Institute for Community Studies
Powered by The Young Foundation

CAPE Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement

Knowledge in action

Exploring the benefits of co-producing policy with academia, local government, and communities

A report from UCL-CAPE and the Institute for Community Studies

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We believe that involving communities leads to better decision-making.

About the Institute for Community Studies

The Institute for Community Studies is a research institute with people at its heart. Powered by the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation, the Institute works to influence change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence, and policymaking.

About CAPE

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) was a knowledge exchange and research project that explored how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policy professionals across the higher education sector from 2020 to 2024.

CAPE was a partnership between UCL and the universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria and Nottingham, in collaboration with the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Nesta, and the Transforming Evidence Hub. CAPE was funded by Research England.

CAPE believes that policy which is informed by evidence is stronger, more effective, and provides better value for public spending. By using research expertise, we can make a positive difference to the UK economy, our wellbeing and to the world around us.

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Executive summary

This report offers a thoughtful exploration of how academia, local government, and community organisations can collaborate effectively on policy development. Conducted by the Institute for Community Studies in partnership with UCL-CAPE, this initiative investigated the challenges and opportunities that emerge when these distinct sectors work together on place-based policy problems.

At the heart of the programme was a practical experiment: three location-based teams were each provided with £25,000 to address local policy challenges through mini-projects. These teams were guided through a structured learning journey that fostered collaborative relationships while allowing flexibility to respond to local needs.

Through this innovative project we learnt:

- how to create an effective environment for co-production
- the sector-specific knowledges and capabilities that contribute to collaboration
- that, with the freedom to experiment, policy issues that 'fall between the cracks' become the focus of attention

Each location-based team was able to generate new learning(s) about their policy problem, improve ways of working in place, and highlight critical policy takeaways.

Emerging themes

What are the enablers and barriers to effective co-production?

A learning journey that establishes a shared understanding can help consolidate team relationships. This process is helped by setting a collaborative tone – where different stakeholders are able to meet as equals – and creating a space where there is permission to fail. This helps create an environment where teams feel like they can try new ideas. As teams are being composed, it is important to achieve senior buy-in. This can free up staff time to participate.

However, without the right institutional policies and processes, participation in co-production can be limited. Funding for staff-time is regularly a barrier for enabling staff to take part in activities, while the pace of delivering an innovative project such as this can create pressures that make it difficult to participate. When capacity – financial and personal – is stretched, projects that are above and beyond core work can be the first to be dropped.

How can we strengthen knowledge, capabilities, and cooperation?

Bringing together different stakeholders highlighted the different strengths of local government, universities, and the third sector.

Universities are able to open doors for key local partners, and this can enable innovative work. People working in universities are also able to provide expert insight into topics, methods, and evaluations – this can help consolidate learnings from projects so that they can be applied in other places.

Local government works across a multitude of policy domains – and at different scales. This means local governments often have access to citizens who are already using local government services and may be in need of financial or social support. Understanding strategic political priorities of both central and local governments can also unlock funding.

The third sector is a powerful collaborator. They understand 'gaps' in the policy landscape – those areas where individuals and families may fall between current service provision, but are still experiencing hardship. The third sector often works with 'super connectors' who know how to get things done; many in this sector are experts in project delivery and inclusive service design.

Why focus on young people?

With the freedom and funding this project created, all the projects ended up concerned with the experiences of young people – via families experiencing in-work poverty, as people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, and as a politically disenfranchised demographic.

Taken together, this programme of work highlighted that young people are experiencing a challenging social, economic and policy environment – and the responsibility for addressing their negative experiences can often fall between policy 'silos'.

Key recommendations

1. **Create conditions that support knowledge-sharing:** The three case studies emphasised the importance of creating team environments that allow for diverse knowledge – traditional, local, experiential – to be shared effectively and integrated into project delivery.

2. **Invest in relationship-building:** This requires a recognition of the different roles co-production partners can play, and investment in relationship-building.

3. **Learn from experience:** Funding that invests in teams, rather than desired outcomes, creates flexibility for teams to learn and innovate from both successes and failures.

4. **Connect institutions and communities:** The 'layered' approaches that emerged in this project, where local case study teams deployed co-production methods to work directly with those holding lived experience of the issues at hand, is an exciting model that can deepen relationships between institutions and local communities.

5. **Leverage university assets:** Universities can better leverage their institutional assets towards co-production by introducing more flexible pay structures for their staff, greater willingness to delegate funding and delivery, and greater emphasis internally on the civic impact of engaged academics.

6. **Address policy challenges that cut across silos:** For local government, co-production is a unique opportunity to identify policy challenges that cut across departments and mobilise the capacity of a local consortium to address them. To enable this activity, local governments could better communicate how external partners can best approach and engage with them.

7. **Value third sector organisations:** they play a crucial role in setting out community needs at a strategic level and supporting the engagement of individuals with lived experience of the subject being explored.

Introduction

What happens when you bring together universities, local government, and the third sector to experiment in policy co-production?

That was the question at the heart of this project, funded by CAPE at UCL. The programme aimed to understand how different sectoral actors can work together, how they approach place-based policy problems, and how to create an environment that allows for better collaboration.

Our role at the Institute for Community Studies was to recruit three location-based teams composed of an academic partner, a local government partner, and a third sector partner. We then delivered a series of workshops in co-production designed to support the teams to develop ideas for policy change. Each team also received £25,000 funding to deliver a mini-project on a policy problem.

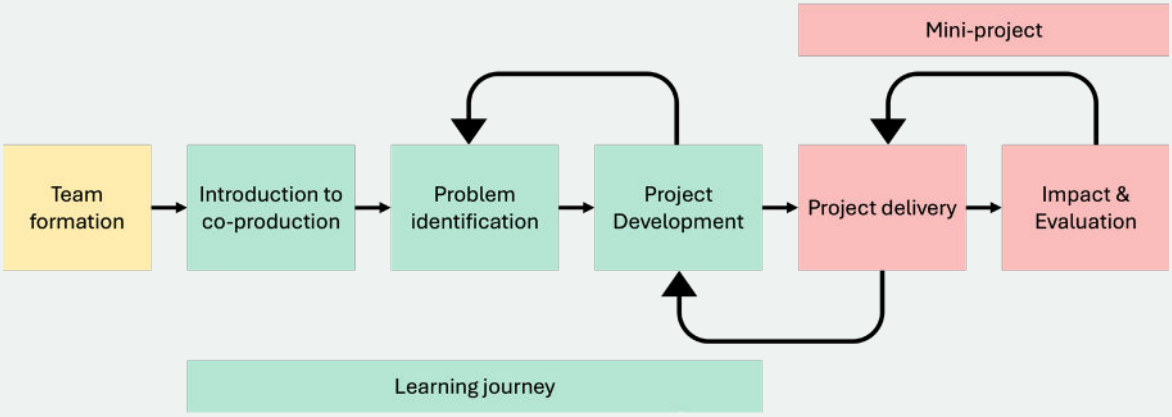


Figure 1. Policy co-production journey

The process was open and iterative, with each location-based team free to define and develop a project that met their area's needs. They were guided with structured activities in problem definition and project development.

The mini projects focused on:

- experiences of in-work poverty in Teeside
- loneliness and social isolation for young people in Norfolk
- youth disenfranchisement in Lincoln

Through the collaboration, we learnt about the distinct strengths of each project partner – and where their strengths overlapped and were complimentary.

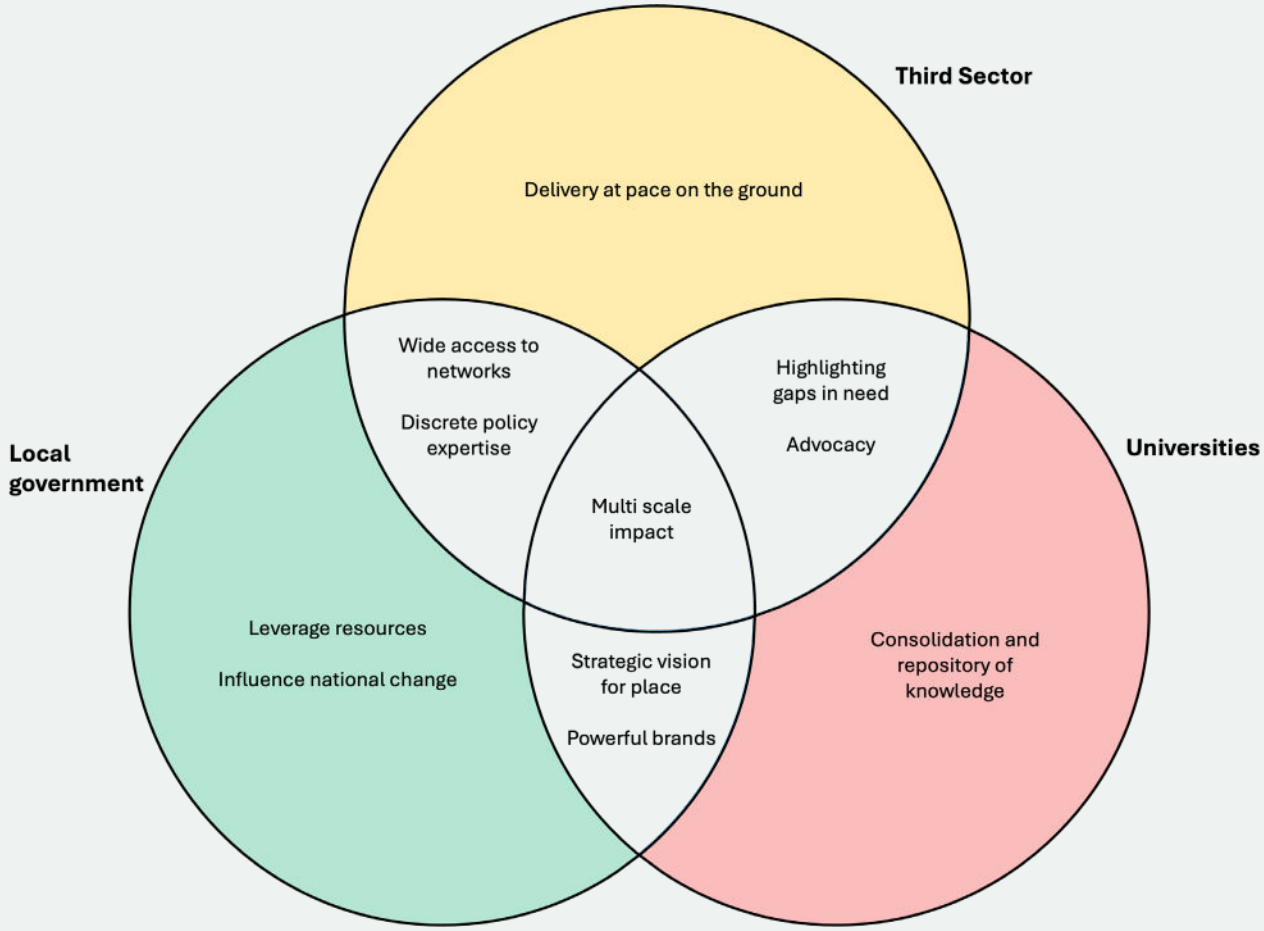


Figure 2. Effective spaces of collaboration

The rest of this report reflects on the success of the mini-projects, the lessons learnt from the programme, and the recommendations for institutional change required to make effective collaboration and co-production a more routine part of the UK policy landscape.

- **Chapters 3 to 5:** summaries of the work each location-based team undertook and the key policy learnings (pages 7 to 15).
- **Chapter 6:** The barriers and enablers of effective policy co-production.
- **Chapter 7:** The knowledges, roles, and responsibilities each sector partner took on.
- **Chapter 8:** Discussion of why the projects coalesced around young people.
- **Chapter 9:** Recommendations for universities, local government and the third sector.

Case study profile: Lincoln

Team composition	
Academic	Lincoln University
Local government	Lincolnshire County Council, City of Lincoln Council
Community	Local Motion, Lincoln YMCA, Lincolnshire Community and Voluntary Service (Lincolnshire CVS), LiNCHigher

Policy issue: youth participation

The Institute for Community Studies initially connected with a group of community-engaged academics at Lincoln University involved with the Lincoln Policy Hub. During initial meetings, there was a lot of interest in the experience of young people - and young fathers in particular - as potential areas of focus.

In the learning journey, Lincoln explored reasons why young people's civic engagement in the area was low, such as geographical isolation, ineffective outreach methods, and apathy borne from a lack of change or action from previous engagement. They also discussed potential consequences of this low engagement, such as low social cohesion and poor policy design.

As the team went through the process of problem deconstruction, they felt that 'youth apathy' had become an excuse for underinvestment in youth engagement by local actors. They were interested in challenging this dynamic, and felt that, rather than assuming apathy, a project should go out of its way to meet young people where they are.

Their final policy problem statement was phrased:

"Powerholders/gatekeepers do not involve or engage young people in policy design or implementation, and therefore we do not know if policies meet their needs."

The Lincoln team decided to take a 'case study' approach to their intervention across two different contexts: Lincoln City and Mablethorpe, a seaside town and resort.

Campaign images developed by the Lincoln Team

Local Motion connected the team with a local VSCE partner The Network Lincoln to lead a youth policy leadership programme over the summer of 2024. This consisted of workshops with a group of young people and local policymakers, a series of capacity-building workshops and trips, and finally the development of a 'Youth Manifesto' for the city of Lincoln. They have already set the ambition of establishing sub-topic specialisms eg, LGBTQ+ issues.

In Mablethorpe, the team partnered with Lincoln YMCA to set up a series of 'residentials' with young people that aimed to build local youth capacity and, eventually, develop a similar 'Youth Manifesto' for the area.

However, the team encountered challenges in reaching young people in Mablethorpe and arranging dates for in-person gatherings. During the programme, the team scaled back their ambitions and focused on building a network of young people interested in exploring these issues, to engage on a similar capacity-building journey in 2025. The project enabled the Lincoln team to focus on building the skills and capacities among people that traditional policymaking environments aren't well set up to listen to. Although a short project, the young people were able to pitch to Lincoln Council about how a market space might be better used to meet young people's needs, they have been approached by TEDx to develop a talk, and interest has been expressed by other young people keen to join. There is a strong proof of concept to build upon in the future.

Key policy takeaways

Meet young people where they are: The City of Lincoln Youth Manifesto had a strong emphasis on supporting not just current residents but incoming generations of young people, in particular as one young person engaged in the project said “not going through what we’ve been through”. It is important to create spaces and opportunities where young people are able to participate in local policy deliberations and decisions.

Invest in skills: Training young people in articulating and using their personal narratives for change was a particularly effective means of supporting young people’s leadership capacity. Programmes that consolidate the capabilities of young people, such as telling powerful stories, amplify their ability to participate in decision-making.

Provide social infrastructure: Physical spaces matter to young people. They want physical spaces to meet and be together; their pitch to Lincoln Council for the Cornhill Market Mezzanine was as ‘The Meeting Place’. Social infrastructure provides the necessary building blocks for young people to connect, build community, and participate in civic life.

Case study profile: Teesside

Team composition	
Academic	Teesside University
Local government	Redcar and Cleveland Council
Community	Redcar Community and Voluntary Development Agency (RCVDA)

Policy issue: in-work poverty

The Institute for Community Studies' team initially contacted academics at Teesside University focused on a 'people and place' research pillar. Rather than picking a policy area of focus, Teesside University built a team based around the geographic area of Redcar and Cleveland. Unfortunately, from Q2 2024, Redcar and Cleveland Council's participation was impacted due to senior personnel changes.

An initial discussion on the cost-of-living crisis allowed the Teesside team to explore the types of issues faced by the area and their causes. They identified 'in-work poverty', particularly for working parents, as a critical issue.

Deconstructing this policy problem revealed environmental factors that were tough for local actors to address, such as deindustrialisation, inflation, and council funding.

However, an actionable challenge emerged from the 'invisibility' of problems, both for local authorities and for families in in-work poverty themselves. There was a realisation that one of the reasons in-work poverty was such a challenge is that it is not a label that people readily identify with, and affects a group of people that are not oftentargetted by local government services or local charities.

This led to the following policy problem statement:

"The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated existing in-work poverty in Redcar and Cleveland and we don't understand enough about how this is impacting on children's development, education, wellbeing and health needs."

Pilot project

Teesside's pilot project focused on running an intervention during the May 2024 school break across two different boroughs: the rural St Joseph's and the more urban Grangetown, both with high rates of deprivation. The project involved funding free activities for all families at a local leisure centre for the duration of May half term, and providing 'packed lunches' for any family that wanted them. The hypothesis was that providing universal coverage would allow them to support families experiencing in-work poverty who may otherwise not be eligible for low-income support, or who identify as needing support.

The team began with a set of workshops with parents, at parents' evenings in St Joseph's and at a school event in Grangetown. Parents welcomed an intervention but highlighted the importance of social networks, for example if an activity was available to one child but not their friends based on parent situation, or their siblings because of age. Transport also arose as a key concern. Through these discussions the team alighted on the idea of providing meals and swimming.

One of the challenges the team faced was being able to connect with and mobilise the right people. The project involved liaising with schools, leisure centres, local family hubs, and the local authority. Moreover, they often needed a senior person with a specific remit to authorise the activity, while also needing people 'on the ground', able to deliver the interventions. They found that using the university as a respected 'brand' helped open certain doors.

The interventions generated significant learning, not just from the positive feedback received from parents who did attend, but also by observing and investigating low engagement rates. The teams had relied on schools to distribute information about the offer, but the assumption that they would find it easier to communicate with busy parents appeared incorrect. They also learnt about the significance of micro-geography: how long it takes to walk from place to place, and whether the walk is uphill.

The team followed up with parents and stakeholders to understand take-up rates, as well as analysing data collected during the intervention and conducting reflective sessions as a team. These findings will be used to inform future policy work, particularly the Local Plan for Towns

Key policy takeaways

Create offers: In places with extensive deprivation, individuals may struggle to negotiate their identity as 'in-work poverty' as they feel they are struggling 'less' than others. As a result, universal offers are more effective as people in in-work poverty would not automatically expect to be provided for.

Practice user-centred design: People in in-work poverty experience not just financial but also time and digital poverties. This creates additional demands on services to ensure interventions are accessible, provide enough lead-in time to plan around, and avoid over-reliance on digital forms of communication. Service providers need to understand the multiple poverties and lived experiences that people are often managing, and design services that are easy to access and engage with.

Build trusted institutions: All participants reported feeling an erosion in their sense of community over the last 10 years. One of the only remaining trusted relationships is with schools due to patchy provision for children in other areas. High levels of distrust also require language modifications – promoting 'funded' rather than 'free' lunches was more effective where trust was low. Working over long periods of time in place could be one way for institutions to build reliable and trusted relationships.

Case study profile: Norfolk

Team composition	
Academic	University of East Anglia
Local government	Norfolk County Council, King's Lynn and West Norfolk District Council
Community	Community Action Norfolk, Norfolk Community Foundation

Policy issue: social isolation

The initial point of contact in Norfolk was the County Council's Strategy and Transformation team, who had already identified a local challenge with loneliness and isolation linked to poor health outcomes (Burton, 2022). Norfolk County Council identified an opportunity to build new partnerships, reaching out to a District Council, local VCSE organisations and universities to build a team.

The team identified intersecting causes of the policy problem, from marginalisation due to youth, gender and disability, through to life triggers such as bereavement or job loss. A key challenge was having the infrastructure in place to support social interactions. Throughout the problem-definition and project development phase, the team were aware that the perspectives of young people were often missing in questions of loneliness and social isolation. The team wanted to understand how young people experience social isolation and whether or not the concept resonates with them.

The team identified a focus on health provision supporting critical need, but little support earlier in a person's journey towards chronic loneliness. This led to the team questioning what 'good' rather than 'emergency' policy might look like, leading to the following problem statement:

"Trends are changing around who is impacted by loneliness and how it's experienced. What we do know is that feelings of loneliness are increasing in younger populations. We don't fully understand why because young people are not asked, and so their voices are not well represented in decision-making. We also don't know the longer-term implications of this on society."

Pilot project

Norfolk's pilot project kicked off with a workshop held with VSCE partners of the team working with young people. From this workshop, 'Project Connect' was developed – a community research and design challenge with young people exploring their experiences of loneliness in Norfolk and their ideas for change.

Launching a 'design challenge' for young people, a competition where participants submit their ideas for tackling a particular challenge, was an opportunity both to gather more data about young people's experiences of loneliness and invite youth voices into the policymaking process.

The team experimented with a range of channels for outreach, including a snapchat account, reaching out to a local social media influencer agency, and relying on partners such as the council's schools team. The hope was that social media would provide a way to directly understand the experience of young people. However, uptake was low, and the team ended up looking to more established routes to sample young people (eg, school teams, case workers, council service users). Although this might be framed as a 'failure', learning how difficult it is to seed a social media campaign was still valuable.

There was a strong response to the design challenge, with around 110 responses including a high proportion of young people facing structural barriers (SEN, care experienced, carers, LGBTQ+). The Norfolk team invited a shortlist of young people to a series of workshops exploring the issue of social isolation, and partnered them with VSCE organisations who can pilot their ideas. Four young innovators were selected to join the design challenge. Across a series of workshops, they shared things that were important to them and developed their ideas. Issues around finding free, accessible spaces and places for young people to hang out and be themselves came top of the things they wanted to address.

Banner image for 'Project Connect', Norfolk Community Foundation

They have been working collaboratively to design and deliver a number of place-based events and social media campaigns that point to the things that make great hang-out spaces for young people.

Key policy takeaways

Understand young people: A challenge was finding language to talk about isolation that was mutually understandable between young people and the team. Young people said they felt "put off" by efforts by others describing their lives and and commented that they felt "imposed on" by efforts to address the situations that were not youth-led. Understanding the perspective of young people can ensure that policies and initiatives speak a language that will resonate with the people they're meant to support.

Improve digital life skills: Use of digital devices and spaces were seen as a "double edged sword" by young people for loneliness and social isolation. The internet enhanced the ease of communication and connection, a feature leveraged by the project team for outreach. Yet it was also identified as a source of harm for young people, contributing to anxiety. Equipping young people with the right skills to use digital technology, ways that work for them, will be an essential challenge for supporting young people's health and wellbeing.

Accessible 'hang out' spaces: One of the key findings from the project was the importance of physical spaces that are affordable and accessible for young people to 'hang out' in. These are relaxed settings where young people can spend time with friends. Physical social infrastructures make it easier to build and maintain social connections, and the presence or absence of these spaces are felt acutely by young people.

Increase mental health provision: The project team theorised that social anxiety was a core driver of youth social isolation. Other issues (eg, transport) contributed, but were also used as means to reinforce isolating behaviours, which may have formed in response to distressing experiences. Responses to the survey highlighted young people describing smartphones as more reliable for meeting their needs than people.

Creating an environment for co-production

The programme was designed to create an environment where effective co-production could happen. It is not easy to come together as relative strangers to deliver a project in a short space of time. Despite this, every location-based team was able to deliver an innovative mini-project that contributed learnings and outcomes to their chosen policy problem.

This chapter explores what was effective, based on participants' feedback and observations from the facilitation team.

Enablers of policy co-production

Learning journey

The programme started with a 'learning journey', which introduced all the case study teams to the core principles of co-production and equipped them with the tools to explore their 'policy problem'. This had a dual effect of ensuring people's knowledge of co-production was equal, and giving the teams an opportunity to build internal relationships and understanding.

The learning journey was split into 'cohort-wide' sessions and 'case study' sessions. The were cohort-wide 'synchronous' sessions, which involved all participants, were arranged at the outset of the programme to maximise availability.

Policy learning and pilot design during these sessions was informed by the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) framework, developed by the Building State Capability programme at Harvard University (Andrews et al., 2018). This approach focuses on an iterative process of breaking down 'wicked' policy issues to root causes, and identifying possible entry points for change. Drawing from the PDIA action book and social innovation toolkits the learning journey embedded practical activities into every session. This supported the case study teams to understand their policy issue and generate ideas for pilots (see figures 3 and 4 on page 19).

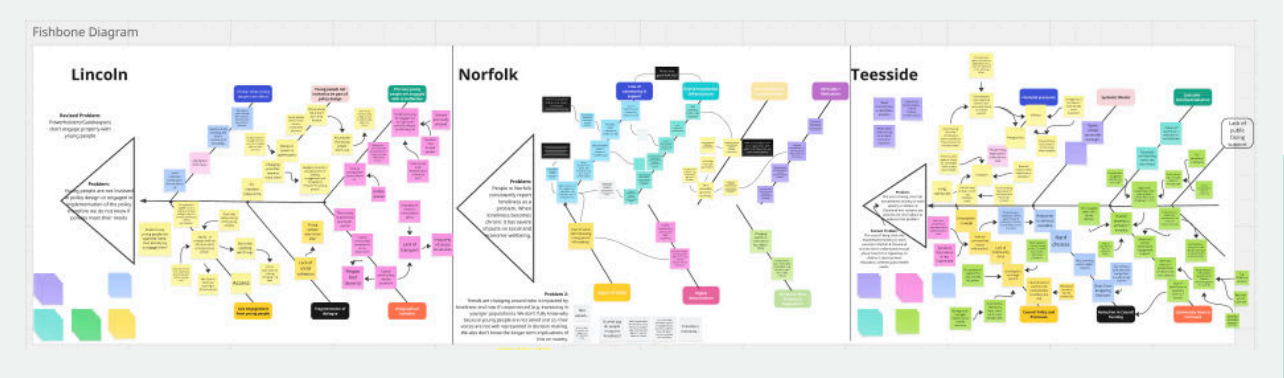


Figure 3: Fishbone' diagram used to break down causes into further sub-causes and identify potential points of intervention. The image illustrates the process in action

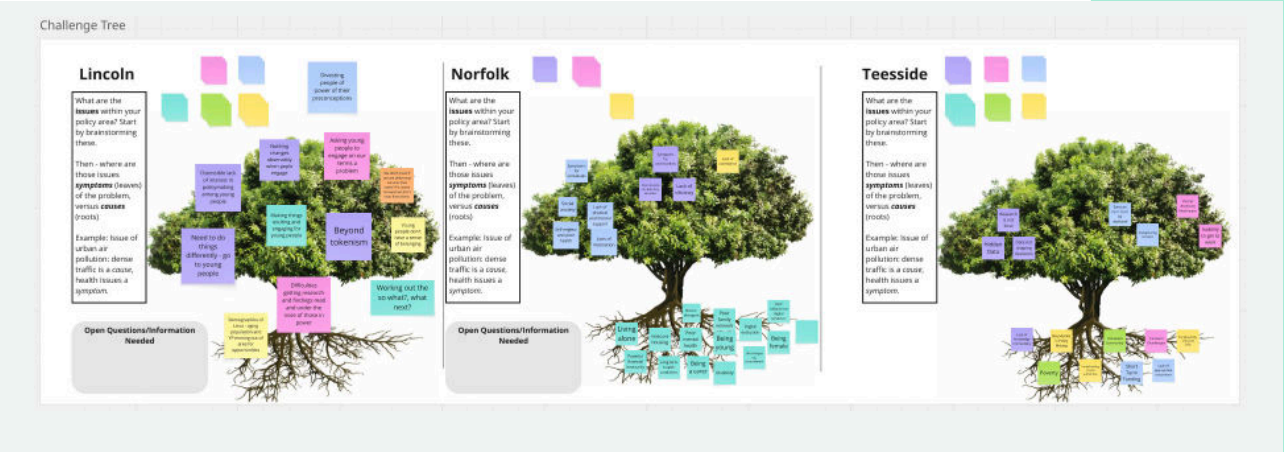


Figure 4: The 'Roots and Leaves' exercise, designed to help teams differentiate between visible symptoms (leaves) and underlying causes (roots) of their policy challenge. The image illustrates the process in action.

During this stage, participants were often overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the issues they were interested in. The learning journey allowed teams to navigate this collectively, and articulate the 'problem' they sought to address with a pilot intervention. Based on feedback, it also opened the space for teams to learn how they could work together, getting to know different priorities, perspectives and working styles.

Collaborative tone

The programme sought to set a collaborative tone, to facilitate connection between case study teams and places. At the outset of the learning journey, the cohort co-created 'co-production principles' (see figure 5), which were revisited at every session and informed how the group would work together. The Institute for Community Studies also introduced regular light-touch reflection points at the end of cohort-wide sessions and during case study 'asynchronous' sessions.

In feedback, case studies found the cross-cohort collaboration particularly valuable as opportunities to share challenges and ideas for overcoming those challenges. Case-study collaboration was also extolled as a strong virtue of the experience, building new networks and relationships between organisations that will continue beyond the project. Though several participants had met before, it was often during 'consultations' or other discussion-based meetings that lacked a practical element. This project allowed different organisations to work together towards an intervention and therefore learn from each other on a deeper level.

> **What we were really testing was whether this mode of working together was effective.**

Community organisation participant

> **It was challenging, I had work in the area that I wanted to achieve but for a collaboration I didn't want it to be just about what I wanted to do.**

Academic participant

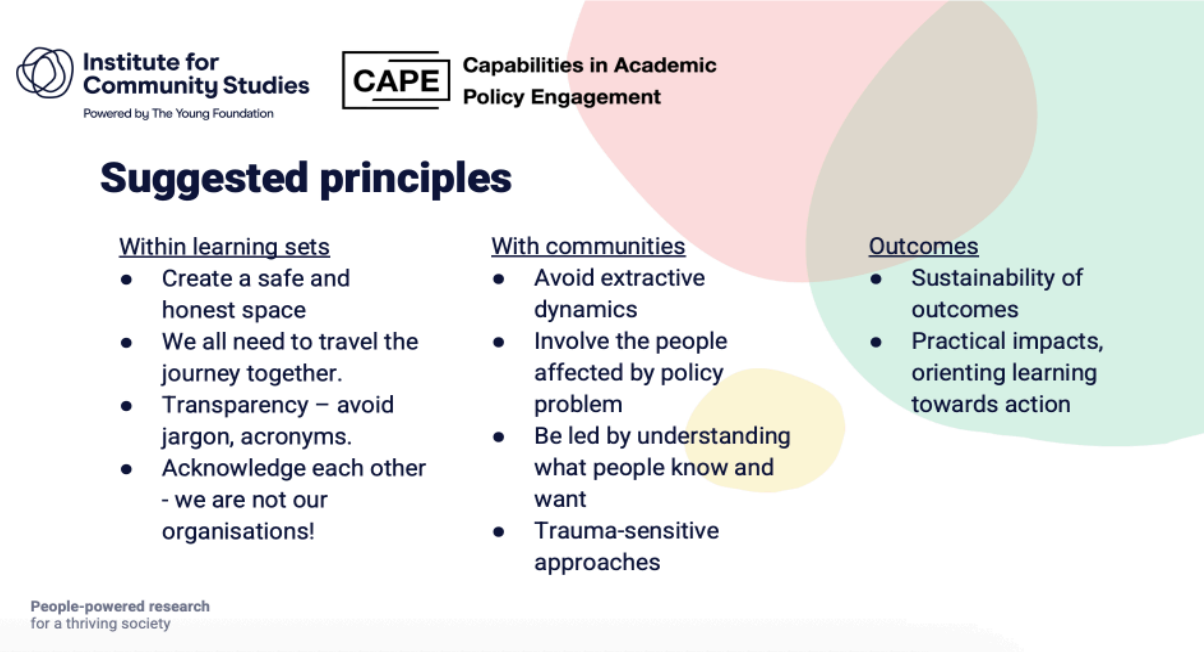


Figure 5. Co-production princples agreed by participants

Space to fail

As a research project, the UCL-CAPE collaboration with the Institute for Community Studies prioritised activities that generated learning of value to the wider public. As a result, the Institute's facilitators made it clear from the beginning that the key outcomes for this programme were not solely focused on impact, and that learning through trying was just as valid as delivering a routine but reliable project. Whilst teams were encouraged to collected data that could allow an evaluation of their pilot interventions, funding was not conditional on targets. This allowed teams to move past more traditional metrics for success and focus on how they could learn through experimentation and collaborative evaluation.

This feature of the co-production space received highly positive feedback from project participants. Failures or challenges encountered by teams were shared openly in cohort spaces without fear of risking funding, creating new opportunities for learning. Participants felt that knowing it was acceptable for an intervention to be unsuccessful (provided it generated new knowledge) allowed them to orient towards action and innovation rather than worry about pursuing the 'wrong' activity. It also created a greater scope to engage individuals with lived experience and shape interventions according to community perspectives, as teams could access the £25k without any requirement to precisely define the form of the intervention.

> To hear that we could get things wrong was liberating. To have that from the start let us put preconceived ideas out the door and see what happens.

Community organisation participant

> The flexibility of the funding allowed people to listen to the community.

Academic participant

Recruitment

The collaboration benefitted greatly from the fact that, from the outset, case study teams had the buy-in of their senior leadership colleagues, who recognised the strategic value of the programme. Community organisations also tended to have strong representation from senior management, allowing teams to initially focus on prioritisation and scoping their policy problem, before staff and organisations closer to the 'frontline' were brought into the project.

In addition, in the recruitment process, the Institute team was able to identify individuals would had already 'bought-in' to the values of co-production. Although this also represents a missed opportunity to spread awareness of co-production techniques, it allowed for a smooth functioning of teams who quickly united around common values and purpose.

> **What enables the psychological capacity for changemaking – people who are lightly oppositional, who can sell ideas but also operate within a structure.**
>
> **Academic participant**

Barriers to policy co-production

Staff time and capacity

> [Co-production] requires people who are really committed to the process.
>
> **Local government participant**

It is worth reflecting that many of the individuals initially recruited to take part in the mini-projects did not see these through to completion. This was most commonly due to overstretched capacity and a tight funding environment across all sectors involved in the co-production projects. The £25k grant did not cover time spent during the learning journey or the design phase, and project teams reported providing unfunded staff time towards strategic or evaluative elements of project delivery.

Allocating staff time across the different organisations was also challenging because of different funding models. For example, one of the project teams struggled to 'free up' time for local government staff despite offering resource to compensate for days dedicated to the project. University and community organisation staff time was comparably more flexible for project-based work. However, university staff faced challenges in allocating their time due to university-set day-rates that were often much higher than their team counterparts.

When capacity is stretched, experimental projects that are 'above and beyond' core work are often the first to be dropped. In some cases, community organisations and local authorities experienced funding crises that dramatically affected participation in the project. One community organisation experienced a significant funding cut from the local government entity in their case study team, which fortunately did not undermine the collaboration.

Finance and administrative systems

For a small-scale project, organisations needed be able to receive and spend grant money rapidly. However, not every organisation is set up to handle finance efficiently. Each of the case study groups selected a different sector partner (university, local government, community organisation) to manage its finances.

Within the cohort, university ecosystems struggled the most to disburse funds, being set up around large research grants. Strict internal processes, as well as finance teams unfamiliar with the projects and fluid nature of co-production processes, introduced delays that were challenging to organisations paying upfront for delivery. However, participants reflected that, for larger sums of money, universities may be more effective as fiscal hosts for the project, given their larger finance team capacity.

Many of the teams also encountered administrative barriers. The root of these issue was how to deliver a project that did not neatly fit within pre-existing systems, such as ethical clearance, which (for example) in a university context often requires a highly detailed and defined project approach. Whereas the relationship between the facilitation team and case study teams developed to a point of high trust, staff members in administrative and financial functions were external to case study teams and less comfortable with uncertainty. Teams were able to work around these barriers through allocations of responsibilities to community organisations, but at the same time community organisations also faced the greatest capacity constraints.

Pace and iteration

> On one hand, more lead-in time would have led to a more successful iteration… However, at the same time, the timing forced action, to do something without fear of failure and learn from it. We learned things doing this we were not even aware we didn't know previously.

Community organisation participant

The nature of the project, as a one-off £25k grant, meant the pace was frenetic for participants. At the outset of the delivery phase, it became clear that the initial goal of completing projects within six months was unrealistic. The programme was eventually extended to the end of the year.

Participants had mixed views on the extent to which this harmed or helped the co-production environment. Many commented on the fast pace and the challenge of getting projects out the door, but also felt that the pace focused the team to act quickly and 'fail fast' – learning when something wasn't working and being able to rapidly adjust. Several participants felt that, with more time, the nature of the pilot interventions would not have significantly changed, simply become more refined or engaged in longer consultation. Instead, teams suggested structuring the programme around 'iterations' of the policy intervention, with time for evaluation and community engagement in between to widen the co-production space. This would have allowed the same 'fast fail' environment whilst allowing projects to build on their learning more sustainably.

Knowledge, roles and responsibilities

Frameworks such as 'evidence based policymaking' are presented as commonsense based policymaking' are presented as commonsense approaches to policy design (see Al-Akhali, 2022), evidence use in policy development, design and delivery is by no means straightforward. There are many obstacles, including access to evidence, issues of timing, and the complexity of incorporating evidence alongside other factors in decision-making (Cairney, 2017). The challenge of aligning evidence 'supply' with policy 'demand' also raises questions about how, and by whom, policy priorities are shaped.

Evidence-based policy frameworks also hide a set of assumptions about what knowledge or 'evidence' is, and who holds it. These assumptions may exclude voices and communities who lack access to power but are directly affected by the policy issue at hand (Speed and Reeves, 2023).

'Lived experience' and 'local knowledge' paradigms seek to challenge these assumptions of who holds evidence:

- **Lived experience** is knowledge accumulated through life experience (Mintrom, Grocott and Sumartojo, 2024)
- **Local knowledge** refers to knowledge, adapted to the local context, that a community has developed over time (FAO United Nations, 2004).

Practitioners, policymakers and advocates have argued for greater inclusion of this type of knowledge through 'co-production', where individuals cast as 'subjects' in the policymaking (policy done 'to' or 'for') become active participants in the design process (policy done 'with' or 'by') (Blomkamp, 2018). Justifications for why co-production is beneficial vary, from a belief that they create greater accountability, to improving outcomes through knowledge transfer between parties, to broader notions of democratic justice (Dean, 2016).

These principles motivated our decision to test co-production techniques with local stakeholders and this chapter reflects on how different areas of expertise and skill were drawn upon in the co-production process.

Lived experience

From the outset of the programme, participants expressed anxiety about the lack of lived experience in the room from individuals that had directly experienced the issues teams discussed, particularly young people. This was expressed both as a fear of not having the right information, and so making incorrect assumptions or decisions, and from concerns about replicating harmful power dynamics by acting 'for' a group that was not present.

> **It's easy to end up navel-gazing about co-production. In your effort make things as inclusive as possible, you can get stuck in endless considerations. At some point you need to define what's possible and not get overwhelmed.**
>
> **Local government participant**

This was reflected in the case study problem definitions, all of which referenced a lack of understanding or knowledge about an issue by key stakeholders as part of the 'problem'. To address this, each of the pilot projects themselves incorporated aspects of co-production with individuals seen as 'closer' to the policy issue due to their lived experience. During delivery of the mini-projects, case study teams often involved more frontline staff members or smaller charities doing direct service provision to support this activity.

Layering co-production

> The people who were the change makers weren't necessarily the same people we started with.

Academic participant

Different roles for stakeholders emerged at each level of this 'layered' co-production, reflected in the changing composition of the case study teams. The learning journey phase involved staff and organisations focused on strategic vision, identifying critical gaps in coverage that fit with local government opportunities, such as local Towns Fund decisions.

After the problem was identified, partners leveraged their networks to identify directly involved delivery partners or staff members who could provide necessary local connections and delivery expertise. The next 'level' of co-production then directly involved individuals with lived experience of the issue identified by the case study team. Case study teams reflected that this layered approach allowed the space for broader strategic discussions, drawing on local knowledge, to identify an issue with buy-in across sectors and then 'pass the baton' to delivery partners and those with direct lived experience to co-produce solutions.

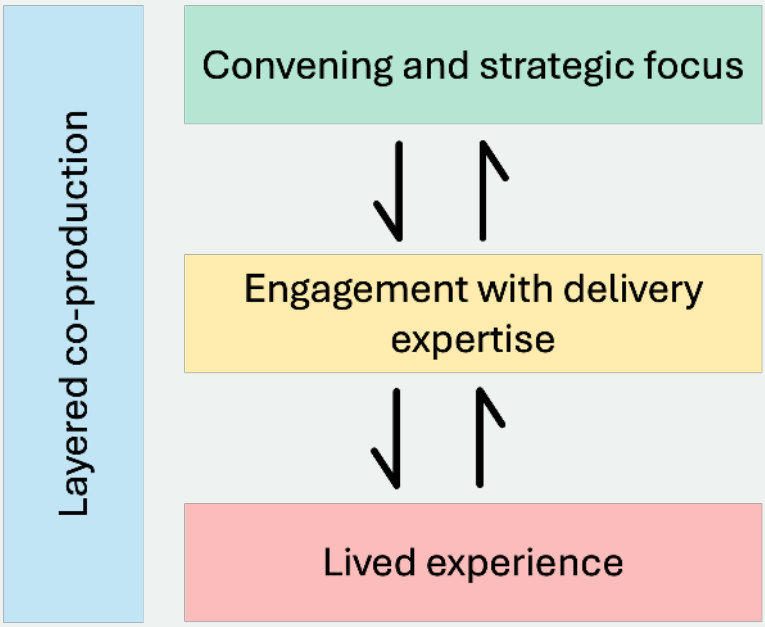


Figure 6. Diagram of layered co-production

Complementary knowledges

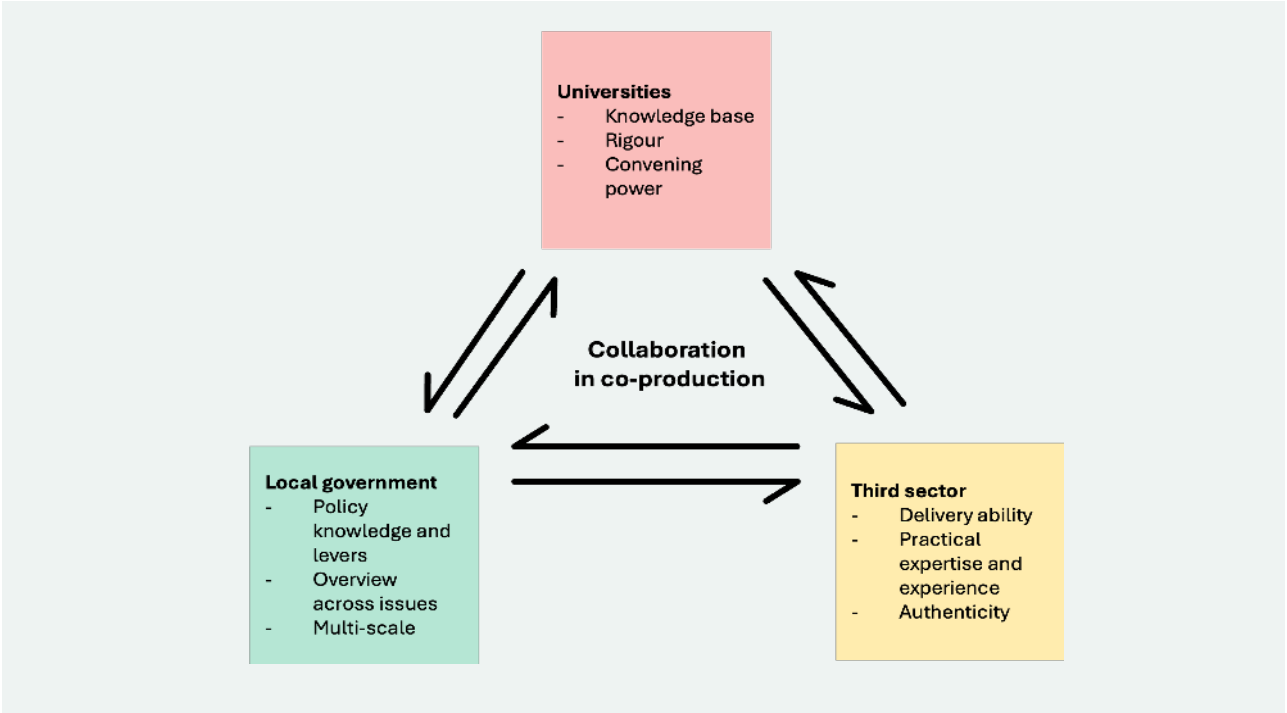
> It was a challenging process that was really slow, but maybe for the other people it didn't feel as slow. Levelling [a hierarchy] requires some kind of compromise."

Academic participant

The experience of project teams also highlights the role of academic knowledge in co-production. Academics reflected on the need to 'step back' from their deep knowledge of their subject area to allow other voices in, using their traditional knowledge of the evidence base to complement, rather than drive, the route to identifying the issue. There was also a slight tension between academics whose expertise and interest were highly defined, with local government and larger community organisations who were more flexible in their population and topic of interest.

Given pressures faced by academics to justify their time spent on the project, this introduced challenges when case study partners began to drift away from their area of subject expertise. Academics navigated this in different ways: some dropped out of the project, others participated whilst additionally building connections relevant to their area of academic interest, and others felt it was a necessary compromise as part of the co-production method.

During the delivery phase, the network and delivery knowledge of third sector and government partners came to the fore, allowing for rapid deployment and experimentation. In addition, although each of the projects generated new academic and policy insights, all teams reflected on how their network and delivery knowledge had deepened over the course of the project. In comparison with academic knowledge, which often requires consolidation through write-up and disseminated, the network and delivery knowledge used and generated through this process was diffused across the different 'layers' of the co-production process.



		Sector partners		
		Universities	Local government	Third Sector
Stage of policy co-production	Problem identification	• Extensive traditional knowledge base. • Established research agendas and partnerships, making for a productive starting point.	• Knowing what will align with local government strategic priorities. • Abreast of statistical dataset and trends. • Understand where levers for change might be.	• On-the-ground experience of the lived reality of particular problems. • Know key individuals and 'super-connectors'. • Prior experience of what works practically.
	Project development	• Methodological expertise, knowing how to design a project to elicit the most learnings.	• Internal advocacy for issues that 'fall between the gaps'. • Understanding of local government interests and upcoming activity.	• Knowing how to translate ideas into delivery activity. • Knowing the additional people to bring into the project. • Connection to individuals with lived experience.
	Project delivery	• A strong brand that can open doors for delivery (ie, schools, libraries, leisure centres).	• An organisation that can address many different issues, at many different scales. • Quick access to pre-existing service users.	• Able to move at speed to deliver projects on-the-ground. • Have experience of working with individuals in need. • Are often set up to take in money (grants, contracts), and distribute money (delivery, incentives).
	Impact and evaluation	• Evaluation expertise. • Can consolidate outputs into a strong document. • Act as a functional repository of learnings and impact.	• Able to translate learnings into policy work.	• Have an ear for an impactful story. • Legitimacy as an authentic voice.

Table 1. Roles and responsibilities at different steps of the policy co-production journey

The policy landscape and young people

One of the striking outcomes of the case study mini-projects is that all of them coalesced around social and economic issues experienced by young people. Norfolk focused on loneliness and social isolation amongst young people, Lincoln on youth political disengagement, and Teesside on families with young children experiencing in-work poverty.

Why did these different locations, with the freedom to define any policy problem of their choosing, settle on young people? By exploring different contexts that may have shaped these decisions, this section sheds light on participant motivations for policy co-production.

Deterioration in conditions for young people

Young people were identified as facing significant challenges. Case study teams articulated how young people had experienced the 'sharp end' of recent crises, such as the disruption caused by Covid-19, austerity and subsequent public service closure, and economic disruption and the cost-of-living crisis. This was seen as having significant downstream implications for places, such as a loss of community vibrancy, driving young people to move away to seek better opportunities or withdraw further from public life (Lincoln, Norfolk). Additional stress on healthcare services (Norfolk, Teesside), and long-term unemployment (Teesside), were also factors.

At the same time, teams identified a lack of reliable data about young people's experiences and ideas, which made addressing the situation more difficult. For Teesside, families experiencing in-work poverty were 'hidden' in local data that focused on rates of unemployment and use of welfare services. National statistics and local government surveys indicating a mental health crisis and high levels of reported social isolation were interpreted as a 'call to action' by the Norfolk and Lincoln teams, but shed little light on the cause of the problem.

This suggests that case study teams were motivated firstly by the urgency and intensity of challenges faced by young people. At the same time, a feeling that they lacked information or insight into the problem may have motivated their 'co-production' approach with young people and other local stakeholders.

Operating between policy silos

> [This work] has raised the profile of a topic that falls between the gaps of different local government departments."

Local government participant

All three of the case study teams identified that their policy issue 'fell between the cracks' of different government departments and felt that young people lacked dedicated services looking out for their interests. Beyond schools, the social issues experienced by young people were felt to be approached as an 'add-on' to other social issues (eg, youth unemployment). However, effective working with young people required skills, specific approaches to outreach, and administrative policies.

By subverting these traditional silo constraints, co-production allowed for unique combinations of stakeholders and skillsets. This made young people a more obvious audience by allowing a wider space of possible interventions and outcomes.

Political marginalisation

> ‘Hard to reach’ is the normal. We just don’t reach out to young people because we don’t get funding for it.”

Community organisation participant

Our case study teams reflected that young people were in a systemically more difficult position to achieve policy influence than other groups. Under 18s are not able to vote and thus cannot hold national policymakers to account via the ballot box. This means they are not necessarily recognised as a stakeholder group, and there are no defined routes through which they are consulted, or where their views can be channelled to inform policy decisions. In contrast, this project allowed young people’s interests to be carefully considered.

The freedom of this project then meant young people’s interests could be carefully considered. Rather than asking young people to engage on the terms of traditional processes, co-production allowed for a wider range of approaches that could promise more meaningful change for young people and address this vicious cycle.

Conclusions

Taking part in this project was a humbling and hopeful experience for all members of the research team at the Institute for Community Studies. We were fortunate to work a committed and passionate group of changemakers, with the courage and insight to translate 'wicked' problems into meaningful change and the redistribution of power.

Co-production opens innumerable new opportunities for experimentation, impact and learning. Yet, as Project Change recently highlights in their 'Bleeding Obvious Report' (2025), it too often remains 'vibes-based', and not attached to tangible outputs. One unique feature of this project was the focus on action and the willingness to fail, lowering the stakes for participants to experiment and learn. The 'layered' model, where local stakeholders set out the strategic need before engaging directly with service users or those with lived experience, is an exciting approach to ensure co-production is geared towards meaningful action.

Although this project was a small year-long pilot, which initially focused on co-production between institutional stakeholders, there are many opportunities to scale this work. This conclusion section summarises our key learnings for how universities, local government and third sector organisations can better work together.

Cross-cutting recommendations

Our observations suggest the following values are of particular importance to cross-sector teams in co-productions environments:

Recognise complementary expertise: Co-production requires participants' discretion at both 'stepping up' and 'stepping back'. Different combinations of traditional, local, delivery and network knowledge were distributed across members (varying both across- and within- sector). Delivering a successful pilot relied on creating a team environment where different types of knowledge were effectively shared, recognised, and factored into delivery.

Understand and enable each other's distinct roles: During the pilot phase, teams worked most effectively together with a clear understanding of who would 'lead' different parts of the delivery, and how other partners could support that leadership. For example, voluntary sector partners could mobilise resources quickly, enabled by academic or local government partner support in broadcasting or leveraging their well-known brand.

Invest in relationship-building: Co-production requires a high degree of trust, and so taking time to build relationships between participants opens the way for smoother delivery as well as deeper learning.

Create room for failure and iteration: Relationships, learning and innovation are best enabled by allowing room for failure and iteration to improve initially tested ideas. In co-production, funders must be open to undefined goals and instead put their faith in the potential of prospective co-production teams.

Recommendations for universities

Practice long-term commitment to improving collaboration and conditions in their place: Universities' role in co-production fits into a wider initiative of the civic university agenda, calling for a renewed focus on how universities can collaboratively work in their places alongside other local stakeholders. Central to this is investing in and building meaningful and lasting relationships.

Use university assets in co-production: In co-production environments, universities can leverage their reputation as anchor institutions, and their research capabilities, to support the delivery efforts of partners. They can also have a strong role as a convener and facilitator. Placing greater internal emphasis on academics' civic contributions, and driving greater flexibility in academic areas of focus, would allow for broader utilisation of university knowledge assets.

Delegation and power-sharing: Willingness to delegate and devolve funding and delivery is essential to ensure co-production is genuinely cooperative and effective.

Flexible pay structures: Adopting more flexible pay structures within projects (such as day rates for community-oriented work) better enables academics to work with community partners.

Recommendations for local government

Identify 'between the cracks' problems: Problems that intersect across several areas of core service delivery and departments can be especially difficult to address. Co-production can identify these issues and mobilise stakeholders around action.

Connect service-users: Lived experience is an invaluable source of knowledge when seeking to address tough policy issues. Connecting service-users to policy co-production spaces not only shares power but can also generate new insights into what makes an intervention effective or ineffective.

Provide 'how-to' briefings for working with organisations: Local government operations and internal structures can appear opaque for external partners. Publishing 'how-to' briefings for stakeholders to use when pitching co-production and partnership opportunities lowers these barriers.

Recommendations for the third sector

Clearly set out need: With a combination of practical knowledge and on-the-ground experience of the lived reality of problems, third sector organisations are well placed to strategically steer co-production groups towards priority community needs.

Articulate value: Third sector organisations were invaluable in the delivery of pilot projects. Clearly communicating the networks, capabilities and ethos of your organisation to partners can effectively build trust and enable organisations' strengths.

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