



The Craft of Co-Production: Lessons From the Development of the Ely and Caerau Community Plan

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The Craft of Co-Production

Co-production is the process whereby professionals (e.g., workers in government and community organizations) collaborate with citizens to enhance communities and public services. This contrasts with public consultations whereby professionals seek the views of citizens about plans that are proposed by professionals. Although co-production has been talked about for long time, little is known about the skills that professionals require to co-produce effectively with citizens. We call these skills, the ‘craft of co-production’.

Co-Producing The Ely and Caerau Development Plan

To learn about the craft of co-production, we studied an innovative process in the Ely and Caerau districts of Cardiff, Wales. There, in response to civil unrest following the tragic deaths of two young men in May 2023, Welsh Government, Cardiff Council, and the South Wales Police and Crime Commissioner’s Office sponsored a project to create a community plan. We see this as an example of co-production because the sponsors stated that the plan would involve professionals working “in genuine partnership with the people of Ely and Caerau” .

Between August 2023 and May 2024, the development of the community plan was led by a local community organization called Action for Caerau and Ely (ACE). The project involved four main activities:

1. Between August 2023 and January 2024, a large ‘listening exercise’ was conducted to identify the strengths and struggles of the community. This heard from 1,234 people in open events, groups, surveys, and conversations. It gathered almost 4,000 comments across 47 engagements. The key issues raised were grouped into six broad themes that included: community safety and safeguarding, children and young people, and spaces and the environment.

2. In spring 2024, ACE and Cardiff Council brought together 96 local residents and 52 public and third sector partners in 7 community workshops to dig deeper into the six themes. In these sessions, professionals (including educators, youth

workers, police officers, GPs, headteachers, and early years workers) reviewed what they had heard, explored ideas, and worked with community members to jointly design actions for change. Within each of the six themes, professionals were briefed on the findings of the listening exercise and were asked to: advise on funding opportunities and ways to connect and shape services to better serve the community, and to engage with ideas directly generated by community participants.

3. Throughout the process, the ACE Community Engagement Co-ordinator chaired a Community Steering Group (CSG) that met monthly to review community feedback, advise, and support the development of the plan. The

CSG also agreed the actions to be included in the final community plan to check that they reflected community views and would deliver positive impact locally.

4. In the late spring of 2024, ACE and Cardiff Council professionals, in collaboration with a wide range of partners, combined information from the listening exercise and workshops into a community plan . That document contains 40 tangible actions, across the six themes. These include actions to increase access to good quality spaces for young people, address concerns around anti-social behaviour, and to strengthen mental health support for teenagers.



Jobs & Training

1. Identify the skills and knowledge required for the job.

2. Determine the training and development needs of the organization.

3. Develop a training and development plan that addresses the needs of the organization.

4. Implement the training and development plan.

5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the training and development program.

Our Study

Working in collaboration with ACE, researchers from Cardiff University studied the creation of the community plan to identify lessons about the craft of co-production that might be useful for future initiatives in other communities. Information was gathered through interviews with professionals from ACE and Cardiff Council, and the observation of events associated with the development of the plan. Our findings are summarised below as six skills that help professions to co-produce with the public: (1) building and maintaining trust, (2) setting boundaries, (3) managing difficult conversations, (4) demonstrating empathy, (5) empowering community through an asset-based approach, and (6) capturing and presenting community voices.

Six Skills of Co-Production

1. Building and Maintaining Trust

This study confirmed that building and maintaining trust is a basic requirement for co-production. For citizens to engage effectively with professionals, both parties must accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of the another. It is recognised that this can be difficult to achieve, even at the best of times. It is particularly challenging when a community's trust in professionals is low.

Participants in this study reported that following the tragic events of May 2023, their trust in professionals had fallen from levels that were not high to start with. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the tragic events, expressions of a lack of faith in the local police force (South Wales) took a variety of forms and they tended to dominate early discussions. Concerns were, however, also raised about the local council (Cardiff) which was perceived to “only come here, to close things down”. In this, very challenging, context for co-production, we identified two features that helped professionals build and maintain trust with community members.

First, the planning process was led by a local organization (ACE) that was both generally (but not, universally) respected in the area, and had a long record of supporting communities in Ely and Caerau. ACE's Engagement Team members drew on their organisation's decade-long experience of local community work to build trust in the planning process. This began by using a wide range of methods to clearly explain the planning process to the community using communication methods including: emails, newsletters, face-to-face conversations, and posts on

social media platforms. Drawing on ACE's network and existing relationships with the community, Engagement Team members then visited 38 community engagement opportunities within Caerau and Ely during which citizens' views were collected through methods including surveys, interviews, workshops, and focus groups. For all sessions, the locations and timings were selected to suit participants. As one professional emphasised, ACE's approach was centred around “going to where people and existing groups are; whether it is a youth club, a school, or a summer event”. The aim was to build trust by demonstrating a genuine concern for peoples' views and opinions. An open and honest approach was taken to allow community members to ‘drive’ the conversations. Second, the development of trust was helped by one member of ACE's engagement team being a local young person. Community members reported that this “local boy” helped them to feel comfortable because he was “one of our own” and could be trusted to communicate their views accurately.



2. Setting Boundaries

All co-production processes are constrained by limits to resources such as time and money. This means that a very important skill for professionals is to manage citizens' expectations by effectively communicating the boundaries of the project and what can realistically be achieved. Whilst effective management of expectations around co-production can help to maintain trust in the process, a failure to manage expectations can act as a significant barrier to success.

Because the community plan project was set to run for only 10 months, it was very important that professionals effectively communicated the scope of the project and what was feasible to achieve. As one professional explained, their focus was to “keep people informed without promising that this is what we will do; instead communicate that this might happen, so trying to be transparent but not announcing anything before signing off the plan”. We observed this message being delivered consistently as professionals began engagement meetings by informing the community about the scope of the process, sharing what they had done up to that point, and what they plan to do next. Similarly, it was consistently stated that it is important for the final plan to make sense and be realistic. This was emphasised by a professional who said that “if nothing happens, it would be detrimental to the trust of the community so there is a lot riding on this. That is why it is important to be clear and open from the beginning regarding what this process can achieve and what not”.

3. Managing Difficult Conversations

The community planning process in Ely and Caerau illustrated that managing difficult conversations is an important skill for professionals in co-production. This is because differences of opinion between stakeholders will always arise from varying views and beliefs, and uneven distribution of status and power. During the creation of the community plan, we observed many occasions where professionals were required to manage difficult conversations to avoid escalation to conflict. The approach that was role-modelled by the ACE engagement team leader involved acknowledging that a difference in opinion had emerged, noting that both views were legitimate, and attempting to find consensus. In one example at an engagement meeting, some

community members expressed their view that persistent local issues had not been addressed by the local authority “because no one listens”. The professional who was convening the meeting allowed the perceptions to be aired, acknowledged the complexity of the situation, and explained that these views would be included within the planning process. A similar process occurred when community members were invited to discuss the membership of the project’s steering group. Originally, it had been decided not to include a police representative. While some community members agreed with this decision, others felt the police should be included. After skilful management of this difficult conversation by the meeting convenor, it was agreed to include a police representative in subsequent meetings.

The importance of effectively managing difficult conversations was highlighted during an engagement workshop on a contentious issue when tensions escalated among participants. This involved some participants standing up and shouting at each other. Unlike the previous two examples, no attempt was made to recognise and reconcile the different views. In reflecting on this process, ACE professionals decided that the next workshop on this issue should begin by introducing participants to each other and mixing people with differing perspectives on different tables for discussions. This approach to managing difficult conversations encouraged participants to listen to each other, acknowledge different perceptions, and ultimately build a consensus on the issue.



4. Demonstrating Empathy

To help break down barriers between professionals and community members during co-production, it is important for the former group to display empathy towards the latter. By empathy we mean seeing the world as others see it, understanding another person's current emotional state, as well as taking responsive actions and communicating the understanding of another's feelings. This study identified two ways that professionals demonstrated empathy during the planning process. The first was by professionals "active listening". This means being attentive to the speaker and responding to what's being said. This was evident in the engagement meetings where professionals responded to citizens by repeating back their points to make sure they understood them, and by thanking them for their helpful contributions.

The second way that professionals demonstrated empathy was by showing a clear appreciation of the local context. This was evident to us when, during an engagement workshop with local parents, professionals emphasised that they too are community residents, living in Cardiff, having children and so "care about the same issues as you". As a council professional highlighted "We set the tone from the outset, that we were there to listen. We had a down-to-earth approach. We did not go in a corporate way with suits and flashy presentations".

From observing the co-production training that ACE provided to its own staff and professionals from the local council (called the 'ACE Way'), we noticed that a focus was placed on sharing information about the socio-economic history of the community. In Ely and Caerau, these issues are particularly important given the historical stigma that is attached to the community. In one example that we saw during an engagement meeting, the professional convener emphasised the importance of publishing the plan's positive proposals before the anniversary of the tragic incident. The aim was to help mitigate the likelihood of the media re-showing negative images of the community. Unfortunately, this script played out when BBC television coverage of the plan's launch showed archival footage of social unrest. This raised tensions in the area, and it created challenges to ACE's relationships of trust with the community.

5. Empowering Community Through an Asset-Based Approach

Because co-production goes beyond consultation to include citizens in decision-making, professionals require the skills to empower citizens to think about and provoke change. This often requires equipping citizens with both material resources and confidence. During the production of the community plan, the approach taken to citizen empowerment followed ACE's model of asset-based development. This promotes a focus on identifying the strengths and assets of a community and using them to effectively promote change.

We observed the asset-based approach to empowerment throughout the development of the plan. As with the skill of demonstrating empathy, empowerment is a key feature of the training that ACE provided to professionals involved in the creation of the community plan. This involved introducing the theory of asset-based development and presenting illustrative examples of how previous participants had experienced empowerment. From the outset of the planning process, all engagement activity began by asking three questions; what does the community have? what does it need? What does it want to change? From this basis, the focus shifted to co-designing solutions that drew from the assets and skills of the community. As a professional co-ordinating a workshop explained to us, this approach "is all about empowering the community, not going in feeling sorry for the situation and only talking about problems and what is wrong, but also what is right". Community participants reported to us that this approach led them to feel that they had something to contribute to the process, beyond "simply participating".



6. Capturing and Presenting Community Voices

The development of the Caerau and Ely development plan illustrates that co-production requires that the professional team has the skills to manage the task of gathering, analysing, and presenting information about community views. During the production of the community plan, a three-stage process was used. First, a variety of methods were used to gather the voices of citizens. These included: interviews, individual conversations, surveys, focus groups, and questionnaires. Second, the information was analysed to identify a set of core themes using a free, open-source, data analysis tool called Taguette. Finally, the themes were discussed with citizens at the engagement workshops and on social media, to clarify, check, and get feedback.

The ACE professional who co-ordinated this detailed work was very clear about the need to present the themes "in a simple way in order to be accessible to the public and easy to read and understand". To address this goal, information was presented using a variety of forms including 'infographics' such as: graphs, bullet points, tables, and "speech bubbles" containing quotes from community members.

The ACE professional who co-ordinated this work explained that "I was analysing large chunks of data which... luckily, I had that skill from my master's degree". That capacity was highly regarded by community members. They often referred to the professional as a "data whizz" who could both: (a) make complex information understandable to diverse audience, and (b) explain what they were doing in a way that could be understood by non-experts. Those research skills were seen as vital to getting the information needed from interactions with the community and using them as the basis for the plan.

Building on ACE's long experience of community-based work, the development of the community plan recognised the importance of recognising the contributions of community members to co-production. This ensured that residents who participated in the 2-hour workshops were provided with refreshments, and a £30 Tesco voucher as a 'thank you' for their contribution. As one professional reported "providing hospitality, even if just through tea and biscuits, helps demonstrate that community participants' time and lived experience are valued by professionals."



Lessons on the Craft of Co-Production

As noted at the start of this report, the aim of our study was to identify lessons about the skills of co-production that might be useful for future initiatives in other communities. We chose to look at the development of the Ely and Caerau community plan because the sponsors promised that it would be created "in genuine partnership" with local people. The final community plan document reported that "At every step, this Community Plan has been co-created with residents of all ages, people who work here in the community, and with public and voluntary sector services from across the city" (page 3).

The main output of this co-production process is a community plan comprising 40 actions, all of which have the support and commitment from local public services, voluntary sector organisations and residents themselves, to deliver. It is presented as "a practical and deliverable set of commitments, agreed collaboratively, and with a 'can do' spirit" (page 6). On 14th May 2024, Welsh Government and Cardiff Council confirmed their commitment to see the community plan delivered for the benefit of all residents, offering their full support.

After summarising the four main elements of the co-production work involved with developing the plan (listening exercise, workshops, CSG, and report writing), our analysis identified and illustrated six skills that helped professions to co-produce the plan with the public: (1) building and maintaining trust, (2) setting boundaries, (3) managing difficult conversations, (4) demonstrating empathy, (5) empowering community through an asset-based approach, and (6) capturing

and presenting community voices. We certainly do not claim that these are the only skills involved in the craft of co-production. These six were, however, very important in the process that we observed.

Although we view the six skills as comprising a 'bundle' of vital components for co-production, it did appear that 'Developing and Maintaining Trust' between professionals and community members is a basic requirement. This was a particularly challenging task in the context of Ely and Caerau following the tragic incident. In that low-trust situation, it seemed important that the co-production of the community plan was led by a body that is both: (a) generally well-regarded by the community, and (b) has extensive experience of co-productive working in the area. It is interesting to note that in developing the Ely and Caerau community plan, the role was performed by a local community organization (ACE). It is unclear whether the statutory sector has the capacity to perform that role.

Given the complexity and range of the skills involved with the craft of co-production, it seems unlikely that any individual could perform them all. Maybe then, the craft of co-production should be seen as a collective endeavour? In our study, we found that different professionals played a leading role in performing certain skills. As we explained, the 'data whizz' performed much of the research work associated with the skill of 'Capturing and Presenting Community Voices'. The 'local boy' played a key role in 'Building and Maintaining Trust', and 'Displaying Empathy'.

The co-ordination of co-production skills was conducted by the ACE Community Engagement Co-ordinator who was also prominent in performing the skills of 'Setting Boundaries' and 'Managing Difficult Conversations'. This leadership role may be seen as similar to that of a 'Master' craftsman who over-see a workshop of apprentices. Any desire to replicate the use of co-production beyond the case described here will need to give serious attention to the identification and training of both master and apprentice co-production professionals. This study suggests that the ACE Way programme may provide a useful starting point.

By concentrating on the human skills of co-production, this study did not explore the costs associated with the development of the Plan. We did notice, however, that in addition to the contract awarded to ACE, the development of the community plan involved significant contributions, of various types, from stakeholders including: community members, governance boards, and council professionals. Without an account of these elements, it is not possible to assess the cost of this process, or to provide a basis for estimating the cost of future exercises.

While the financial cost may not be widely known, this study has identified and illustrated six skills that helped professions to co-produce the plan effectively with the public. With community participants having reported high levels of satisfaction with the process, the co-production skills identified here may provide a basis for designing future attempts to empower communities through co-production.

