

Unlocking the true power of coproduction

BITE SIZE GUIDE

Overview

This bitesize resource is designed to support public sector staff in addressing inequalities through understanding protected characteristics. It shows how to strengthen resident voice through community engagement and coproduction, to influence policy development, commissioning, service design and delivery approaches. It focuses on enabling staff to explore how to create a partnership with residents and community organisations representing people with lived experiences, who can give insights into how to make services more targeted and cost effective. It also seeks to inform the ways partners can effectively work together and in collaboration with public sector bodies

This bitesize guide, Protected Characteristics and beyond, is part of a series of four bitesize guides that summarise the key points from the Cornerstone Good Practice Guide on developing inclusive Equality Impact Assessments into a more accessible format:

1. Strengthening resident voice.
2. Unlocking the true power of coproduction.
3. Understanding intersectionality.
4. Protected characteristics and beyond.



The Tower Hamlets Cornerstone Project

The Tower Hamlets Cornerstone Project is a partnership between Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service (THCVS) the infrastructure organisation supporting the voluntary sector in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and six community organisations representing protected characteristics.

The two-year project, funded by The National Lottery, developed an approach to influence more inclusive decision-making across public sector agencies in Tower Hamlets. The project created a model for voluntary sector partnership for public sector bodies wanting to work with local communities to address inequalities within policy making services in Tower Hamlets. The continuing goal is to ensure that all residents benefit from improved planning and decision-making that better reflects the experiences and needs of disadvantaged and marginalised communities across London.

The project developed a **Good Practice Guide** to support council and NHS officers to undertake inclusive Equality Impact Assessment: , in order to raise awareness and improve the visibility and understanding of the different equalities' issues and experiences across our communities through practical, lived understanding of intersectionality and how this applies to residents.

As part of strengthening resident voice, through raising awareness with communities, the project developed a leaflet for residents in **English, Somali and Bengali**, both as a written and **audio resource**.



Introduction

Purpose: This guide supports organisations, especially those working with marginalised groups, to strengthen resident voice in decision making processes through effective consultation and coproduction.¹

Overview: It defines key engagement methods including consultation and coproduction, introduces the Ladder of Participation, and shares best practices and case examples. The guide draws on real world lessons including from Age UK East London's Older People's Reference Groups (OPRGs) to offer actionable ways to embed resident voice in strategy, service design, and delivery.

Sections

1. Understanding participation from consultation to coproduction.
2. Foundations of effective coproduction.
3. Who to consult and coproduce with?
4. Conditions for meaningful coproduction.
5. Case study: Parking Permit.
6. Case Study: 'It's Our Turn'
7. Learning from Age UK East London's working group.
8. Conclusion and practical next steps.



Section 1: Understanding participation from consultation to coproduction

Summary

Not all decision making requires coproduction. What matters is clarity about the level of engagement and ensuring that processes are inclusive and meaningful, regardless of the method used.

1.1: Defining Key Terms

Consultation

- Stakeholders' views are actively sought.
- Final decisions rest with the facilitators or decision makers.
- Effective for testing ideas, informing decisions, or gathering evidence under time or resource constraints.

Coproduction

- Stakeholders and decision makers share power.
- People are involved in designing, developing, and sometimes delivering services or policies.
- Requires trust, flexibility, and capacity from all parties.

1.2: Ladder of Participation

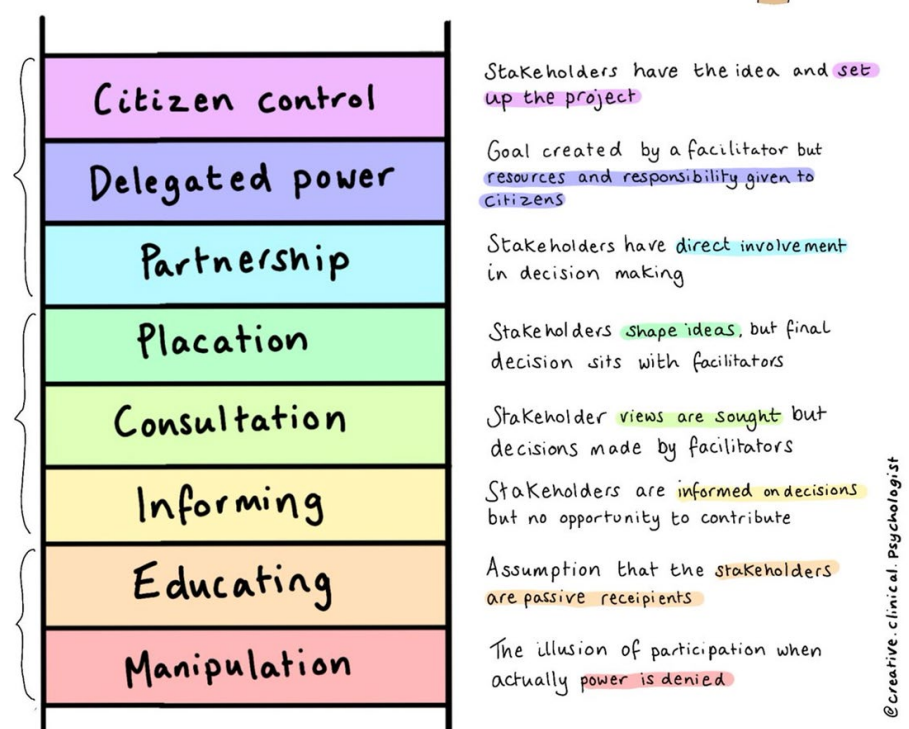
A helpful framework for understanding levels of resident engagement.

Important:

Aim for the most appropriate level of participation for each context. Co production isn't always possible, or suitable but clear, inclusive consultation is always necessary.

Ladder of Participation

(Arnstein, 1969)



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Section 2: Foundations of effective coproduction

Summary

When coproduction is appropriate it should be well resourced, intentionally designed, and started early. A rushed or tokenistic version of co production can cause more harm than good.

2.1: Core practices

Start early

- Begin during the planning stages before decisions are made – budget for coproduction at the start of the project.
- Identify who should be involved and why using Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) – advertise in places that will reach a diverse range of residents such as Ideas Stores, leisure centres and places of worship.

Clarify expectations

- Communicate roles, responsibilities, and limits of influence.
- Be honest if consultation rather than co production is what's being offered.

Apply right to left thinking

- “Right to left thinking,” in the context of Robert Schalock’s work, refers to a quality-of-life approach where desired personal outcomes are identified first, and then supports and services are developed to achieve them, rather than the other way around.
- This approach centres individuals’ goals and leads to more meaningful and personalised decision making.
- Co production is most powerful when it starts with the aspirations of residents, not organisational agendas.

2.2: Inclusive accessible participation

Design for access

- Offer multiple formats such as online, in person, phone and multiple time slots such as daytime and after work. Avoid using jargon and abbreviations.
- Ask participants what support they need to engage.

Value contributions

- Recognise time and lived experience with incentives or payments.
- Acknowledge contributions publicly and in outcomes.



Section 3: Who to consult and coproduce with?

Summary

Broaden engagement to include voices that are often excluded. Reach out to a broad range of communities, sectors, and informal networks to gather diverse, relevant input.

3.1: Key enablers of coproduction culture

Stakeholders and sectors

- Local Authority teams and NHS services.
- Schools, Police, and GPs.
- Voluntary sector and local charities.

Community and lived experience networks

- Places of worship, youth hubs, barbers and hairdressers.
- Scrutiny groups such as disability, LGBTQI+, race.
- Resident associations ensuring inclusivity.

Older People's Reference Groups (OPRGs)

Resident led forums run across Newham, Tower Hamlets, and City and Hackney.

- Shape services and strategy through regular open meetings.
- Offer both consultation and co production opportunities.
- Mixed format with speakers, workshops, information sharing, and peer led dialogue.

Section 4: Conditions for meaningful coproduction

Summary

Effective coproduction doesn't just happen. It requires intentional organisational culture and values that enable people to contribute as equals.

4.1: Key enablers of coproduction culture

The following diagram illustrates the core elements needed to create an environment where coproduction can thrive:



Each component reinforces the others. Without a strong cultural foundation, even well-designed engagement processes may struggle to produce meaningful outcomes.

Image source: [Research Gate](#)

Section 5: Case study: Parking Permit

Summary

A real-world example of the power of resident voice and scrutiny when a council decision made without proper consultation negatively impacted older residents.

Context

The council without any scrutiny moved all parking permit requests online only, withdrawing the scratch card system that was in place where you could phone up for vouchers which you could order and allow visitors to park.

5.1: Resident impact Mahendra's experience

First Question: Mahendra, how did this decision impact you and other older people in the borough?

Mahendra: *'This arbitrary decision impacted us very adversely. Our friends, family members and well-wishers could not visit us. The delivery men refused to serve us as they struggled to find parking. We could not call even the workmen and electricians to fix our problems. Most of us live in isolation. This decision of the council made us more lonely.'*

Second Question: How did it make you feel?

Mahendra: *'This cruel decision made us feel extremely frustrated and helpless. The council dumped us as unwanted useless garbage.'*

5.2: OPRG response and outcomes

- Raised the issue with councillors and demanded accountability.
- Challenged the council's lack of EqIA and gathered real life resident examples.
- Revealed that support plans for older people were inadequate or non-existent.
- Successfully lobbied for the temporary return of scratch cards and creation of in person and telephone support.

Key lesson: Residents shouldn't have to fight for basic accessibility. Proactive consultation and EqIAs would have prevented the issue.

5.3: Reflection what can we learn

Third question: What can we and the council learn from this?

Mahendra: *'The council should learn that they cannot treat us like dumb driven cattle. They should not make decisions with consulting us and our groups. In our working age we also made contribution to the economy and the society. Now, when we are in the twilight of our life, they need to treat us with dignity and do not dump us. Let us share pains and pleasure together. Nothing about without us. Before taking any decision that might impact us, they should have a proper consultation and discuss pros and cons of their decision.'*

Section 6: Case Study – ‘It’s Our Turn’

The Campaign to End Loneliness (2018) highlighted the possibility of a virtuous cycle of perception building on experience to combat loneliness. The ‘It’s Our Turn’ project involved Disabled people coproducing their own solutions to loneliness.

One of these solutions was the ‘Find Your Voice’ workshops. These were groups designed to encourage Disabled people to express themselves through a variety of structured activities such as storytelling and art.

‘Ernest’ describes how he immediately felt at ease when he joined the programme and felt able to open up:

“All of a sudden, something left me which was keeping me quiet and not expressing myself to other people. So, from the very first day, I was very open and I was feeling like a different person.”

He explained that having a specific time which was focused on opening up and sharing with others had helped him to feel more comfortable than he usually would. The fact that the sessions had been designed and delivered by Disabled people meant that they met his needs more effectively than other groups he had attended and therefore had better outcomes for him.

“The criteria, the method they were using, it was giving me more and more chance to write down or try something or say something in front of other people. There was an understanding that this is the time I’m going to open myself, and I said the things that I would not have said anywhere to anybody. I think it was the method; it was the way they were treating us and supporting us... It was different than other seminars or programmes where you hardly get a chance to speak. Here, everybody was given plenty of time to speak, and nobody was stopping you to say something. Everybody got their turn... It was a different Ernest who was participating, expressing himself and saying things.”

As well as enjoying the sessions themselves and feeling able to open up, Ernest reported the wider impact attending the sessions had had on his confidence, enabling him to change from someone who would sit back to someone who was able to take more of a leading role in the community:

“[Before] I felt a bit shy, and also a bit irrelevant. I remember I used to go to Queen Elizabeth Park for gardening there, and all day I was very quiet, even at the coffee time, I was not talking, I was just keeping inside myself... There’s a very good real-life example [of my improved confidence]. I was in my surgery for a coffee morning a few days back... and I was the person who was almost leading the session.”

Ernest also mentioned family members noticing the difference in him and feeling more confident to speak with medical professionals, and even mentioned participating in the evaluation as an example of how his confidence had improved:

“Right now, I’m talking with full confidence, I have no anxiousness, I’m not feeling inhibited.”

Section 7: Learning from Age UK East London's working group

Context

The consultations and the resulting Working Group derived from Age UK East London's review of its offer for older people across East London in preparation for setting its strategy for the next 5 years. We needed to ensure that older people's views and experiences are at the heart of how Age UK East London does things and to continue to improve our performance based on what older people have told us they need.

Summary

The Working Group was a model for how to coproduce effectively with older residents shaping organisational strategy, building skills, and holding Age UK East London accountable.

6.1: Successes

- Clear structure including Memorandum of Understanding and Terms of Reference.
- Participants developed evaluation and presentation skills.
- Residents became ambassadors with influence and confidence.

6.2: Challenges

- Retention as some residents dropped out due to other commitments.
- Diversity where more inclusive recruitment is needed.
- Facilitation to ensure equitable contributions from all participants.
- Incentives were appreciated but need open discussion in future planning.



Section 8: Conclusion and practical next steps

Summary

Meaningful participation is about matching the right method to the context and doing so with integrity, clarity, and care.

Key Takeaways:

- Co-production is not consultation; it's about shared power from the start.
- Trauma-informed, inclusive, and respectful processes matter.
- Challenge tokenism. Ask: "Who benefits? Who is being heard?"
- Make space for discomfort, slowness, and reflection.

Practical next steps

- Review your current practices using co-production principles.
- Set up structures for ongoing lived experience leadership.
- Embed feedback loops to show how contributions are used.
- Invest in co-production and capacity-building for all involved.



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