Positioning Peer Research in a Policy Context

Institute for
Community Studies

Powered by The Young Foundation

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About the Institute for Community Studies:

The Institute for Community Studies is a new kind of research institute, with people and communities at its heart. We believe that involvement of communities leads to better decision making on the issues that most affect them. We engage with communities and experts across the UK to identify and prioritise what matters to communities, directing research towards the most urgent and salient questions and amplifying community perspectives. We seek to improve the evidence base of what's working and increase the legitimacy of lived experience as a form of evidence. We work with policy makers, business and those holding the power to change the experience of communities today.

About The Young Foundation:

The Young Foundation's mission is to develop better connected and stronger communities across the UK. We research in and with communities to increase your understanding of community life today. We offer different methods and approaches to involve communities and grow their capacity to own and lead change. We provide tools and resources to support innovation to tackle the issues people and communities care about. We're a UKRI accredited research organisation, social investor and community practitioner.

Interested in finding out more about peer research? Drop the team a note at **peerresearch@youngfoundation.org**

Authors:

Caroline Yang and Zoe Dibb

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Foreword

Over the last decade we have seen an increasing shift towards evidence-based policy and practice in government, commissioners, social investors and philanthropic funders. What counts as evidence and measuring the social impact of different interventions and policies has been a continued work in progress over a similar period. Historically, the experiences and perspectives of people who are directly affected by complex social challenges (or the interventions designed to alleviate them), are far less well evidenced and not routinely sought in a useful or meaningful way.

That is now changing, and it is clear that peer research is increasingly being seen as an impactful route to better understanding the needs and experiences of certain groups and communities. And there is a growing body of evidence which points to considerable advantages using peer research to generate better and more relevant insights and data to inform policy and decision making.

Peer Research in a Policy Context sets out a large range of examples where peer research has influenced positive policy outcomes. It also raises concerns that there are many gaps in good models and practice, and a potentially damaging trend for practitioners to 'make it up as they go along'.

With ever growing demands for people and communities to be listened to, and to have influence over the issues which affect them, it is critical that peer research and other forms of citizen engaging research practice is robust and of a high quality if it is to be seen as legitimate. That is why the Institute for Community Studies and The Young Foundation are committed to expanding our peer research network; creating the space for sharing resources, evidence, and accreditation which supports improvement in the quality of peer research and other forms of community and citizen engagement, alongside its growing national network of trained peer researchers.

Peer Research in a Policy Context forms a companion piece for Peer Research in UK, a desk review of 50 peer research projects conducted across the UK in the last five years, revealing further opportunities to harmonise and improve standards for peer research.

Helen Goulden
CEO, The Young Foundation

Introduction

Using lived experience to inform policymaking and provision

In recent years there has been a growing interest in involving citizens and communities in the creation of public policy and the design and delivery of public services. Local governments and service providers have begun to recognise community members as experts in their own right, equipped with valuable lived experience and an inside understanding of how their communities work and what their communities need. As 'experts by experience,' community members can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of the policies and services that impact their lives

There are a wide range of methods for bringing the lived experience of communities to bear on policymaking and service design processes. This report will focus on two approaches: **peer research** and **co-production through citizen engagement**. The report reviews the available evidence on the usability and value of these approaches in the principal areas of youth and urban policy through a number of case studies and explores the opportunities and challenges for lived experience as a form of data in policymaking and service design more generally. The report draws on existing literature, as well as a series of original interviews with policy makers and academics engaged in the use of lived experience data.

Contributors

In order to situate this report in practical examples and recommendations, we conducted phone interviews with 15 stakeholders who kindly contributed their experiences, thoughts and opinions about lived experience and peer research. The findings from the interviews are included throughout this report.

List of contributors

- **Dave Borland** Interim Assistant Director of Performance, Strategy and Commissioning, Royal Borough of Greenwich

- **Jane Brueseke** Youth Engagement Manager, Waltham Council

- **Melissa Butcher** Professor of Social and Cultural Geography, Birkbeck, University of London

- **Daniela Cabral** Connecting Communities ESOL SPOC Research Officer, London Borough of Waltham Forest

- **Ursula Hankinson** Head of Impact, West London Zone

- **Meerat Kaur** Interim Deputy Theme Lead Engagement and Involvement Team, Imperial College London / NIHR

- **Will Kendall** PhD candidate / Societal Engagement Officer, Imperial College London / London School of Economics

- **Gemma Moore** Senior Researcher, University College London Institute for Environmental Design and Engineering

- **Siobhan Morris** Coordinator, Grand Challenge of Justice and Equality at University College London

- **Catherine Needham** Professor of Public Policy and Public Management, University of Birmingham

- **Kathryn Oliver** Associate Professor of Sociology and Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

- **Joanna Sawkins** PhD Candidate at GLA, University College London / GLA

- **Ellen Halstead** Director of Strategy, Peabody

- **Olivia Stevenson** Head of Public Policy, University College London

- **Rae Whittow-Williams** Principal Project Officer, Greater London Area Regeneration and Economic Development

Peer research

What is peer research?

Peer research is a participatory research method in which people with lived experience of the issues being studied take part in directing and conducting the research.

A project using peer research might recruit and train young people from a particular neighbourhood to explore the perspectives of their peers - other young people who live in the area - through interviews, surveys, focus groups or more creative research methods. In this example the researchers and their peers are connected through their experience of a particular place. Another project might connect researchers and their peers due to a shared experience, for instance young people who have left the care system. As such, peer researchers (also referred to as 'community researchers') bring their lived experience as members of a social or geographical community to the research process.

The approach aims to move away from the 'extractive' model of social research in which professional researchers produce knowledge 'about' a particular community and toward a model where research is conducted 'by and for' the community in question. In peer research, communities are intended to be equal partners in the research process. Peer research represents a way of doing research that is inclusive, democratic and participatory. It challenges traditional approaches to knowledge production that can leave communities feeling excluded, exploited and unheard.

Peer researchers may be involved in many different parts of the research process including assisting with research design, developing research tools, collecting and analysing data or writing up and disseminating findings. In the majority of cases, peer researchers have been engaged by 'professional' researchers to carry out specific stages of the planned research—such as refining a questionnaire, recruiting participants and conducting interviews. Some projects involve peer researchers as leaders in all aspects of the research from design and data collection through to analysis, write-up and dissemination of the findings.

Peer research is sometimes referred to as **user research** when it is conducted together with the users of a specific service to evaluate that service. It may also be classified as a form of **co-produced** or **participatory research.** Both terms refer broadly to approaches that involve community members in the research process, and both are appropriate ways to describe peer research.

Peer research often sits alongside other **participatory action research methods**, which are characterised by a commitment to moving away from 'extractive' forms of inquiry and instead focus on empowering participants and promoting social change.

What are the benefits of peer research?

There are a number of known benefits that can come from peer research. These include:

Empowerment of participants

Peer research is premised on a commitment to conducting research 'with and for' the subjects of the research. It gives communities the chance to speak for themselves instead of having academic intermediaries speaking on their behalf.

> *Young people should be seen as valid stakeholders with valid concerns and requests that should be acted on.*
> **(Rae Whittow-Williams)**

Access to 'less heard' voices

Because peer researchers are drawn from the community being studied, they often have privileged access to people who might be unwilling to engage with 'professional' researchers. They can use their existing networks and relationships of trust to involve subjects that may not otherwise have been included in the research.

> *Part of the peer research spec is to build networks in each of the four [local] areas, contacting or having ability to contact people we don't normally speak to...we want to hear from different people.* **(Ellen Halstead)**

The added value of experimental expertise

Peer researchers bring with them the advantage of their own lived experience. Their experiential knowledge and inside understanding of the issues being studied can enhance the richness and nuance of the inquiry, and can help ensure that the research is relevant to the community involved.

> *There are a lot of limitations to a lot of policy research methods - they can't reach all constituents. The shift towards participatory research is part of this thirst for expert knowledge and rethinking of what an 'expert' is.* **(Joanna Sawkins)**

Activated communities

Participatory approaches critique and challenge academic research as the only legitimate way of knowing and strive towards "the radical transformation of social reality and improvement in the lives of the individuals involved"[1]. Participatory approaches create activated, self-critical communities invested in their own wellbeing and awaken those who participate to their own potential.

> *We wouldn't engage with peer research if it resulted in good quality data but didn't benefit residents in some way. The 'social impact' of training residents as peer researchers can convince those who wouldn't necessarily buy into this type of data collection of its value.* **(Ellen Halstead)**

Benefits to peer researchers

Peer researchers may benefit from engaging in valuable work experience and training that may increase their employability in the future. A substantial body of evidence indicates that people gain confidence and self-esteem by participating in peer research and finding that they add significant value to the process. It may also promote social inclusion among groups who often experience exclusion and marginalisation.

[1] **MacDonald, 2012**

Gathering better data

When those conducting research have experience in common with the people they are interviewing, it reduces the risk of misunderstanding between researcher and subject. Participants may respond more honestly and openly to an interviewer they know has personal experience of the issue being discussed, or with whom they are already familiar and feel they can speak more informally. This can lead to the collection of higher quality, authentic data with more depth and nuance.

What are the challenges faced by peer research?

Despite evidence of many benefits, there are inevitably challenges to setting up a peer research project as well as recruiting, training and working alongside peer researchers. These include:

Data quality

While assessing the quality of data is always a challenge, with peer research the issue is particularly pronounced, given the involvement of non-academic researchers. Those wishing to engage in peer research must be willing to confront concerns about the quality of their data and make the case for the value of their findings.

You need to be honest about the limitations of the data. It's a different kind of data and this needs to be made clear. (Melissa Butcher)

Credibility

Questions surrounding the quality of peer research data feed into the issue of general credibility. Making the case for participatory research of all kinds "calls for considerable courage and willingness to swim against the current"[2]. Peer research demands a rethinking of conventional ways of knowing and challenges us to confront uncomfortable truths about whose perspective counts when it comes to influencing policy. It may be difficult to persuade policy makers or service providers who are unfamiliar with the methodology that researchers who lack formal academic training should be seen as credible sources of knowledge.

I want to create more inclusive knowledge. My colleagues are motivated by the need to get to professorship through funding and high impact journals…

[2] Bergold and Thomas, 2012

Resources

Peer research is an incredibly resource-intensive undertaking, requiring a significant contribution of time, effort and expertise on behalf of the research team. Those wishing to engage in peer research must ensure they have the financial resources to fund the recruitment, training, support and remuneration of peer researchers throughout the course of the research. The level of resourcing required to run a peer research project means peer research is not an appropriate way to approach all research questions.

This kind of research is quite expensive, which is an issue for cash-starved local councils. The process takes time and you need to invest in it. You need to have the proper mentoring and support in place. (Melissa Butcher)

Issues of power

While it has been argued that involving community members in research may reduce the kinds of power imbalances embedded in more traditional research approaches, power dynamics within the research team will inevitably persist. It is important to keep in mind that "there can be a fine line between involving and empowering community members as peer researchers and exploiting their labour and expertise"[3]. Those wishing to engage in peer research must be honest and transparent in addressing how decision-making will be shared with community researchers; how power dynamics within the research team will be identified and mitigated; and how projects will avoid reproducing the structural power inequalities they aim to address. Practitioners we spoke to repeatedly stressed the importance of involving participants in as wide a range of research activities as possible to build a genuine sense of ownership over the work.

Gaps in best practice knowledge

In general, there is a lack of clear models for how to do peer research and "it is not uncommon for practitioners to 'make it up as they go' in the absence of formal guidelines"[4]. The gaps in the best practice knowledge are significant. A peer research approach demands specialised strategies oriented around the inclusion of non-academic researchers in the research process. These strategies must take into account and formulate ways of working through and around the colliding perspectives of those involved—academics, policy makers, funders, service providers and community researchers. Best practice guidelines are needed to help ensure that research practices are ethical and inclusive and will ultimately lead to better data.

Misaligned agendas

Peer research requires the collaboration of communities, academics, funders, local authorities, community-based organisations and other stakeholders. Often, this level of collaboration results in a misalignment of agendas and conflicting interests that make this kind of research difficult. Successful collaboration requires an ability and a willingness to acknowledge and work through conflicting agendas where they exist with openness and transparency.

The challenge is oftentimes about having very different agendas. Academic researchers want to do research that is generalisable, that is publishable, with findings that can be extracted. Whereas people who get involved in research who are non-academics participate because they want to make their lives better.
(Kathryn Oliver)

[3] Edwards & Alexander, 2011, [4] Roche et al., 2010

Peer research with policy impact: Transforming the lives of young people

Peer research has become particularly prevalent in the area of youth policy alongside a growing demand for approaches that promote young people's voices around issues that affect them.

Peer research with young people is based on the principle that young people are capable of producing valuable knowledge about their own lives, not just as subjects, but as active participants in the research process. One of the benefits of working with young researchers is that they are more likely than their adult counterparts to share a language and common experience with young study participants. This could help reduce the risk of misunderstanding during data collection and analysis and ensure that the research remains relevant to the needs of young people. Participating in peer research may also give young people the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in influencing the policies and services that shape their lives and communities. Young people conducting peer research gain useful work experience, hone a range of skills and build confidence and self-esteem. However, these benefits must be considered together with the issues of power likely to arise in the dynamic between adults and young people involved in the research and the amount of time and resource that must be expended to train and guide young people through the research process.

In the following section, we will examine several case studies in which a peer research approach was used to investigate and inform social policy aimed at improving the lives of young people. We will summarise the available information on best practice and information gathered via key informant interviews, as well as consider future directions for the use of peer research with young people.

Case Study 1:
Staying Put 18+ Family Placement Program Evaluation

The Staying Put 18+ Family Placement Program[5] was a pilot program launched in 2007 in 11 local authorities across the UK. The program offered young people in foster care the opportunity to remain in care until the age of 21 and to take advantage of additional support services so that they could transition into independence at the pace that was right for them. The 2012 evaluation of the program commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families used a peer research approach to investigate care leavers' experiences of transitioning out of care under the Staying Put pilot program. The evaluation was led by researchers at Loughborough University's Center for Child and Family Research (CCFR) and Catch 22's National Care Advisory Service (NCAS).

As part of the evaluation, 12 care-experienced young people from six local authorities were recruited and trained and took part in every stage of the research process. They participated in formulating the research questions, designing the research tools, conducting interviews, analysing the data and disseminating the research findings. The evaluation revealed that for the majority of young people being able to remain in care past the age of 18 and take advantage of the support offered through the Staying Put program led to a more stable and successful transition into independence.

Policy impact

The positive peer evaluation of Staying Put led to the program being put on statutory footing, meaning that local authorities are now required to support, advise and assist children in care to remain with their carers beyond age 18. These changes were put in place after a campaign led by the Fostering Network and drew on the Staying Put evaluation, among other evidence, to lobby for reform of the policies around leaving care.

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[5] NCAS, 2012

Case Study 2: You Only Leave Once (YOLO)

The YOLO study was launched in 2013 with the aim of investigating the experiences of young people with mental health issues and/or intellectual disabilities who were leaving care. The project was led by researchers at Queens Belfast University and was conducted in partnership with the organisation Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) which provided support throughout the project.

Four young people with experience of care settings, intellectual disabilities and mental health issues participated as peer researchers in the study. Peer

researchers were involved in every aspect of the study. They helped design the interview schedules, conducted 131 interviews over an 18-month period with 31 care leavers, helped analyse the data and assisted in writing up and presenting the findings.

The peer research culminated in a series of case studies that illustrated participants' experiences of transitioning out of care. These case studies were incorporated as part of a larger report that also included quantitative and qualitative pieces of research conducted by professional researchers[6].

Policy impact

The larger report,[7] of which the YOLO study made up a substantial part, comprised a comprehensive evaluation of the services and support currently on offer for young care leavers with mental health and/or intellectual disabilities. Incorporated throughout the report are a number of specific policy and service improvement recommendations touching on areas such as preparation for leaving care, ongoing support, accommodation options, mental health, disability and youth justice services and many more. The report urges policy makers, commissioners and service providers to implement the study's recommendations in order to ensure they are meeting the needs of all care leavers.

Case Study 3: A City Within a City

In 2017 the Young Westminster Foundation (YWF) launched A City Within a City, a peer research project that aimed to investigate the needs and experiences of young people (aged 8-25) living in Westminster.[8] The needs analysis touched on a wide range of issues including economic disparity, mental and physical health and wellbeing, cuts to youth services, education, accommodation, safety, drug and alcohol use, environment and employment. The project recruited 17 young people from the area to participate as peer

researchers. They participated in co-designing a survey and administering it to 234 young people living in Westminster. Peer researchers supplemented the survey by conducting 7 face to face interviews and holding 6 consultation events with young Westminster residents. The report concludes by establishing a number of priorities for youth service provision in the area, as well as recommendations for how YWF can play a role in targeting those priorities through increased and improved youth service provision.

Policy impact

In addition to helping YWF set its policy priorities by creating a set of actionable recommendations, the research was taken up as evidence in a report authored by the Westminster City Council which addressed the issue of knife crime among young people in the area.[9] It cites the peer research report in highlighting the many challenges facing young people in Westminster including economic inequality, overcrowded housing, peer pressure to engage in gang activity, easy access to drugs and alcohol and lack of safe youth spaces. The Westminster City Council report also cites as a reference the Westminster Annual Public Health Report, which draws heavily upon the AYPH/WWM-led peer research project discussed in Case Study 4.

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[6] **Kelly et al., 2016,** [7] **https://research.hscni.net/sites/default/files/YOLO%20Final%20Report.pdf,** [8] **http://www.ywfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/YWF-Needs_Analysis_Report.pdf,** [9] **https://www.byc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/BYC016-Westminster-City-Council.pdf,**

Case Study 4: Youth led research into the lives of young people in Kensington and Chelsea

In 2018 the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in partnership with Working With Men (WWM) and the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) commissioned a peer-led needs analysis of young people in the borough which also investigated young people's views on the borough's existing services and how they might be improved[10].

The project recruited 16 young people from the area between the ages of 16 and 20. The young people were trained as peer researchers and participated in data collection by carrying out interviews and administering surveys with 152 of their peers. In addition, peer researchers participated in analysing the findings and shaping the final report.

Based on the findings, peer researchers and partners at AYPH and WWM produced a set of recommendations for how the borough could improve their provision of services and support for young people. They recommended, for example, increasing the provision of support around mental health, improving outreach to young people who are not yet engaged in support and creating safe spaces for young people in the borough to gather.

Policy impact

The peer research fed into the Annual Public Health Report for Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster 2017-2018,[11] which set out a number of policy priorities addressing the health and wellbeing of young people in the area. In addition, the report made up part of an extensive review of youth services commissioned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) as part of an effort to improve youth services across the borough.[12] The peer research, along with findings from a related engagement project targeting parents, young people, community groups and service providers in the borough was used to inform the co-design of youth services with young people from the area in a number of workshops and engagement events. Based on the findings presented in the peer research report, RBKC engaged young people and other stakeholders in the area in the process of co-designing proposals for future youth service design and delivery. This co-design process is discussed more fully in Case Study 5.

[10] Hagell & Rigby, 2018, [11] https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/westminster-annual_public_health_report_17-18.pdf
[12] https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Youth%20Review%20Engagement%20Findings%20Report.pdf

Lessons in best practice for peer research

The case studies discussed above, as well as learning from stakeholder interviews, provide a number of important lessons in best practice when conducting peer research with young people.

Recruitment

Recruitment takes time and should be well thought through
The Staying Put project leads stressed the importance of selecting young people with the necessary skills and capacity to contribute productively as peer researchers. They advise: "Poor recruitment and selection denies participants optimum conditions to tell their story"[13]. Projects should be specific about what kinds of skills or abilities peer researchers will need to participate successfully in the work.

Recruitment through referral works well
Recruiting by referral through networks of people and organisations who have existing relationships with young people (such as carers, youth groups, etc.) is an effective way to identify suitable candidates. The Staying Put project distributed a peer researcher job description to care workers in participating authorities who helped identify young people they believed would be suitable candidates for the role. The YOLO project recruited through VOYPIC, an advocacy group that works with young people in care, and local Health and Social Care trusts in Northern Ireland.

Young people need to know what they're committing to
YOLO project leads stressed the importance of fully informing young people about the commitment the project would entail in order to reduce the number of young people who drop out of the project once they realise they have taken on too much. The YOLO project initially recruited twelve peer researchers, but young people withdrew at each stage of the recruitment until only four remained. The project leads advise those wishing to engage in peer research that young people will inevitably withdraw from the process, and that this can be partly mitigated by making clear from the start the kind of commitment researchers will be expected to make.

Peer researchers should reflect the respondent groups they will work with
In addition, projects should aim to be as inclusive as possible and to build a team that is as representative as possible of the community being researched. The RBKC study discussed in Case Study 3 emphasised the importance of recruiting a diverse group of young people who reflected the diverse ethnic makeup of the borough.

> *Practitioners stressed the importance of recruiting young people with specific experiences of marginalisation and exclusion, including young carers, care leavers, young parents, young people with disabilities, justice-involved youth, young Travelers, formerly gang-affiliated young people and young people with experience of abuse.*
> **(Jane Brueseke, Dave Borland)**

Training

Training needs to be flexible and responsive to young people's needs
Training in projects like these should be tailored to fit the needs of young people and must be comprehensive enough to adequately prepare young people for the research to come. Young people may come to the research with variable skill sets and aptitudes and these variations must be accounted for when planning the training. Initial training can be supplemented with 'refresher' training sessions throughout the research process as knowledge gaps or skills deficiencies are identified and addressed. For example, in the Staying Put project, facilitators held an initial three-day training event which was later supplemented with additional sessions during the data collection process when it became clear that some of the researchers needed more training on conducting interviews.

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[13] **Lushey & Munro, 2014**

> *An interviewee asserted that while the initial training is certainly important, there is an element of training that goes on throughout the research process as academics guide and support peer researchers in the field and beyond. The length of the training has to be proportional to what you're asking of community researchers. In many cases, you're relying more on what you do one to one before and after interviews in the field.*
> **(Catherine Needham)**

Expert input can help strengthen training

In addition, it is often effective to deliver training in partnership with organisations or individuals with specialised expertise or who are knowledgeable about how to work effectively with young people. In the YOLO project, training workshops on disability and mental health were led by experts who helped peer researchers develop the skills to interview young people affected by intellectual disabilities and mental health issues. In the RBKC Youth Review, training was delivered in partnership with Working With Men, who facilitated the young researchers' participation throughout the project.

Accreditation

There is an argument to be made for the development and use of accreditations for peer researchers. Accreditations represent official recognition of the work that peer researchers have done and all that they have learned through their training. This kind of recognition, besides making clear the value that peer researchers have added to a specific project, may be presented as proof to future employers of an individual's skills and experience. The lack of a standardised and accessible accreditation scheme for peer researchers (young and adult) was raised as a potential opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of peer research by a number of stakeholders during interviews.

Support

Pastoral support is key and take significant time and effort

When planning a project, substantial thought needs to go into how young peer researchers will be supported and cared for throughout the research process. For the YOLO project, support had several dimensions: firstly, professional researchers took on as much of the logistical work as possible. This meant scheduling interviews when and where it was convenient for peer researchers. It also meant taking care of peer researchers transportation to and from interviews and training.

> *One practical consideration to keep in mind is that young people will be in school during normal working hours. You need to make sure you can train and meet with young people outside of working hours as they're likely to be in school. Know from the start that real engagement with lived experience may require working weekends and evenings.*
> **(Dave Borland)**

Payment and reward should be considered for young peer researchers

Support also consisted of payment for peer researchers, who were compensated for the time they spent working on the project. While payment is not necessarily a requirement for a peer research project involving young people, it is a way of acknowledging their contributions and may be a welcome source of income for young people who may not have any other kind of work.

> *Several practitioners we spoke to asserted the importance of paying peer researchers for the work they do. Young people's time is worth money.* **(Jane Brueseke, Melissa Butcher)**

> *Another practitioner asserted that payment falls under the duty of care you take on when you decide to enlist the help of peer researchers. You're not paying people very much, but compensation could be very impactful for people.* **(Catherine Needham)**

Regular check-ins and debriefs should be scheduled into research timelines

The YOLO project also recognised the importance of debriefing with researchers over the course of the project. This was a way for them to address the emotional demands of research for young people dealing with sensitive topics and reflecting on their own experiences in care in the process.

The recommendations that came out of a review of the Staying Put evaluation were very similar with respect to supporting the researchers. The peer researchers were provided with ongoing support from care workers in their own local authorities and from participation workers at NCAS and CCFR, Loughborough University. In addition, the project gave considerable thought to the ethical dimensions of the research. They aimed to ensure that young people's participation in the research was not tokenistic by meaningfully involving young people in all aspects of the research and being transparent about the decision-making processes and young people's role in them.

> *Peer research is enjoyable but time-intensive and hand-holding for people takes a lot of effort. Doing research with young people has been especially difficult. Research is always emotional - you have to look at the world in a new way and look behind the facade. Teaching research to young people - it's a journey for them. Especially if the issues being studied are of a sensitive nature, it takes some particularly sensitive skills for dealing with that.* (Joanna Sawkins)

> *It is important to keep checking in with people and keeping them engaged. Keeping those relationships warm, doing that emotional labour, explaining the timeline of research work.* (Catherine Needham)

Methods

Methods need to reflect the age and interests of young peer researchers

Young people will need to be involved in the research in a manner that engages them. Several practitioners we spoke to asserted the effectiveness of using more creative methods with young peer researchers. Arts-based approaches including participatory video, storytelling and creative workshops have been used successfully by practitioners to involve young people in the process of creating knowledge about themselves and their peers. Sending young people out to conduct surveys as peer researchers is a less effective use of their skills and interests and is likely to lead to high numbers of drop out.

Limitations

Recognise that peer research has limitations and may be one aspect of a research 'mix'

The advice from these studies was clear about the relative limitations of taking a peer research approach with young people. Staying Put project leads acknowledged some variations in the quality of the data. Some of the peer researchers were better than others at prompting and probing participants during interviews to elicit richer responses. This kind of variation is to be expected with inexperienced researchers. The issue was addressed in the Staying Put project by crafting an additional training for peer researchers involving role-playing interviews so they could improve their skills and confidence.

Peer research with young people can be resource and time intensive

The YOLO project listed a number of challenges they faced in adopting the peer research approach. These were mostly practical in nature. They noted the additional time, money and effort that is required to train, compensate and manage inexperienced researchers throughout the course of the project. These costs were not insignificant and the project leads advised those looking to implement a peer research approach to carefully consider these additional expenditures. However, they conclude: "Overall, whilst adopting a peer research approach requires additional time and effort, the added methodological and ethical strengths alongside the personal and professional benefits of peer research, make a compelling case for involving care experienced young people in studies involving care leavers"[14].

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[13] Lushey & Munro, 2014

Recommendations for strengthening the influence of peer research

Cultivating credibility with policy makers

> *There does need to be a dialogue with policy makers if we want to make change. Using this research method is a way to try to mediate between young and the council, facilitating a process by which the young people are made visible.* (Melissa Butcher)

Raising the profile of peer research will require an effort to familiarise policy makers and research commissioners with the benefits and best practice of the methodology. The concentration of peer research studies on the topic of foster care in the UK is not a coincidence. Staying Put and YOLO are just two examples of peer research conducted with young care leavers. Others include the What Makes a Difference project investigating service provision for children in care, Catch 22's Corporate Parenting study and the Right2BCared4 research into young people's transitions out of care. Each of these studies contributed to strengthening the case for future peer-led investigations into young people's experience of care by contributing to the evidence base for the best practice of peer research in this particular policy area. Policy makers and research commissioners focusing on foster care became attuned to the idea that peer researchers had something worthwhile to contribute to investigations into care and could refer to the success of past projects when commissioning new research.

> *At the start it was hard to engage commissioners and there was quite a lot of fear about working with young people - fear of the unknown but also of managing expectations if the council couldn't respond to requests or changes young people wanted to see in services. But as people across different services and departments see that it's working and things are changing for the better, they become more open to involving young people in genuine ways.*
>
> **(Dave Borland)**

Take the borough of Westminster as a further example. In its white paper on youth knife crime, the Westminster City Council references the peer research project A City Within a City (discussed in Case Study 4) and the Westminster Annual Public Health Report, which in turn draws heavily on the RBKC youth-led research project (Case Study 3). What this indicates is a growing regard for peer research evidence among policy makers and commissioners operating within this particular borough. Promoting peer research is in large part about proving its value to policy makers who then become more likely to turn to the methodology as a way of generating insight the next time around.

> *Get political buy-in from the beginning. Practitioners stressed the importance of developing relationships with policy makers in order to enhance the impact of the peer research being conducted.* (Melissa Butcher)

> *Gaining recognition for peer research in policy spheres has a lot to do with who is in a position of power to decide what kinds of projects to fund and to be open enough to accept less traditional forms of evidence as credible. The development of individuals as part of peer research connects with the issue of whether we can get people into policy positions that will be open to this kind of evidence. If individuals who normally would be doing other things in youth clubs can get interested in politics through peer research it will have been worth it. If it gives people the chance to do something with their lives that they hadn't done before.*
>
> **(Joanna Sawkins)**

In many cases, having policy impact is related to working on policy-relevant questions. Policymakers rely on persuasive evidence to move policy forward and to effect meaningful policy change or reform. Having impact may depend in part on working on policy issues that policymakers are already focused on.

Make sure you're working on policy-relevant questions. Get buy-in with a policy issue. Policymakers are not likely to discount something on methodological grounds. They're thinking "here's a set of things I need to do, who can I find to give me reasonable-sounding advice?" (Kathryn Oliver)

Policymakers make decisions and do so for a variety of reasons. The answer is to use that peer evidence base but link it to powerful storytelling. (Catherine Needham)

Impact may be enhanced where peer researchers produce an output that policymakers can use to tell a compelling story about the policy issue at hand.

Influencing policy often means creating a product that policy makers can easily circulate and hold up as an example of the work that was done. You have to present the information in a way that policymakers can show. They are not as interested in the process, but the product. To make change, it's good to give policy makers something tangible to pass around, to point to. This doesn't mean there can't be different outputs. (Melissa Butcher)

Working through partnerships

The projects discussed above demonstrate the importance of working through partnerships between local authorities and young people's advocacy groups. Involving young people in peer research requires specialised support and structure that can be provided by organisations with existing capacity to engage effectively with young people. These organisations also play the role of advocating on behalf of young people who may have low credibility outside their research role. Advocacy organisations such as the Young Westminster Foundation, the Association for Young People's Health and the National Care Advisory Service aid the impact of youth peer research by using bringing their resources, networks and credibility to bear on the research in order to ensure that findings are

disseminated to relevant decision makers and that the findings are recognised and acted upon. Building and cultivating relationships between research commissioners, policy makers and advocacy organisations is an important step towards expanding the demand and capacity for youth peer research with policy impact.

With young people, there always needs to be some sort of partner, some sort of structure. Going to do a project in a youth club is better than trying to bring members of a youth club to a project. This approach is also useful because there's so much safeguarding involved. (Joanna Sawkins)

[14] Kelly et al., 2017: 18

Co-production and citizen engagement

Citizen engagement, co-production and experiential expertise

In recent years there has been a growing interest in involving citizens in the decision-making processes that shape public policy and public services. When public decision makers open a formal dialogue with citizens - through public events such as forums or town halls, consultations or other sorts of outreach - in order to inform and shape policy or service delivery, this is termed **citizen engagement**.

The idea behind citizen engagement is that citizens should be afforded a say in the process of shaping the policies and services that impact their lives. **Co-production** is the broad term used to describe the process of producing public policies or services as a collaboration between decision makers and the community members the policies or services will impact.

Citizen engagement is based on the idea that policies and services shaped collaboratively with citizens will be more relevant, more workable and will better address the needs and wants of the citizens they will impact. This is because the co-production recognises community members as 'experts by experience' - that is, experts whose insider knowledge or understanding of the policy problem has been gained through lived experience of the issue. Citizen engagement and co-production rely on this form of **experiential expertise** to enhance the relevance, richness and authenticity of the policymaking process. In addition, citizen engagement elevates the legitimacy of the policies or services that emerge - rather than being imposed on citizens from the top-down, citizens buy into policies over which they possess equal ownership.

In the following section, we will look at several examples of how citizen engagement and co-production have been used to inform and create urban and youth policy. We will summarise the available information on the best practice and information gathered via key informant interviews, as well as consider future directions for the use of engagement and co-production in both areas of interest.

'Co-production' and sub-terminology

'Co-production' refers to the entire process of producing public policies or services together with the service users or the people the policies will impact. It should be noted that co-production encompasses a number of other sub-processes including: co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and sometimes co-assessment.

Case Study 5: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) Youth Engagement Review

In 2018, the RBKC commissioned a comprehensive review of youth services on offer in the borough implementing a citizen engagement and co-design methodology. As part of the review, outreach workers engaged young people and other stakeholders in the borough in the process of evaluating the current provision of youth services and co-designing future provision.

Citizen engagement was multi-pronged and involved young people, parents, schools, community groups and service providers. The aim was to ascertain the community's views on current youth service provision and set policy priorities for the future.

- Dedicated outreach workers spent time speaking with young people at youth clubs and spaces where they spent time

- Young people were invited to a series of public events where they let the Council know how they would like to be involved in the commissioning process

- Outreach workers engaged with young people on the street and other outdoor spaces

- Young travellers, offenders and other low-engagement groups were specifically targeted for involvement

- Outreach workers ran a series of workshops and one-to-one consultations with community organisations and providers to understand their vision for the future of youth services in the borough

- Peer researchers engaged young people across the borough (this component of the review is discussed in Case Study 4 above)

Policy impact

The initial engagement fed into the development of a co-design process based on feedback from the initial stage of citizen engagement. "Co-design is a method of participatory engagement whereby an organisation works alongside communities to create a product or service that is wanted, needed and fit for purpose...Each stakeholder involved in co-design...is recognised for their expertise and lived experiences"[15].

Using this process, the Council co-designed new models for youth service delivery with young people and stakeholders in the borough. The process is laid out below.

1. Using feedback from the engagement stage, the borough established key policy priorities.
2. These priorities were taken back to young people and community groups to ensure that they accurately reflected citizens' feedback.
3. Policy and service provision models for addressing these priorities were then discussed collaboratively with young people.
4. Service models were then drafted based on discussions described in the previous stage, as well as feedback from an online co-design questionnaire completed by young people.
5. The models were refined and revised iteratively through the same deliberative processes until the model was deemed fit for purpose by all participants.

Some of the proposed models include addressing young people's participation by starting a Youth Parliament, creating two 'youth hubs' to coordinate available services and programs, run 'pop-up' projects and events for young people in community spaces, enhance one-to-one support for young people who need help accessing education and employment. These new models and others will be used to inform the future youth offer in the borough.

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[15] RKBC, 2018: 8

Case Study 6: Jam and Justice: How can we govern cities differently?

Jam and Justice was a project conducted in Greater Manchester from 2016-2019 that explored the potential of co-production for improving urban governance by developing 10 projects that tested ways to connect communities with decision makers. Some of the projects were delivered by members of the research team and some were commissioned out to external partners. Many were conducted in partnership with community organisations and local government officials where relevant. These projects addressed a range of issues.

- GM Decides was a project that investigated the potential of digital democratic innovations in Greater Manchester with a specific focus on what women need and want from participation.

- Co-producing the Green Summit was an initiative that sought to widen citizen participation in developing the city's first Green Summit.

- Space in Common investigated how the city could make better decisions over the city's physical redevelopment by involving citizens in the planning process.

- Testing the 21st Century Councillor Framework was a project that tested a framework, which lays out the skills councillors need as their role has developed over the past two decades, through focus groups with local councillors and community members.

Other projects looked at care-at-home policy, the potential for participatory budgeting, democratising urban energy governance, young people's involvement in decision making and more. The projects aimed to understand how a wider, more diverse range of people could be included in governing cities. Jam and Justice researchers analysed each project and came up with key findings on the best practice of co-production, some of which will be discussed in the best practice section below.

Policy impact

Jam and Justice had policy impact on two levels. Individual projects led to new policy innovations or ways of thinking about participation. For example, Co-producing the Green Summit led to changes in the Summit's design which supported greater interactivity and crowdsourcing content for the Greater Manchester (GM) Environment Plan. A working group that emerged from the GM Decides project are now contributing to the GM initiative Turbo Charge Gender Equality. The Combined Authority, now in the stages of drawing up plans for voluntary, community and social sector engagement on the revised redevelopment plan, are seeking to learn from the findings of Space in Common. Testing the 21st Century Councillor Framework led project partners North West Employers to update their training across 41 local authorities to provide sessions for councillors and council officers on the subject of co-production.

On a larger scale, Jam and Justice had a role in reframing the policy issues raised in the 10 projects and demonstrated the value of participatory approaches in local governance. The project participants were invited to give expert evidence to a working group of the Combined Authority of Greater Manchester which fed into a report and directly informed its recommendation "to foster meaningful participation...and actively engage in co-production of key messages." In 2019, the project also garnered recognition from the Greater Manchester Mayor who invited the 10 member local authorities to develop a community of practice around co-production building on research undertaken in Jam and Justice[16].

Lastly, through this work, the project has forged networks of citizens, local authorities and community and voluntary organisations invested in widening participation, inclusion and co-production in city governance in the future.

[16] http://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/s151146/14%20Coproduction%20Report%20GMCA%20250118%20merged.pdf

Case Study 7: Good Growth by Design: Making London Child-Friendly

Part of the Mayor of London's Good Growth by Design plan for improving the design of public spaces in London is an initiative to make the city more child-friendly by involving young people in the design process. Making London Child-Friendly is in the beginning stages and has laid out an approach to participation in a scoping report (Mayor of London), which is summarised below. Two principles drive the initiative's participative approach:

- Children and young people should be engaged in the process of design and planning from the earliest possible stages, including pre-design consultation.

- Participation needs to be understood as a long-term process; ensuring post-intervention feedback and analysis means co-creation is not limited to the design of a space, but also its management and iterative changes.

The project lays out a number of best practice recommendations for designers in the collaborative design process. These include:

- Using the lived experience of children and young people as a way to understand place and as the starting point for good design.

- Engaging children to do community mapping in order to better understand how young people make use of space in their area.

- Making sure that the feelings, experiences and opinions of young people are meaningfully incorporated into the design and development process.

- Implementing creative methods to engage with young people and children to make sure that the engagement is both enjoyable and productive.

Policy impact

The policy impact of this scoping project will likely be significant. It lays the groundwork for the way that designers and commissioners will engage with young people in the co-design of public spaces as part of the Good Growth by Design program in order to ensure that young people's views are taken into account.

> *There's very little work on how young people experience urban transformation and very little collaboration with young people on urban design, urban development. Young people are experts in the field when it comes to their neighbourhood. They bring an expertise because they spend so much time in public space.* **(Melissa Butcher)**

Case Study 8: Productive Margins

Productive Margins (PM) was a five-year Big Lottery-funded program of research that used a co-production method to investigate and re-imagine systems of regulation using the experience and expertise of marginal communities. The project was a collaboration between community organisations and academics working in and around Bristol. Similar to the Jam and Justice project, the PM program comprised a number of different co-produced projects that touched on issues such as immigration, social work, food regulation, space and surveillance, older people, ethnicity and faith. For example, one project looked at the regulatory impact of the government's counterterrorism strategy on Muslim communities. Another looked at forms of regulation that shape food habits in marginal communities.

The program employed a co-production model from beginning to end. The original funding bid did not define the research questions or sites of investigation, and instead proposed the idea for "an intentional space for openness and a process for identifying together what were important questions to ask"[17]. This translated practically into the creation of the Research Forum, a series of gatherings that included researchers, community organisation workers and program administrators participating in the program. The Forum set the research agenda by collaboratively formulating the research questions, developing the research projects and carrying them out as a collective over the course of the five-year program.

The co-production process itself was treated as a site of experimentation, where new approaches and ways of working were allowed to emerge organically out of the collaboration that occurred in the Research Forum. Inevitably, this required quite a bit of what the investigators referred to as 'mess,' encompassing a good amount of tension and conflict, uncertainty, frustration and doubt. However, starting from the principles of openness and experimentation allowed program participants to actively engage with the meaning of 'co-production,' unbound from the instrumental objectives and expectations imposed on more traditional forms of research.

Policy impact

The Productive Margins project actively resisted producing straightforward lists of policy recommendations, asserting the relative misalignment of the purposes of co-production and the expectations of what research is 'for.' In considering this misalignment in the book published following the end of the program, one of the academic partners writes that what was "troubling was the tension between the goal of co-production and normative expectations of what a research project should look like: set research questions before deciding on methods; rely on researchers well versed in established techniques; view case studies as a one-way process of knowledge extraction; and produce papers with tidy conclusions."[18]).

She adds: "The authors of this volume have refused to offer simple lists of research outcomes in the form of policy recommendations, instead offering challenging models of complexity and emergence - vocabularies that do not feature significantly in the bullet point action plans that pervade conventional transformation programs"[19].

[17] Cohen et al., 2020: 48, [18] Newman, 2020: 215, [19] Newman, 2020: 218

Lessons in best practice for citizen engagement and co-production

These case studies provide a number of lessons on best practice for citizen engagement and co-production which we will draw together below.

Project design

Prioritise openness and flexibility in project design

Jam and Justice researchers emphasised openness as an important principle of project design. Projects should be designed to create opportunities for people to participate in different ways and to enter and exit the process at different stages to suit their needs. In addition, the researchers noted that the 'semi-structured' design of the overall project allowed people to have flexibility in responding to changing circumstances when developing the ten sub-projects, which each had different requirements and necessitated different ways of working. The open design allowed leeway for methodological experimentation, which contributed to the development of better ways of working.

Embrace uncertainty and discomfort through communication

Researchers in both the Jam and Justice and Productive Margins projects acknowledged that openness can also lead to uncertainty and discomfort, which should be addressed by communicating transparently about what is known and what still needs to be worked out in the course of the co-production process. The Productive Margins team writes: "One of the many lessons that we learnt from this program was the need to leave space for emergence. Much of what arose from our research program could not have

been anticipated at the start"[20]. As discussed above, the Productive Margins project design left intentional space open (in the form of the Research Forum) for collective deliberation and agenda setting from the start and approached this process with an ethos of experimentation.

> *The issue of meaningful engagement is complicated by the fact that many of the project parameters are decided prior to recruitment of community researchers. Ethics committees wanted to know the research questions before the research started but the PIs wanted to wait to formulate the questions with community researchers once the project started.*
> (Catherine Needham)

> *With participatory research methods you want people to be involved in developing the research questions. But funders want to know the research questions before the research starts. There's a bit of tension there. The solution for them was to have the participants reshape existing questions during the training.* (Melissa Butcher)

Methods

Consider blended methods to increase participation

Using different methods for generating insight or encouraging engagement opens up co-production processes to a wider range of participants. In addition, they can disrupt conventional ways of thinking about policy problems and expand the horizon of what is possible in coming up with policy solutions. For example, rather than just relying on traditional qualitative methods such as interviewing and surveys, some of the Jam and Justice used more creative methods such as photo voice or participatory workshops. Jam and Justice researchers emphasise the importance of recognising "that methods are not neutral and impact on participation and power."

> *Use of creative methodologies such as photovoice and 'sound walks' were successful ways to engage people in participatory research.* (Gemma Moore)

The engagement methodology of the RBKC Youth Review was also multifaceted to ensure that citizens were involved in the manner that suited them. Outreach workers used a combination of 1 to 1 consultations, creative workshops, public consultation events, street-based outreach on estates and open community spaces, online surveys, peer research, community events, a youth

panel and more. The multi-channelled approach allowed outreach workers to reach the widest range of citizens as possible. For example, street outreach was conducted in order to make sure that young people who were not yet engaged in youth services or organisations in the borough, but who spent time in community spaces and on the street, could have their views included in the engagement process.

Support

Factors in the emotional toll of co-producing work

Jam and Justice researchers point out the emotional nature of much of the work of co-production. Co-production is often a difficult process marked by uncertainty, doubt, anxiety and frustration. On the flipside, emotions are also an important component in sustaining and motivating co-production efforts. It is important to create a space for the expression of the whole range of emotions and also to recognise the emotional labour involved in any effort that challenges traditional ways of knowing and working and which involves the collaboration of stakeholders with differing opinions, backgrounds and interests. Building trusting relationships between stakeholders in which these emotional challenges can be productively and respectfully traversed is therefore imperative for any co-production project.

Acknowledge at the start and throughout the process that participants will bring their emotions to co-production

Productive Margins also pointed to the importance of not taking emotions for granted in the co-production process. Many of the challenges the project came up against had to do with the strong emotions that various stakeholders brought to deliberative processes. In reflecting on the process, project leads considered the possibility that they "needed to identify and acknowledge more directly from the outset the emotions that were both expressed in the room and simmered below the surface"[21]. Co-production processes are complicated and challenging and can cause participants frustration, anxiety and doubt. Those wishing to engage in coproduction must be aware that strong emotions will inevitably develop and circulate as by-products of a process which at times can be highly conflictual. Practitioners must allow space for the expression of such emotions and must engineer ways of working that do not invalidate participants' feelings about the process, but harness the power of emotion to move the work forward.

> *There is a lot of important emotional labour that goes into a successful participatory project. The PIs and the university take on a duty of care for the community researchers that must be taken seriously. This should involve an interrogation of existing systems to make sure that this duty is being upheld*
> **(Catherine Needham)**

Engaging policymakers

Work with policymakers early on

Jam and Justice researchers assert the importance of forging connections with policymakers and other decision makers in the process of co-production. While co-production projects should make an effort to expand existing agendas and policy priorities, it is worthwhile to recognise the value of working with policy developers and decision makers to create change when appropriate. They found it was important to develop relationships and networks with policymakers and other stakeholders in order to figure out how each project could contribute to city agendas in order to have influence and impact in the future. Both Making London Child-Friendly and the RBKC Youth Review are examples of government-initiated projects plugged into policymaking and service design processes from the start. This ensures their policy relevance and provides a clear path for the application of their findings in policy and service design and creation. Developing projects alongside local authorities or other governing bodies is a good way to create early buy-in and ensure that the projects are aligned with policy agendas and existing priorities for highest impact.

[21] Cohen et al., 2020: 57

However, direct policy impact is not the only reason to engage in co-production. Projects like Productive Margins actively resisted producing neat lists of policy relevant or instrumentally useful recommendations, demonstrating that coproduction is not limited to work that can be straightforwardly applied to policy or service design.

> *Engagement work is about personal relationships. You can't underplay the power of having those personal relationships with policy makers or those who work in local authorities.* (Gemma Moore)

Be prepared to work through tensions and conflict
The co-production process brings together a diverse range of stakeholders with different views and opinions and therefore inevitably brings out some level of conflict. In addition, the uncertainty of co-productive processes often leads to frustrations and tensions among participants. The Jam and Justice researchers advise that these tensions must be navigated transparently and facilitators must allow for a diversity of views, opinions and values to co-exist. Co-production is about working through and addressing conflict head-on, and being honest and open about how consensus will be reached is an integral part of the co-production process.

The Productive Margins project engaged deeply with the challenges of conflict and tension that emerged in the course of their coproduction work. They acknowledged the inherent 'messiness' of the coproduction process, especially within the Research Forums where they recognised the need to "address...differences and find ways to move forward in the spirit of 'rough consensus'...to enable collaborative, yet pragmatic decision-making"[22]. The multiplicity of stakeholders involved in coproduction will inevitably bring diverse emotions and standpoints to the process which will lead to tensions both spoken and unspoken. Project leads on the PM project recommend: "Collaborators need to build in strategies for holding difference without rushing towards mediation or amelioration" (Cohen et al., 2020: 58). To that end, they advise starting out the coproduction process by having participants take part in values mapping activities so that participants' various motivations and starting points can be made explicit and difference can be acknowledged transparently from the start.

> *Don't try to orient towards consensus. The art of engagement is about dealing with conflict and that process of negotiation. There's always going to be winners or losers, and therefore it's important to be really transparent about the process. It's unrealistic/ unproductive to expect complete consensus.* (Gemma Moore)

> *I still get questions 'is that research?'...There will always be sceptics who can't be convinced. 20% are already bought in, 20% will never buy in - I care about the middle 60%.* (Meerat Kaur)

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[22] Cohen et al., 2020: 53

Ethics

Ensure ethical practices are at the heart of co-production plans

Those managing co-production or engagement work need to ensure that citizens are being engaged ethically. The report from Making London Child-Friendly advises interested practitioners to refer to Hart's Ladder of Participation when considering a co-production approach. The Participation Ladder was created by the sociologist Roger Hart in his book Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care (1997). The Ladder is a tool that maps the spectrum of young people's participation along eight 'rungs' and can help commissioners formulate engagement efforts that are genuinely participatory rather than tokenistic or manipulative. The eight 'rungs' of the Participation Ladder are laid out in Appendix A.

The Ladder of Participation is an important tool for gauging the level of participation a co-produced project is proposing. Co-production should aim to be empowering where possible and should absolutely avoid being exploitative, manipulative or tokenistic in nature. Ensuring proper ethical considerations are at the core of plans is paramount when planning a co-production project, and using this model as a guide can help projects design models of participation that are as empowering as possible. It should also be noted that the use of the ladder of participation is not limited to projects involving young people. It applies to any kind of project in which citizens are engaged or involved alongside professionals or stakeholders in relative positions of power (academics, policy makers, service providers, etc.).

Know when to co-produce

Jam and Justice researchers acknowledge that co-production is not necessarily the solution to every policy problem. They recommend that co-production be used when: "the problem itself needs to be defined and understood; there's no shared solution; there are new opportunities not determined or captured by existing agendas or organisations; traditional approaches for tackling the issue have failed." They are also clear about circumstances under which co-production is likely to fail: "For instance, when there is a clear instrumental goal in sight, when processes are fixed, when solutions are already known, or where there are cultural or organisational barriers to open and uncertain processes."

As each project demonstrates - and as the Productive Margins leads make explicit - coproduction is a time- and resource-intensive undertaking. Productive Margins leads "acknowledge that a shift towards collaborative production, with its requirement for substantial time and other resource investment will be a hard move for policy developers, especially under conditions of austerity"[23]. The Jam and Justice project was conducted over the course of three years and Productive Margins over the course of five. While shorter-term citizen engagement projects such as the RBKC report are possible, practitioners should not underestimate the amount of time, resources, and specialised skill that is needed to do coproduction successfully.

[23] Morgan et al., 2020: 208

Conclusion

Existing literature examining peer research as a form of evidence has found considerable advantages including lived experience enhancing the richness and nuance of the inquiry[24], leading to better and more relevant data[25], and including those who are often left out of other forms of research[26].

It is clear from the literature and case studies, as well as the expert opinion of key informants across local government, academia, education, youth policy and regeneration, that peer research and lived experience are increasingly seen as credible forms of evidence in policy making.

Whilst it is indisputable that the demand for research that involves community members and those with lived experience has grown significantly in recent years[27], gaps still remain in the understanding of how best to influence policy makers with evidence generated through participatory methods. Making the case for participatory research of all kinds "calls for considerable courage and willingness to swim against the current"[28] and this was highlighted as a key challenge by many of the stakeholders interviewed as part of this paper.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of a standardised approach or framework with which to evaluate peer and lived experience research. While assessing the validity of data is always a challenge, with peer research the issue is particularly pronounced, given the involvement of non-academic researchers. One of the problems that Bergold and Thomas (2012) identify is that peer researchers and the professional researchers and other stakeholders they are often working alongside will likely all have different views of what 'good evidence' consists of. It is difficult to integrate these differing viewpoints in a way that gives each their due, while addressing concerns about the reliability and validity of evidence in a unified way.

How we evaluate peer research, its impact and the data it produces is a question that needs to be considered more systematically in order to address the doubts and concerns stakeholders and policymakers may hold. Peer Research in UK, a desk review of almost 50 peer research projects conducted across the UK in the last five years, revealed opportunities to harmonise and improve standards for peer research. In response, the Institute for Community Studies has plans to launch a national peer research centre, which will bring together those striving for community-led change and act as a platform for peer research organisations and those interested in engaging with peer research to:

- Strengthen the peer research methodology and standards related to improving the legitimacy, reliability and validity of evidence generated through peer research

- Share learning and best practice from across communities and sectors

- Partner to enrich peer research outputs and outcomes

- Showcase peer research and its impact to a wider audience

We are inviting peer research organisations, their peer research networks and industry champions of peer and community research, to join our National Peer Research Network. If you're interested in joining, contact peerresearch@youngfoundation.org to find out more.

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24 **Beresford, 2007; Dixon et al., 2019; Edwards & Alexander, 2011);,** 25 **Smith et al., 2002; Littlechild et al., 2015; Tanner, 2012,** 26 **Guta et al., 2013,**
27 **Boxall & Beresford, 2013,** 28 **Bergold and Thomas, 2012: Section 48**

Appendix A

Hart's Ladder of Participation

1. **Manipulation** At the lowest end of the participation spectrum, children are used by adults to support adult agendas. The adults pretend that their efforts were genuinely inspired by young people when in fact they were not.

2. **Decoration** Adults use young people to bolster their efforts, without any meaningful input from the young people themselves. However, the adults refrain from pretending that their efforts were inspired by young people.

3. **Tokenism** Young people appear to have been given a voice, but they in fact had little say over their role or the nature of their participation.

4. **Assigned but informed** Adults assign young people a specific role and young people are informed about how and why they are being involved.

5. **Consulted and informed** Young people give their advice on projects designed and led by adults, and are informed about how their input will be used.

6. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people** This rung of the ladder can be exemplified by participatory research such the Staying Put research project which was initiated by adults but in which young people took part in important decision-making processes.

7. **Young people-initiated and directed** Young people initiate and direct a project and adults are only involved in a supportive role.

8. **Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults** This can be exemplified by projects that are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared with adults. These kinds of projects empower young people while enabling them to use the expertise and experience of involved adults.

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