co-production better, and more often, will require more resources and organisational buy-in beyond the people directly involved in the co-production process.

Future of London's Co-production Principles

In response to these findings, together with sector practitioners and community representatives, we've created Future of London's Co-production Principles: sharing power, sharing knowledge, and being inclusive.

They come with a series of questions to help those involved get each principle right in practice. Together, they provide a broad, cross-sector definition of what co-production is and what it involves in a built environment context.

The purpose of the Principles is to set the standard for co-production within the sector and prevent 'co-washing'. But they're designed to be flexible and non-specific as our research has shown that there isn't a one-size-fits-all co-production method that works for all stakeholders, across all the different types of development in London.
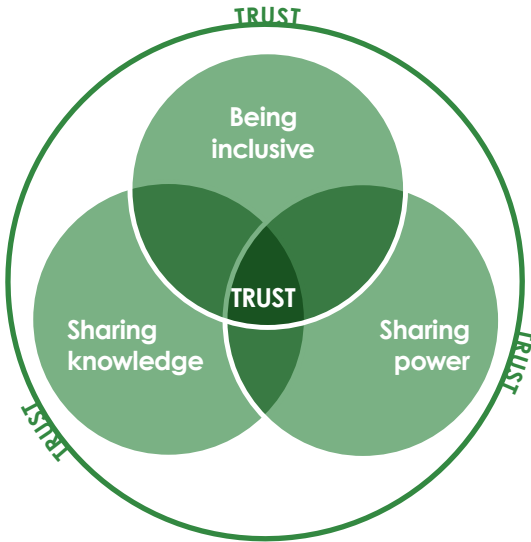
Making co-production more mainstream

More work and resources are needed to make co-production a more widespread, and better understood, practice. This includes:

- case studies that show co-production can work in different contexts and at different scales in the built environment
- a way of measuring the success and impact of a co-production process
- a co-produced training programme to introduce more people to this approach, and build up the confidence of both community members and practitioners.

FoL's Co-production Principles

Through workshops with community representatives and practitioners Future of London has produced these Co-production Principles. They provide a broad, cross-sector definition of what co-production is and what it involves in a built environment context. Their purpose is to set the standard for co-production within the sector and prevent 'co-washing'.

For more detail on how to use these principles please read our full report.

Principles	Getting these principles right
Sharing power	▸ Have community members been involved from the beginning, before the agenda is set? ▸ Do community members have the power to jointly shape not only the co-production process but also the outcome and the criteria for measuring the success of the project? ▸ Has it been agreed – and made clear to everyone – when and how power will be shared? ▸ Has the power imbalance been acknowledged by the group? ▸ Have time and resources been set aside to support everyone involved to take part in the process? ▸ Are the built environment professionals taking part empowered to inform key decisions on behalf of their organisation?
Sharing knowledge	▸ Knowledge sharing is bottom-up as well as top-down: can community members share their knowledge and can this influence decisions? ▸ Does everyone involved in the process have access to the information they need in order to make decisions and feel like an equal part of the group? ▸ Is the information easy to access and easy to understand? ▸ Have the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved, along with the parameters of the project (eg the budget, the timeframe), been made clear to everyone at the start? ▸ Is everyone always honest and transparent with the other people involved in the process?
Being inclusive	**Who is involved in the process?** ▸ Are a diverse group of community members taking part in the whole process, including members of minoritised groups? ▸ Are the community members representative of the communities affected by this scheme/development/process of urban change? ▸ Have time and resources been set aside for communities to have conversations within their community and between communities? **How are people involved?** ▸ Do people have the right support to attend meetings and fully participate? ▸ Is the language being used (in conversation, in written documents) accessible and considerate to everyone? ▸ Is everyone asking 'open' questions? (Example: Do we need a green space? What kind of green space is required to meet those needs?) ▸ Is there a feedback process to check that everyone taking part feels that they are being treated as an equal and are being listened to?

'Community member' here refers to members of the community taking part in the co-production process, not members of the wider community.

Project team

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