

## research

# In what ways can an age-friendly approach to co-production transfer power to participants? Translating ideology into practice

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This article contributes to conversations about co-production by examining a voluntary sector organisation's programme of work aiming to help develop age-friendly places. Using perspectives from older people and voluntary sector professionals involved in the project at both a strategic management and local level, this study examines two key issues. First, it develops understandings of co-production by examining the precise ways in which rhetoric is reflected in practice with a project operating across a number of age-friendly domains and working with different sectors. Specifically, it examines the tensions involved in transferring power to community actors, yet managing the process to ensure older people are supported in developing projects that involve and are representative of their wider population. Second, in assessing the role of the voluntary sector in negotiating cross-sector partnerships, it contributes to debates around the role of the voluntary sector in service delivery during reduced public spending.

**key words** co-production • co-design • community involvement • community development • service delivery • public • health • social and community services • knowledge exchange • capacity-building • theories of voluntary sector

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## Introduction

Co-production has been articulated as a process by which 'citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them' (Ostrom, 1996: 1073). This study examines an interpretation of co-production with older people, which encompasses elements of co-construction, co-design, co-delivery and co-management (Bovaird et al, 2017). Co-design and co-creation are based on the principles of co-production (Durose and Richardson, 2016), and use user-centred and participatory design techniques to develop more person-centred public services (Farr 2017). Durose and Richardson (2016) describe the co-production process as asset-based, specifically built around people and on existing strengths, with a focus on collective decision making and devolved power.

This article takes the view that co-production comes from a tradition of community development work in the UK in the 1970s. Therefore, Rothman and Tropman's (1993) analysis of community development work as aiming to change power relationships, as opposed to fixing small-scale or short-range problem situations, is relevant to the analysis developed in this article. In terms of its approach, community development work focuses on social class (Taylor, 2011), with critics arguing that area-based policies result in systematic exclusion according to race, disability, gender, sexuality and faith (Tilly, 1999). Furthermore, co-production can be seen to have emerged in the context of dissatisfaction with participatory work that was accused of informing or even manipulating communities but not transforming power to them (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

This article examines a voluntary sector organisation's interpretation of co-produced methods to develop age-friendly places. It focuses on a £10.2 million Big Lottery Fund<sup>1</sup> 'Ambition for Ageing' (AfA) programme, part of the national 'Ageing Better' portfolio. AfA is led by Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO). Eight local delivery lead (LDL) partnerships have been contracted to deliver programmes of work across Greater Manchester and this article reports on the early stages of co-production, co-design and co-delivery.

## Literature review

Reviewing the literature on co-production, three themes can be drawn out:

- power dynamics within co-production, including the extent to which citizens are representative of their wider population;
- the role of co-production in public services;
- the role of co-production operating under New Public Management and New Public Governance service delivery models.

### *Power dynamics in co-production*

Situating contemporary co-production within a context of neoliberalism, authors question whether co-production gives 'a false impression of citizen power' (Dahl and Soss, 2014: 592). Farr (2017) draws on Archer's (2013) realist social theory to examine the power dynamics within contemporary co-production and co-design processes. Significantly, she notes that both processes tend to work *within* institutions (Farr, 2013). She found that people's experiences of co-production within a health services and local government community-based intervention was positive, but cautioned that structural changes were generally small scale (Donetto et al, 2014). Farr (2017) highlights the need for critical reflective practice and dialogue in order to facilitate more equal relational processes.

After consultation with older people in 33 cities, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified eight domains that encompass an age-friendly city (WHO, 2017):

- outdoor spaces and buildings;
- transportation;
- housing;
- social participation;

- respect and social inclusion;
- civic participation and employment;
- communication and information;
- community and health services.

The extent to which this model of 'global age-friendly cities' has used a 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' approach in development has been examined. [Plouffe et al \(2016\)](#) argue that consultation has been 'bottom-up', and point out that the WHO continues to emphasise that older people should be closely involved in all phases of age-friendly assessment, planning and action. However, others point to a 'top-down' approach. [Lui et al \(2009\)](#) argue that the model primarily involves policy makers and focus groups of older people in assessing environments against established criteria or checklists. Using a predetermined framework may not enable emotional and expressive contributions to be included ([Gibson et al, 2012](#)) and may control what language is used ([Beresford, 2013](#)).

Thinking about the tools for operationalising co-production, developing some form of asset-based mapping exercise is one of the ways used, which initially identifies community needs. An asset-based community development (ABCD) approach is an alternative to a deficit approach, which focuses on problems, needs and deficiencies ([Foot and Hopkins, 2010](#)). ABCD methods involve identifying the resources of both individuals and communities and tend to focus on resources that engender face-to-face social networks and encourage civic participation ([Foot and Hopkins, 2010](#)). Place is another element highlighted as central to the approach ([Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993](#)). Critics argue that asset-based approaches tend to accept structural power imbalances and do not recognise the need to reorganise our societies in order to meet the increasing and changing care needs of older adults ([Daly and Westwood, 2018](#)). They also argue that not everyone benefits or can engage equally ([Daly and Westwood, 2018](#)), which is a challenge to co-production methods more broadly.

Joint ways of working are not equitable if people with a range of life experiences are not involved. The need for community actors to represent their wider communities is imperative when considering the fair redistribution of resources such as lottery money to deprived neighbourhoods ([Matheson and Summerfield, 2000](#)). Community actors are largely middle class ([Faulkner et al, 2015](#)) and more 'articulate and managerially experienced' ([El Enany et al, 2013: 29](#)). This study examines whether the AfA programme genuinely involves a range of older people, and whether the methods lead to widening engagement as the programme progresses, as opposed to providing a platform for the most vocal ([Layard et al, 2013](#)).

Looking at age-friendly initiatives specifically, [Golant \(2014\)](#) suggests targeting initiatives at moderate- to low-income older people, his reasoning being that affluent people can afford to buy the resources they need and the economically disadvantaged are supported by social welfare. While authors ([Golant, 2014; Plouffe et al, 2016](#)) advocate for the development of age-friendly initiatives in disadvantaged areas, one of the problems [Golant](#) identified of working in such areas is a lack of community leadership. He argues that the presence of needy older residents should be the principal criterion for locating these age-friendly responses, and not the presence of resourceful leaders ([Golant, 2014: 12](#)). [Plouffe and Kalache \(2014\)](#) argue, therefore, that leadership development needs to be built into age-friendly activities if positive outcomes are to be sustainable. There is an inherent tension in applying [Golant's \(2014\)](#) approach,

which is needs-led, and using an ABCD approach. This article will examine how AFA interprets the philosophy and tools of co-production.

### *Co-production and public services*

Co-production has been identified as a valuable route to public service reform and as a means by which additional resources can accrue to public service delivery (Nambisan and Nambisan, 2013; Durose and Richardson, 2016; Osborne et al, 2016). In the UK, the consequences of economic decline, coupled with the coalition government's (2010–15) and subsequent Conservative government's (2015–) national programme of cuts to social programmes have had serious implications for communities experiencing disadvantage (Hastings et al, 2012). Citizens are being encouraged, and to some extent required, to take greater responsibility for their own lives and their local communities (Clayton et al, 2015), examples in the UK including the New Deal for Communities Programme (1998–2011), Community Contracts (2008–09) and The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. However, communities facing disadvantage are not necessarily able to respond to such expectations (Featherstone et al, 2012). Critics have expressed concerns about how the focus and scope of 'responsibility' are determined and by whom (Taylor, 2011). The extent to which initiatives around engaging and empowering citizens are driven by a real commitment to devolving power has been challenged (Purdam and Crisp, 2009). For example, Lawless and Pearson (2012) question the extent to which power was actually transferred from the centre to the local level under the New Deal for Communities partnerships. Durose and Lowndes (2010) found only limited support and even evidence of cynicism among senior council officials and elected representatives towards involving citizens in governance. This study focuses on the voluntary sector's role in working with communities to upskill them to recognise and advocate for their needs. But also, it gauges perceptions from voluntary sector organisation (VSO) delivery leads about the reciprocity of relationships, recognition and support from local government.

### *New Public Management, New Public Governance and service delivery*

In the UK, New Public Management (NPM) dominated public service reform from the 1970s. There is growing interest in New Public Governance (NPG) as a reaction against it in the 1990s (Osborne, 2009). Under a NPG framework, Bovaird et al (2017) question whether politicians and service managers are resistant to understanding public services as services, rather than as products, as this would require a shift of focus from controlling costs to recognising that value lies in the intangible, process-driven nature of co-production. Bovaird et al (2017) raise the question as to whether co-production is about service improvement or about leveraging in 'free' resources to public service delivery.

Recent research on VSOs delivering public services for government articulates the tensions involved in maintaining organisational identity while negotiating relationships across sectors and with funders. Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) argue that the third sector has found it difficult creating voluntary and horizontal networks beyond individual organisations. Egdell and Dutton (2017) highlight the threat to VSOs' independence. In a similar vein, Hemmings (2017) suggests that austerity has affected the ability

of VSOs to represent, advocate and lobby to ensure that the voice of disadvantaged people is heard by government. With a shift in emphasis, this study focuses on a VSO developing a programme of work that operates alongside statutory services. This research similarly examines the threat to a voluntary sector operating in a climate of commissioning, which favours short-term gains over long-term learning and sustainability (Osborne and Brown, 2011). It also questions whether, under such an uncertain and responsive way of working, there is the scope for the voluntary sector to develop innovative social models to empower communities (Hemmings, 2017).

### *Research questions*

This study examines an interpretation of co-production using perspectives from both community actors and voluntary sector professionals involved at both a strategic management and local delivery level. It examines the following research questions:

- What are the tensions involved in managing the process to ensure older people are supported in developing projects that involve, and are representative of, their wider population's needs?
- What is the potential for co-production and co-design methods to provide an alternative to statutory and non-statutory service delivery and the role of the voluntary sector in negotiating cross-sector partnerships?

This study makes a distinctive contribution to co-production literature by examining how the process operates at scale, across a number of age-friendly domains, and involving voluntary, public and private services. The different viewpoints presented allow us to examine to what extent the philosophical and ethical rationale behind co-production is borne out through practical implementation and the extent to which power is transferred to community actors.

### *Research context*

Using co-production as an approach is outlined as part of the Big Lottery Fund/National Lottery Community Fund's strategic vision to ensure that outcomes are needs-led, with the aim of effectively tackling disadvantage (Austwick, 2015). AfA is a five-year (2015–19) Greater Manchester-wide programme of work using a co-produced approach to create more age-friendly places. Plouffe and Kalache (2011: 131) note two elements that comprise an age-friendly approach to co-production: '[a]ddressing all domains that constitute an age-friendly community' and 'strengthening intersectoral relationships to access multiple arenas of decision-making'. Both elements may appear so wide that it is difficult to think of any issues or practices in public administration to which they are not relevant. However, both aspects are indicative of the ambitious call for the need to work across domains and across sectors to achieve significant change.

Each of the eight LDLs through which the programme is delivered has a budget of between £650,000 and £750,000 over the five years of the programme. Reflecting the characteristics of co-production, a range of approaches to work with older people is being adopted. For the first phase, however, all LDLs initially identified a group of older people who became 'co-researchers' (Buffel, 2015). The LDLs

trained, facilitated and worked with the co-researchers to conduct some form of ABCD mapping exercise to identify ways of making their neighbourhoods become more age-friendly.

For the second phase, the co-researchers drew on the asset mapping exercise to develop projects alongside more newly recruited older people community actors. LDLs were responsible for funding a series of small investments in each of their neighbourhoods. LDL staff, older people community actors and agencies, charities and organisations worked together to co-design projects. This article will examine the tensions involved and opportunities presented in the early stages of co-commissioning, co-producing and co-designing the programme.

## Methods

Qualitative interviews with older people co-researchers, staff delivering projects and staff involved in the management of the project were felt to be the most appropriate way to gain multiple and shifting perspectives on the co-production process. This article responds to the research questions with data collected through focus group and individual interviews with the following:

- older people from each of the eight LDL areas (community actors);
- two staff representatives from each LDL area;
- a member of the lead VSO delivering the programme (to preserve anonymity, their job title has not been supplied).

In total, the research involved 17 individual interviewees and 53 focus group participants.

### *Community actors*

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with older people participants who were new to the programme at the time of interviews (October 2016 to January 2017). They were already engaged with the AfA programme to some extent within the first year. The aim of the focus groups was to explore from the perspective of community actors the development of the co-production process.

The interview frameworks captured baseline data around participants' experience of the co-production process (see [Table 1](#)).

### *Local delivery lead staff*

The interviews with LDL staff were conducted approximately six months later (June 2017). The aim of the interviews was, first, to provide an opportunity for LDL staff to respond to preliminary findings emerging from the focus groups with community actors, and second, to explore staff perceptions of how their projects were developing.

The interview frameworks for LDL staff captured data around:

- the development of programme aims and approaches;
- the co-production process;
- the different groups being targeted;

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**Table 1: Focus group characteristics of community actors**

LDL	Numbers	Aged	Aged	Aged	Characteristics
		50–64	65–74	75+	
Bolton	9 (8 female, 1 male)	1	5	3	2 black and minority ethnic (BME)
Tameside	6 (6 female)	4	2		
Oldham	4 (2 female, 2 male)		4		
Wigan	10 (7 female, 3 male)	1	3	6	
Rochdale	4 (2 female, 2 male)	1	2	1	2 BME, 1 hearing impaired, 1 sight impaired
Manchester	7 (5 female, 2 male)	6	1		2 BME
Salford	7 (6 female, 1 male)	1	5	1	
Bury	6 (3 female, 3 male)	4	1	1	Included a couple, one of whom was non-verbal after having a stroke and the other who was her carer.

- the different roles of older people within the programme;
- relationships with statutory and non-statutory bodies in relation to the sustainability of projects.

The research received ethical approval from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Manchester. Written and oral consent was obtained from the interviewees.

### Analysis

A constant comparison process of analysis was adopted (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To interpret the data, the research team repeatedly read the interview transcripts, gradually identifying key categories and connections. A systematic method of analysis was adopted, which involved coding the data (Denscome, 2003). At the initial phase of analysis, the categories were subject to a process of refinement. The various categories emerging from the early consideration of the data were checked in the field for their validity against ‘reality’ (Denscome, 2003). Through the process of reflection on the categories, a set of themes and relationships was developed that structures the discussion section.

### Findings

#### *Designing programme aims*

The funding organisation set the national programme’s strategic goal of reducing social isolation. The lead VSO held workshops across all 25 targeted wards in Greater Manchester and invited older people to help design the bid. The lead VSO explained how the programme decided to tackle the range of issues in existence in different

geographical wards: “Through the workshops we found out that there was no pattern across wards, which made us realise how diverse older populations were” (leadVSO).

Community actors directed the programme away from the initial emphasis on reducing social isolation, towards a positive focus on developing age-friendly neighbourhoods:

‘Older people steered us away from designing a particular intervention. We’re not curing disconnection, we are creating conditions where social isolation doesn’t cause harm. It’s the opposite of social prescribing. We’re asking people what form of social connection is important for them, whether it is being able to walk in the park or go to the shops. It’s not “someone’s broken, how can we fix them?”.’ (LeadVSO)

The change in emphasis being driven by community actors reflects a particular understanding of age-friendliness, as driven from below rather than from above. It is quite different from the age-friendly city initiative’s use of assessing environments against established checklists, as often exists in practice (Lui et al, 2009). The clear emphasis on not administering an ‘intervention to fix a problem’ demonstrates an ABCD approach.

### *Implementation*

Once the bid was awarded, workshops were held to generate common understandings of the principles of co-production. Workshops comprised of all relevant stakeholders, and were held in different geographic locations so that participants did not have to travel into the city centre. All participants contributed to discussions around facilitating reciprocal relationships and the challenges involved in recruiting a range of older people. A range of academics and practitioners presented scientific research on people at risk of social isolation, the definition of social isolation, age-friendly cities, cumulative disadvantage and other age-related inequalities. The format of delivery included presentations, break-out activities based around set themes, small-group discussions and whole-group feedback discussions. Because workshops were led by a professional, the process of knowledge exchange was initially asymmetrical. However, during discussions, all stakeholders shared their knowledge and experience of social isolation and the development of age-friendly communities. Evaluation feedback from participants revealed that they valued the peer-to-peer learning and so this element was incorporated to a greater extent in subsequent workshops.

At the end of the first year of implementation, the lead VSO described how the philosophy of co-production is mediated at arm’s length:

‘Where we are is now completely different. Co-production is mediated by the organisations we’re [LDLs] working with so there is a distortion of translation effect. Having gone for the vision and aims, we can end up with something quite traditional like people wanting to go on trips.’ (LeadVSO)

Although co-production involves developing projects proposed by community actors, the leadVSO described how community actors have a range of baseline expectations and lifecourse experiences: “If you ask people what they want, they’ll tell you what



they've had. Staff need the skills set and to ask the right question to find out what problem it is we're addressing" (Lead VSO).

There is a clear need for scaffolded support from GMCVO to ensure projects reach a range of socially isolated people. To develop age-friendly places, community actors need to be representative of the wider communities they serve, to which the article now turns.

### *Working with diverse communities*

To ensure that a diverse range of community actors are involved, the programme directly targets groups more at risk of social isolation. These groups include:

- people from a lower socioeconomic background;
- men;
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people;
- people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups;
- people with a limiting disability;
- people experiencing cognitive decline.

One LDL staff member commented on how there was an inherent contradiction in targeting groups as this suggests a top-down approach to co-production:

'We talk about co-production. And ... we're given a task of focusing on these groups of people that, you know, haven't naturally come forward thus far. But actually, [with] good community development ... you would find those people eventually.... But now there's a real directive there (local delivery).'

GMCVO explained why targeting was necessary. The majority of community actors who were initially recruited were White British from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, with higher education levels, with good physical and mental health. In the first stages of recruiting community actors, co-production can therefore function to amplify social inequalities: "It transfers power but unequally. We have to let the first group in the door and then go beyond that. We have to target. The first group through the door are the problem, not the solution" (lead VSO). GMCVO staff were aware of the risks involved in not managing the process of co-production as it could lead to unrepresentative groups of older people protecting their own interests.

In co-production literature, it is difficult to determine how shifts in thinking or developments in practice are achieved. The examples in the next subsection highlight the processes involved. To ensure projects were developed with, and for, people from BME backgrounds, raising cultural awareness among older people was seen as a crucial aspect of the programme. Staff attributed the conversations they had with community actors as part of the programme as working towards broadening people's experience of working with groups from different ethnicities. The university-led focus group functioned in the same way. In the following example, there was a debate between participants about integration between different ethnicities. The first participant, who is White British, noted: "The council have tried quite hard to get people to integrate where they live, rather than have [for

example a] Pakistani area ... [but] it's almost impossible to engineer" (community actor). Another participant challenged this:

'[P]eople are so ignorant.... They think that Pakistani group or the Asian group is one group, it's not: Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Kashmiri ... [they are different groups].... They don't know about all the stuff that the council does and why a lot of the estates are single cultures ... we need a general education.' (Community actor)

The university responded by holding a workshop looking at issues around BME groups and social isolation. To give an example of shifts in behaviour, six months after the initial interviews, the first participant cited above had joined a table of Pakistani men at a recent social event and was developing a project proposal involving participants from BME backgrounds. She had also challenged White British groups bidding for investments for small projects who perceived minority ethnic groups to be getting an unfair proportion of projects funded.

In one LDL ward, staff were aware that they were not engaging with participants from the Nigerian community. In response, community actors conducted research around local neighbourhood perceptions. The LDL staff felt that this information helped to educate local populations, alleviate their fear and challenge their prejudices.

In the case of non-native speakers, language as intersected with other cumulative disadvantages may have been a longstanding barrier to communicating and advocating for needs. As an inability to communicate using English was seen to be preventing social participation in the community, four LDLs developed projects connected to developing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) through community groups, as opposed to formal educational institutions: "It's older Pakistani women who want to go shopping.... It's a very practical way of getting that shopping and learning the words in English ... they wanted to learn English but they were dead sure about not wanting ... classes" (LDL). LDL staff and community actors co-designed models of learning to the specific interests of community actors, instead of affording value to formal modes of learning.

In two LDL areas, older people from BME groups were perceived by staff as having less agency as compared with White British groups. In two additional LDL areas, staff described how project proposals had not come from any BME groups, despite extensive meetings with community groups. In the following quotation, the LDL lead described Bangladeshi and Pakistani involvement from one ward:

'They will suggest the same thing that they've had previously, whereby services have put in short-term projects on healthy eating.... So, the approach we like to take with them is, develop their understanding of community, develop their understanding of how they can take part in making change.' (LDL)

GMCVO staff noted that different cultural norms were at odds with project aims. In support of this view, one LDL staff member noted that Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups were reluctant to take charitable money out of pride. GMCVO recognised the need for continually adapting strategies to engage with BME participants, for

example it may be that the existing gatekeepers were not ‘credible’ with different ethnic groups. It was also expressed as critical not to make presumptions and value judgements about all groups wanting the same type of project.

### *Devolved spending decisions*

One of the key indications of equal partnerships was the fact that community actors were involved in making spending decisions, which is of significance in itself as an indicator of co-production (Clarke et al, 2017). LDL staff worked with groups of older people, charities and organisations to develop projects that fulfilled programme criteria. Spending decisions were made by a panel comprised of older people, with LDL staff overseeing the procedure to ensure that no one dominated discussions, that proposals were allocated equal time in discussion and that the voting procedure was regulated.

A range of projects was co-designed by older people, agencies and charities and then funded. Projects ranged in terms of aims and scope. They included:

- sustained social participatory programmes (46), for example cooking, LGBT or men’s groups – of these, specific themes included fitness programmes (15), gardening (13), craft groups (11), cultural programmes such as cinema groups (6) and woodwork (1);
- educational programmes, whether non-formal or formal learning – IT literacy projects (8), ESOL groups (4) and return-to-work programmes (1);
- projects for people with dementia or their carers – craft groups, support groups for carers or sensory gardens for people with dementia (10)
- research activities (4);
- purchasing of equipment such as iPads (32);
- providing transport (4);
- improving facilities/buildings, for example, making a kerb wheelchair accessible or installing a new boiler in a church hall (13).

The range of the 122 projects funded, from social participatory activities to projects adapting the built environment, shows the multiple age-friendly domains encompassed.

The project also supported fixing small-scale or short-range problem situations. LDL staff felt the fact that the project supported ‘quick wins’ made a significant difference to community groups, citing the example of replacing a drinking water boiler for a social group who wanted to meet in the church hall. Providing groups with a place to meet removed an important barrier and was therefore viewed as facilitating significant change.

Community actors were asked about their experience of co-production. Focus group participants noted how the democratic process behind making collective decisions had initially seemed excessive. However, now their project was running, they felt it had been an effective process: “We’ve experienced complete involvement.... We had four meetings about designing each little aspect and I was thinking this is democracy over the top, just get on with it. But, now we’re up and running, I think it’s quite a good way of doing it” (community actor). Another community actor acknowledged how much support LDL staff had provided and the substantial nature of the financial investments: “Nothing’s too much trouble for staff to explain anything,

which is really good because not everybody can grasp [what] they want” (community actor). It is significant that the community actor noted different levels of experience among community actors, suggesting a level of diversity. Significantly, the community actor endorsed the scaffolded support provided by staff.

### *Navigating partnerships with the public and private sectors while retaining VSO identity*

This subsection examines the nature of the different cross-sectoral partnerships that were under development, namely with health and social care professionals and private sector food retailers. Establishing relationships is a necessary stage before organisations can co-produce projects. While aiming to develop relationships across different sectors, the VSO is clear on the programme’s role not being to replace public or private sector service delivery: “We don’t have relationships with organisations but with people. We’re not aiming to scale up projects so that they become services. Instead, where flexibility exists within the private sector, we can exploit it” (lead VSO). This approach marks a resistance to NPM service structures, specifically articulating the process of co-production as being built around people. Here, the aim is to change asymmetrical power relationships whereby VSOs would be expected to provide services for more powerful health and social care and private sector commissioners. The idea of ‘exploiting’ flexibility, which carries with it connotations of making use of a situation in a way considered unfair or underhand, reflects how radical, or even rebellious, the speaker feels this stance could be viewed in the current political climate. The risks involved in taking over public service responsibilities were articulated further:

‘We don’t want to turn the voluntary sector into a public service. The risk is wearing the clothes of a community institution whilst delivering a public service. In those cases the voluntary organisation is reflecting back to the funder what they do and how much it costs. But what is their purpose beyond the delivery of a contract? What is needed is a community organisation which self-sustains – a voluntary sector organisation being accountable to the community.’ (Lead VSO)

Here we see a strong voluntary sector organisational identity based on a longer-term vision for the sector, as opposed to a more reactive contract-to-contract existence.

To give examples of cross-sectoral partnerships in development, those with private sector food retailers were proving fruitful. Community actors from two LDL areas were working with supermarkets to research the development of a more age-friendly shopping experience. This included consulting with older people and sending volunteer ‘secret shoppers’. Training for store staff was then delivered. This is an example of user-centred and participatory design techniques begin employed to develop more person-centred public services (Farr, 2017) – although in this case this is a context-specific, user-led project changing private sector customer services practice.

Most LDLs had actively pursued working with the health and social care sector. Staff described developing good professional relationships with key individuals, but felt that staff churn would make lasting change unlikely. One LDL had been working

to develop a relationship with health professionals at a strategic Greater Manchester level. They had been sharing their findings with a GP federation over the course of a series of meetings and LDL staff noted that GPs were beginning to accept qualitative evidence AfA had gathered. The LDL's evidence revealed that although there were relevant health and wellbeing services in the area, the issue was that older people were not aware of them. As a result of these discussions, the LDL was working with a health and wellbeing service to advertise and facilitate engagement with existing groups and programmes in the area.

In terms of strengthening intersectoral relationships to access multiple areas of decision making (Plouffe and Kalache, 2011), two projects had been match-funded by the council in one LDL. For the first, the LDL invested in a machine to enable people with multiple sclerosis to improve their mobility. The council, on seeing the benefits for users, provided another similar machine. For the second, the LDL invested in a community garden and the council then gave money for a polytunnel. In terms of professional relationships, one LDL felt that although they promoted the successes of the programme to the council, they were uncertain how reciprocal the relationship was:

LDL: 'We've rubbed off on them.... They used to have the very standard procedure, for applying for funding, where you go online, you fill in an application form. I've made it completely clear that we offer support so that it's accessible for everybody ... and now they offer that support.'

I: 'Do you feel that it's more that you're influencing them with good practice?'

LDL staff member ... I think, at the moment ... it's pretty much one way.... But having said that, we've developed this relationship with the [X] team.... But then again, it's not as a corporate body ... it's with individuals.'

The comments in this subsection reflect the importance that voluntary sector staff place on developing relationships with individuals from statutory and non-statutory bodies who see a strength in their proposals, as opposed to providing a service that conforms to external organisational requirements. This requires adaptation on behalf of statutory services, which the discussion over the value of qualitative evidence demonstrates is a negotiated process that takes time.

## Discussion

The age-friendly interpretation of co-production involved a combination of bottom-up and top-down project development with community actors. The data reveal that the project was more top-down and professional-led than bottom-up and community-led, so there is a question as to whether the practices studied in the research can be labelled co-production. Here, 'joint production' with citizens falls under the labels of co-commissioning, co-construction, co-design, co-delivery and co-management (Bovaird et al, 2017). This article makes an important contribution to the debate on the appropriate conceptual framework within which to understand co-production by revealing how the approach is interpreted at scale by a VSO-led programme of work.

Crucially, it was designing the aims of the programme with community actors that steered the programme's move away from the funder's initial emphasis. It was also at this stage in the co-production process that the programme took the strategic decision not to focus on a smaller specific subgroup of older people with particular characteristics. This differs from [Golant's \(2014\)](#) call for focusing age-friendly initiatives on those with a moderate income.

The strength of the co-produced approach discussed in this article is that older populations at risk of social isolation, which correlate with other social inequalities around ethnicity, race, faith, gender, sexuality, sexual identity and disability, were targeted. This systematic targeting marks a shift from community development work that focuses on social class ([Taylor, 2011](#)), and area-based policies that have been argued to result in systematic exclusion according to the protected characteristics ([Tilly, 1999](#)). The asset-based mapping exercise, which can emphasise place, had to be complemented by active management by the lead VSO to ensure more people could engage with the AfA programme and benefit more equally ([Daly and Westwood, 2018](#)). Although a contradiction in targeting groups was identified by one LDL, timeframes and budgets operating under contemporary NPG frameworks do not allow for groups to organically emerge. Although arguably top-down, the process had to be managed to ensure community actors became more representative of their constituent populations.

The project was led and managed with the aim of changing power relationships ([Rothman and Tropman, 1993](#); [Cooke and Kothari, 2001](#)). To add another dimension to [Rothman and Tropman's \(1993\)](#) observation that community development work focused on changing power relationships rather than tinkering with small-scale problem situations, here staff felt that a transfer of power to community actors was sometimes achieved by fixing small-scale problem situations. At the time of the interviews, it was too early to say whether structural changes would be achieved through using a co-produced approach ([Donetto et al, 2014](#)).

The process of community empowerment tended still to work *within* institutions ([Farr, 2013](#)). Community actors were assimilating professional managerial language and bureaucratic practices. They were upskilled in project commissioning, development and management. More research is needed on how to value and draw from the skills and knowledge of community actors. Particular attention should be paid to what language is used ([Beresford, 2013](#); [Morrison and Dearden, 2013](#)) and how to include emotional and expressive contributions ([Barnes, 2008](#); [Gibson et al, 2012](#)). However, in the case of developing projects to help non-native speakers develop language skills, staff had considered carefully how different deliberative styles include and exclude different participants ([Donetto et al, 2014](#)).

Expectations about the time it takes to transfer power to community actors have to be realistic. Older people taking part in the programme may have had limited experience of civic engagement or opportunities to exercise agency throughout their lifecourse. The lead VSO recognised that varying rates and levels of development across LDL areas were to be expected.

Joint working transferred power to community actors from the offset through the control they had over budget decisions ([Clarke et al, 2017](#)). The need for opportunities to be provided to build capacity to engage in co-production, co-commissioning and co-design processes is clear, as making spending decisions was not easy for the community actors. Cultural norms being at odds with project

aims in the example of some groups being reluctant to take charitable money out of pride, presents a particular challenge in terms of inclusion, efficacy and social justice.

Findings presented here demonstrate how conflict is managed (Carr, 2007), and in this particular context, how prejudice towards minority ethnicities is challenged. There were three main ways in which changes in knowledge, understanding, behaviour and practice were achieved. First, staff-to-peer conversations, and the university-led focus groups, which facilitated peer-to-peer conversations, not only promoted greater cultural awareness, but also challenged cultural stereotyping. Such conversations required staff and community actors to challenge prejudice. These conversations should be formalised as part of the co-production process. It is imperative that professional staff are suitably equipped to facilitate potentially difficult conversations, which is of relevance to workforce development training. The role of a research organisation acting as a critical friend can serve to probe particular issues through focus group discussions and collective conversations. The potential for everyday conversations to lead to behaviour change should not be underestimated (Billig, 1991).

Second, the project-wide co-production workshops were found particularly useful for LDL staff due to the opportunities provided for peer-to-peer learning across the programme. Researchers communicating scientific research helped professionals to engage in dialogues 'outside their traditional terrains' (Gibson et al, 2012: 542). LDL staff were able to bring their applied experiences to contradict or support academic research, which co-produced understandings and strategies to develop age-friendly places.

Third, research carried out by the community actors reduced prejudice targeted towards different minority ethnicities. Using the lived experience of community actors initially involved in the project is not sufficient in informing the development of projects that make areas age-friendly for a wide range of older people. Community actors needed to learn more about the different populations living in their wards. Community actors conducting and disseminating research focused around local contexts was an effective way of giving legitimacy to findings.

The joint activities reinforced each other and produced the synergy that is key to co-production. The process was constituted by joint contributions from both citizens and staff. It is important to note that the examples given in some cases constitute solitary instances, but nevertheless mark a substantial achievement, and have the potential to become a regularised set of practices.

Projects were funded across a range of interconnecting domains, with the majority of projects involving some form of regular and facilitated social participation. It is unlikely that smaller VSOs would have the opportunity, influence or budgets to work across diverse areas such as transport and housing.

The programme's flexible approach provided LDLs with the freedom to take an exploratory approach in developing partnerships with both private sector supermarkets and public sector health and social care providers. The lead VSO is clear on being accountable to the communities they are working with. This will involve co-assessment by the lead VSO and communities of the work of the VSO and, by implication, of the workings of the AfA programme. LDLs are able to resist developing services due to GMCVO promoting a strong organisational identity, which has a clearly delineated role for the voluntary sector. Rather than marking a top-down style of management, GMCVO supports LDLs in their negotiation across sectors in order to ensure that

the integrity of the programme's ethos is borne out in practice. A limitation of the study is that at the time of the interviews, it was too early to comment on whether the project will be able to create horizontal networks beyond individual organisations (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). The programme aims to have a sustainable legacy, but it is not through scaling up and mainstreaming projects so that they can be replicated in other contexts.

## Implications for policy and practice

It was designing the aims of the programme with community actors that steered the programme's move away from the funder's initial emphasis. This example emphasises the shift in power relations needed if co-production is to be taken seriously at a funding, and therefore strategic, level.

An essential consideration on the part of commissioners and professional staff engaged at both a strategic management and local level involves ensuring community actors represent a diverse set of social locations. Aiming to improve living experiences for a wide range of older people runs the risk of being too ambitious in scope, and is certainly not replicable for smaller VSOs.

There are three main changes in knowledge, understanding, behaviour and practice that are recommended:

- staff-to-peer and university-led peer-to-peer focus group conversations around cultural awareness;
- peer-to-peer learning through project-wide workshops;
- community actor-led research around issues of specific relevance to local contexts.

In terms of staff-to-staff peer learning, sharing detailed examples of good practice is recommended. To make such forums for knowledge exchange useful and to ensure critical reflective practice, this article argues that it is important to create a space where constructive criticism is welcomed, and conflict is raised and addressed. This is opposed to encouraging a forum for advocacy where positive outcomes are overstated. When looking at establishing collective understandings of co-production in such forums, there is more work to be done on how to validate both lived experiences and theoretical knowledge more equally from the offset.

It is difficult to envisage how policy operating under a NPG framework across the following areas – Health and Social Care; Housing, Communities and Local Government; Work and Pensions; Transport; and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – could design for such flexibility and an iterative approach to project development. The time the joint-working process takes is not to be underestimated, demonstrating why co-production is not easily translated into current public service delivery models.

The Afa's flexible approach to delivery was dependent on the lead organisation's productive dialogue with its funder. Smaller voluntary organisations forced to be more responsive under current economic and political climate may not have this ability, supporting Egdell and Dutton's (2017) and Hemmings' (2017) arguments. Data from the lead VSO indicates that attempting to fill public service delivery gaps would threaten organisational autonomy and working with communities in a meaningful way.



## Conclusion

This article makes a contribution to the debate on the appropriate conceptual framework within which to understand co-production in practice. In this particular project, co-commissioning, co-design and co-delivery are all interpreted as elements of co-production. Forms of co-production and co-design that are largely top-down still facilitate an important move towards a shift in community actors' empowerment. Active professional steer is necessary to ensure that a wider range of older people from different social locations are involved and upskilled to co-design programmes of work that respond to the needs and interests of wider populations. While there is an inherent tension involved in using an ABCD approach, yet also targeting communities experiencing disadvantage, a pragmatic stance has to be taken when programmes of work are operating under NPG timeframes. Practices of staff-to-peer and university-led peer-to-peer conversations, community actor-led research and workshops developing principles of joint working all reinforce each other in developing greater cultural awareness and challenging prejudice towards minority ethnicities. Developing knowledge and understanding and changing behaviours over such issues marks a significant achievement and leads to more inclusive programmes of work.

Second, the data demonstrate clear potential for co-produced methods to provide an alternative to statutory and non-statutory service delivery. However, if cross-sector programmes of work are to be accountable to communities, this is dependent on a reciprocal relationship between the VSO and the funding body. It is important that lead VSOs delivering ambitious projects are confident in articulating the danger of VSOs filling public service delivery gaps. Leadership on behalf of the sector can serve to support smaller VSOs that do not have the autonomy or influence under the current economic and political climate.

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## Note

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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