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Article

The case against co-production as a silver bullet: Why and when citizens should *not* be involved in public service delivery

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Abstract

Co-production refers to the collaboration of public service professionals and citizens / service users in the design and delivery of public services, which is said to make services more effective, democratic, and efficient. Despite normative agreement of the benefits of co-production, some practitioners argue that there are instances in which co-production is not the silver bullet that it is promised to be. These arguments are that co-production should *not* be undertaken: when it is under resourced, when the involvement of citizens substitutes paid work, or when co-production is asking too much of citizens. Instead, I argue that practitioners should consider whether citizen involvement in public service delivery can be done meaningfully, in a way that builds upon the expertise of both professionals and citizens instead of assuming that co-production is always the answer.

Key words

Co-production, public services, citizen involvement.

Introduction

Co-production of public services has become one of the biggest trends in public management research and theory over the past 20 years. As public problems become increasingly complex and seemingly wicked, public servants and non-profit professionals are on the lookout for new ways of delivering public services that are cheaper, more effective, and more adaptable to the needs of ageing and increasingly diverse populations. It is within this context that co-production – an idea originally developed in the late 1970s – sprang back into the public and academic consciousness. Theorists argue that co-production, meaning the involvement of service users and/or community members in delivering the services they would otherwise passively consume, is part of a new trend in public governance where the state recognizes citizens and third sector organizations as equal partners. Co-production is said to rebalance the distribution of power between professionals and service users, creating more

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public value as the state makes better use of the skills, expertise, and resources of citizens, rather than seeing citizens as passive beneficiaries.

Co-production certainly has the potential to do some of these things, and indeed, studies have shown that involving service users in co-production creates public value and can lead to improved outcomes in multiple different service areas including health, urban development and public safety [1], [2], [3]. However, the overwhelming optimism of scholars about the *potential* benefits of co-production has significantly outweighed the empirical evidence that proves that co-production actually creates the espoused benefits. With increasing scepticism that co-production can simultaneously lead to cheaper but also more democratic, effective, and empowering services, some have begun to explore the 'dark sides' of co-production and question, does co-production live up to the hype? And furthermore, should public service professionals really always be aiming for full co-production of all services, with all service users, all the time?

In this article, I consider these questions, or more specifically when and why co-production may *not* be appropriate, effective, or advisable. To be clear – I am not arguing against co-production as a concept, full stop. Instead, based on discussions with practitioners in multiple countries, I raise arguments against the normative assumption that co-production should and can happen in every service field and that co-production is *de facto* beneficial.

First, I explain the concept of co-production and discuss the various purported outcomes and benefits attributed to these types of collaborative practices. I then outline three arguments against the implementation of co-production in all public service encounters. Finally, I present some propositions for practitioners regarding how to decide if, when, and how co-production can be employed meaningfully in a way that benefits both practitioners and service users.

Co-production of public services

Though co-production is not a new concept – indeed, it was originally developed in the late 1970s [4] – the turn of the 21st century saw a rapid upswing in interest in the notion, with many academic, public policy and think tank articles arguing for the numerous benefits of co-production [5], [6], [7]. Though there is a lack of agreement about definitions, I draw upon Bovaird's [5] conception of co-production as the involvement of service users or other members of the community in both designing (making decisions about) public services as well as delivering them. This means that citizens are not simply consulted about public services, but rather work as equal partners with public service professionals, contributing their time and effort to service delivery, i.e. through volunteering, mentoring, or contributing complementary tasks to public service delivery.

For example, studies on childcare and family services showed that parents can be involved in co-producing their children's day-care by participating in the governance of co-operative nurseries and family programmes, and by chaperoning field trips, preparing snacks, or supporting day-care workers in day-to-day tasks [8], [9]. Thus, while early years practitioners are responsible for the professional task of children's care, parents contribute their time, and their particular resources and expertise to the delivery of childcare services. In the context of refugee integration, refugee service users and local volunteers can both engage in the co-production of integration services: refugees can act as peer mentors and translators for other refugees/migrants, and locals can volunteer for language cafes, informal social activities and buddy programs for refugees [10], [11]. Other research has explored the involvement of service

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users and their family members in disability services [12] and eldercare [13], the co-production of neighbourhood and community development projects [14], [15], and the co-production of public safety [3].

Much of the co-production literature has been overwhelmingly positive about the benefits and opportunities of co-production. As Boyle and Harris [6, p. 12] argue, co-production

> *"goes well beyond the idea of 'citizen engagement' or 'service user involvement' to foster the principle of equal partnership. It offers to transform the dynamic between the public and public service workers, putting an end to 'them' and 'us'. Instead, people pool different types of knowledge and skills, based on lived experience and professional learning."*

Arguments about the positive benefits of co-production abound: involving users more directly in service delivery is said to tackle the democratic deficit by allowing citizens to have more direct influence over public services [16]. Through building trust and dialogue between professionals and service users, co-production is expected to improve service quality as staff better understand citizen needs and preferences [17]. It is also seen as a way to empower citizens, increase social capital, and improve services [18]. From a financial point of view, these processes are also expected to make public services more efficient [19]. It is difficult to argue against co-production.

Curiously, the evidence supporting many of these ambitious claims is still hard to come by – the academic community has focused significantly more on the barriers and obstacles to co-production [20], [21], and on typologising the different forms of co-production and different roles for citizens and professionals [22], [23]. There has been far less attention to proving that co-production works. This is in part because of the fluid and relational nature of co-production, meaning that it is often quite difficult to evidence qualitative improvements, as well as the fact that the benefits from co-production may accrue in a different area of public services than where the co-production process or activities took place. For instance, co-producing individual support plans with teenage parents may reduce the strain on housing support services, but the correlation is difficult to evaluate. Given these constraints, several articles suggest more adaptable, flexible ways of evidencing the outcomes or benefits of co-production [24], [25].

Some studies have investigated the potential obstacles or barriers to co-production. Staff may lack the skills and training necessary to engage citizens in co-production [20]. Professional and organizational culture also act as barriers. Public organizations in particular are perceived as bureaucratic and risk averse, which makes it difficult to change practices to involve new forms of expertise and action into public service provision [9]. On the side of citizens and service users, many of the obstacles that prevent people from taking part in co-production are quite similar to identified barriers to any type of public participation, such as a lack of time, confidence, training or information about involvement activities [26], [27].

More recently, scholars have begun to inject some scepticism into the study of co-production, questioning whether there is in fact a 'dark side' to this seemingly ideal concept. Co-production may in fact destroy (or co-contaminate) value for the public, such as neighbourhood watch groups that have led to serious injury or death of innocent civilians [28]. In the realm of healthcare, examples have shown that co-production initiatives have sometimes become co-opted by professionals, leading to a re-creation rather than challenging of power structures and causing frustration for citizens [29]. Engaging citizens in service delivery also leads to the risk of failing accountability and legitimacy of public services, if roles and responsibilities are not

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clarified and government shifts responsibility to citizens rather than working in collaboration [30].

Data

The data for this article is derived from several qualitative research projects about various aspects of co-production in the context of non-profit organizations, exploring how, why, and when staff of these non-profit organizations engage citizens in the design and delivery of their services. Interviews were conducted with staff members (both managers and frontline staff), board members, volunteers and service users of organizations in England (total 38 interviews), Scotland (12), France (32), Quebec, Canada (20) and Austria (20) [9], [31], [32]. The organizations that interviewees work and volunteer for provide a range of social, leisure and support services, from general public health and social services, community development, family services, and refugee integration services.

Interviewees were asked about their organization's overall approach to service delivery, their approaches to service user and community member involvement, and enablers and constraints to co-production. For the purposes of this article, interviewees have been fully anonymised. Interview data was also complemented by an analysis of organizational documents (e.g. funding bids, annual reports, evaluations) and observations of meetings and service delivery activities.

While by and large interviewees were positive about the value of engaging service users in co-production, in some instances, frontline staff members and senior leaders expressed scepticism either about co-production as a concept, or about the value or benefit of involving volunteers and service users in some aspects of service delivery. Given the seemingly universally normative appeal of the concept of co-production (particularly in the UK, where much of the empirical research was conducted), this was initially a bit puzzling. If, as the literature claims, co-production can make services more effective, efficient, democratic, and empowering, how could one argue against it? The claims against co-production were thus probed in more detail to explore the motivations behind why (or when) some organizations intentionally choose not to engage service users or volunteers in co-producing their services, and their reasons behind this. Interviews were analysed thematically to identify key themes that relate to attitudes and positions against 'co-production as a silver bullet', three of which form the structure of the next section. The purpose of the following section is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of particular case studies, but rather to explore in some detail the themes arising regarding the arguments against co-production.

When is co-production not the answer?

Many studies have shown that co-production creates positive benefits for people, both individually and collectively, and this messaging has been convincing for public service professionals. Some organizations have taken the notion of co-production on board wholeheartedly. As a frontline staff member for a program in the UK described their approach,

> *"We said everything we do is going to be co-designed, co-delivered, co-evaluated. It's going to be better. We're going to do it better than anyone else can do it." (Senior staff, England)*

But given what we increasingly understand about the drawbacks or dark side of co-production, there is a real question about whether *everything should* be co-produced. In this section, I

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describe three primary arguments of instances when co-production is not the answer; or, in other words, when co-production may not meaningfully improve the quality, efficiency, and/or effectiveness of public services. These instances are: (1) when the resources and time for co-production are insufficient; (2) when volunteers substitute paid work; and (3) when co-production asks too much of citizens.

When the resources and time for co-production are insufficient

One of the often touted arguments about the benefits of co-production is that it can make public services more efficient [33]. This argument is based on the assumption that by having a better understanding of citizens' needs and desires, services can avoid costly duplication and ineffectively designed services that are not fit for purpose. This argument that co-production makes services cheaper is no doubt part of the driving force behind why many of the UK government's public service austerity measures of the last 20 years were put into place alongside token community building initiatives. The problem with this notion of co-production is that it fails to take account of the fact that often – at least in the short term – investing in the time, resources, training, and support necessary to engage citizens in co-production may actually be more expensive than traditional public service delivery. In fact, the reason that co-produced services are sometimes cheaper is not because they are better or more efficient per se, but because some of the work previously done by paid professionals has been shifted to volunteers (whose labour is not financially quantified)[34].

The first argument against the co-production silver bullet is thus that co-production should not be undertaken if not properly resourced [9], [35]. This means that if the option is between (1) engaging service users, but in ways that do not allow for time to actively listen to them, take their views into account, and sufficiently support them or (2) simply relying on traditional professional-led service delivery, then the latter option is probably the better choice. Resources refers both to financial resources, which are necessary to provide support, training, and facilities, as well as dedicated staff time.

The lack of both time and resources is one that plagues many organizations, for instance, where public service contracts with strict performance measurement requirements and the pressure for public service providers (both in the public and non-profit sector) to behave in a more business-like manner have been significant barriers to co-production. Many organizations delivering public services find that while they are expected to find ways to both do more for less as well as involve citizens in more creative and empowering ways – expectations that are often impossible to meet simultaneously.

Having sufficient financial resources is, however, not sufficient to ensure that co-production is undertaken in a way that is effective, inclusive, and meaningful for participants. Interviewees from one program in the UK described this balance. The program was well resourced with a large, six-year grant to provide city-wide activities to reduce loneliness and isolation of older people, with a stated intention that everything must be co-produced.

> *"There's quite a lot of resource, but we try and do too much and we probably don't fully resource the co-production. And it costs money, and it takes time. I think time is more of a thing – things get rushed and you can't rush co-production. You certainly can't rush co-design, anyway." (Senior staff, England)*

As they went on to explain, 'rushing' co-design processes and the selection of representatives to co-govern the program meant that often the 'easier to reach' older people were included, and the program's target demographic (lonely, isolated older people) was not truly represented.

Public Management and Governance Review – 2024
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ISSN: 2960-592X

Resources are needed to ensure that co-production is undertaken in a meaningful way that includes actual 'experts by experience'.

Having the time for co-production is a theme that was also frequently discussed in Montreal, Quebec, where a community development organization engages residents of the neighbourhood in four-yearly priority setting followed by the creation of citizen-professional collaboration through 'action groups' tasked with developing projects and services to benefit the neighbourhood. The key to the success of these co-production efforts was often the resources invested in ensuring that the groups had sufficient time to create real change for the area. The importance of time for successful co-production was highlighted at a community meeting where the community development director proposed the idea of a 'second wave' of short-term community projects to complement the work of the action groups, which would be defined as concrete co-production projects that could be achieved in a few months (as compared to the often several year timescale of the main action groups). However, citizens were vehemently opposed to the idea, arguing that this approach would not be sufficient to mobilize citizen participation in co-production. After a vote, the idea of short-term actions was dropped.

Though the citizen opposition to short-term approaches to co-production in Montreal is perhaps a unique example, with citizens directly speaking out against short-term co-production, it illustrates clearly how important the investment of time and resources is for professionals and citizens to be able to work in collaboration in public service design and delivery.

When volunteers substitute paid work

The value of co-production is that paid professionals and service users can make better use of each other's skills, time, and resources. The involvement of citizens should be *complementary* to the efforts of professionals, rather than *substitutive* [36]. Such complementarity is typically the ideal goal when it comes to designing co-production processes; however, in some service areas the tendency to involve volunteers in service delivery is done with the intention of lowering the financial burden of paid staff work. When involving volunteers/ service users in service delivery substitutes paid work, one could argue that in fact that co-production benefits are lost. This was an argument put forward by several interviewees in Austria, who indicated that they did not believe that services should rely on volunteers to deliver their services.

> *"There are a lot of tensions there. On the one hand, it's a question of social policy as well, because the funding for non-profit organizations decreases. They don't get enough money. And then there is a question, do we take volunteers instead? And then instead of paid professionals? From that moment on, the paid professionals ask themselves if they would like to work with volunteers, who possibly are pushing them out of their jobs in the future, so this is a tension." (Senior staff, Austria)*

> *"Our social workers are really sceptical about volunteers. Social work is a profession. They learn that. In a hospital and other professions there are no volunteers. Why should we have them?" (Senior staff, Austria)*

These arguments against co-production as a substitution for professional work are based on two rationalities: in the first, the interviewee argues against the introduction of volunteers as a way to decrease the cost burden of public services, a point echoing the argument about resources for co-production. In the second quote, the interviewee argues that the introduction of volunteers is inappropriate in the realm of social work because it means that professional expertise becomes undervalued.

Public Management and Governance Review – 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.60733/PMGR.2024.04

ISSN: 2960-592X

As the second interviewee above explains, social workers have professional expertise that has been gained through a specific educational program, much like medical professionals. Involving volunteers in the work that paid social workers typically do essentially deprofessionalizes the service and undervalues the degree to which their training is necessary to deliver services effectively. Another interviewee in Austria (from a different social service organization) made a similar argument, and elaborated to explain that volunteer involvement in some service areas, such as elder care, meant that volunteers are given responsibility for the nicer areas of care (e.g. chatting with service users, playing games, going for walks), while nurses and social workers are then relegated to the less desirable work such as feeding and washing duties. This means that the professional input into these social areas of care work is undervalued.

One of the key arguments for co-production is that including service users more directly in service delivery is a way to better recognise the expertise that they have as 'experts by experience'. However, involving people with lived experience as *unpaid* volunteers is not the only way to achieve this – indeed, many organizations do not include volunteers in delivering their services, but instead, make an intentional decision to hire people with lived experience as paid staff members (i.e. experience of living with a health condition, or experience as a migrant or refugee).

> *"That was a clear decision from the beginning that we do not want to do this work with volunteers. I think there's a very high responsibility attached to it, first of all. So we need to be able to set clear rules. And the other thing… I observe that in this group of refugees, where people have nothing. I mean, it's ridiculous to ask them to work as volunteers, really. I just think it's unfair." (Senior staff, Austria)*

In the three quotes, professionals discussed instances where co-production was intentionally dismissed, due to the significance placed on the roles of paid staff. This was due either to their specialized training and expertise, or adherence to the principle that work should be compensated financially. What we see is that volunteer or service user involvement should not be undertaken in instances when it means that paid, skilled professionals become undervalued or substituted entirely.

When co-production is asking too much of citizens

A case for co-production is that it can be empowering – shifting the power for decisions over public service delivery from professionals to those who actually use and benefit from services. But in some instances, citizens may lack the skills, time, or confidence to be able to participate in co-production in a way that complements the inputs of paid professionals. Alternatively, citizens may not *want* to take part in co-production. Consequently, co-production is not the answer if the expectations placed on citizens are unreasonable, given citizens' interest in taking part, or ability to do so.

One non-profit director in England argued that in relation to involving citizens in decisions about their local community, in some instances it is not appropriate because citizens may be unaware of the most pressing problems in their area, or unwilling to admit their lack of knowledge about something. Their organization undertook a consultation for the City Council about residents' priorities in their community, asking people in a local park targeted questions about what they thought was needed in the area.

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ISSN: 2960-592X

> *"People – because they're in a park – say, 'Well, dog muck. Dog mess. That's a real priority for me. Oh, and loose paving stones.' So the council developed this strategy of things they were going to focus on for 18 months in [neighbourhood]. They said, 'We're going to focus on clearing up dog mess. We're going to have more wardens. We're going to have more bins. We're going to do something to the pavements.' This is all true. We said, 'What about community education? There's a real need for community education.' 'Well we didn't get any feedback on that.' Of course you didn't. How many people, if you say, 'What's a priority?' will say, 'Well actually, I'm really under-qualified and I know nothing so I really need some more education.' Who the hell is going to say that? Especially if you're conducting it in a park. People are influenced by what they can see around them." (Senior staff, England)*

Inviting citizens to engage in co-production presupposes that they have a basic level of knowledge and understanding about what is being asked of them, and as the non-profit director above describes, in some instances it is unreasonable to expect a resident to contribute to strategic priority setting without more time and context. The above scenario may in fact be more of an example of a co-production process *poorly designed* rather than a case against the involvement of residents full stop. Indeed, had the team designing the consultation taken a different approach, such as inviting residents to a workshop, describing the purpose of the involvement exercise, and taking the time to ensure meaningful participation, perhaps this could have been an appropriate and effective approach to co-production. Here, again, the necessity of investment of resources comes to the fore.

In other instances, professionals may attempt to engage citizens in co-production and only later realize that this is asking too much of them. This was the case with one project in the UK, where a program to engage parents in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in co-facilitating parent and toddler groups discovered that their target client group lacked the skills, time, and confidence to meaningfully participate in co-production.

> *"I think we sort of had this visual imaginary picture that, you know, all these people are going to be queueing up to be volunteers and they're all going to be absolutely switched on and fantastic and run with it and they're going to do everything we want, and actually real life is not really like that, is it?" (Frontline staff, England)*

The program had been designed with the intention of the toddler groups being co-facilitated between a paid early years practitioner and a parent volunteer for an amount of time before transferring to fully volunteer-led groups. However, staff on the program found that this was unrealistic in this particular neighbourhood, where many people were unemployed, living near the poverty line, and dealing with complex needs. While this did not result in the abandonment of co-production – with parent volunteers remaining integral to program delivery – the expectation that parents would make crucial decisions about the program, be in charge of bank accounts and independently run program activities proved overly demanding. Consequently, professionals have continued to play a much more significant role in supporting parent volunteers and ensuring that the program can run smoothly.

Finally, asking too much of citizens may be a reason not to engage in co-production when the activity is highly demanding, such as the emotional and physical toll involved in providing emergency aid. This was an argument put forward by several individuals in relation to emergency support for refugees in Vienna – not as an argument against co-production full stop,

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ISSN: 2960-592X

but rather the argument that involvement in service delivery should be limited in some instances to protect citizens.

> *"The problem we faced also in the Ukraine crisis now, that there were volunteers from Ukraine that helped and it was a real challenge, because we need professionals and volunteers who can work in certain [areas]… It needs a lot of prearranging so that they don't burn out, and there were volunteers that couldn't leave the places where we provided help, and this was difficult for our social workers and team leaders to tell these people, 'Go home now. You can't do everything.' This was felt as an insult. It's not always easy." (Senior staff, Austria)*

When we argue *for* co-production, it is under the assumption that citizens are willing and able to take part, and that their involvement is beneficial in some way to both them and to the service. If these conditions are not met, then co-production may be asking too much of citizens and perhaps service delivery, or some service tasks, should in fact be left to professionals.

Discussion and implications for practice

Whether one is a co-production evangelist or a co-production sceptic, it is difficult to argue against an idea of improving outcomes for communities, bolstering democracy, and cutting the costs of public services. Nevertheless, with so much optimism around a concept like co-production, it is bound to lead to some disappointment when people attempt to use it too often, incorrectly, or in a way that prevents meaningful change from happening. Some studies have begun to explore the 'dark sides' of co-production [28], [37], but importantly, we must also consider *when* co-production might be an appropriate approach that creates value for communities, and *when it is not*.

It is important to note that while the arguments considered in this article are drawn from a large number of interviews, the interviewees (primarily from non-profit organizations providing services in fields that are not highly professionalized) do not represent the vast scope of opinions of public service providers. In service areas such as healthcare which require a large degree of expertise, professionals are more likely to argue that co-production also risks diminishing the quality of services provided [29]. In the fields studied, however, this was less of a concern – though the argument that co-production should not be pursued in areas where professional expertise is vital for ensuring service quality is worth noting.

The arguments I have presented 'against' co-production are actually arguments *for* ensuring that co-production is done appropriately, meaningfully and with the sufficient resources to ensure that it is done well. One of the biggest problems with the fact that co-production has become a popular buzzword (particularly in the UK), is the potential for co-production to be co-opted to describe activities that are not empowering service users, or where the actions/resources of citizens are used to *substitute* those of professionals rather than *complement* them. Indeed, the rhetoric around co-production (and related ideas of empowerment and involvement) has become so popular that many individuals talk about 'doing co-production' rather than critically examining their motivations for doing so, and ensuring that they are facilitating genuine collaboration.

Notwithstanding these considerations, co-production still holds significant promise. Co-production is not a panacea, or a silver bullet, but it merits recognition for its capacity to foster positive transformations in communities and enhance service delivery. One useful way to determining whether involving citizens and service users in co-production may have the

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potential to lead to the creation of value for service users and community members is through considering the CLEAR framework [38], which suggests that participation is the most effective when there are sufficient skills and resources for involvement (Can do), when citizens are committed to the process (Like to), when there are reasonable opportunities for participation (Enabled to), when citizens are mobilized (Asked to), and when co-production actually makes a difference (Responded to).

In addition to this diagnostic tool (which was developed to investigate public participation more broadly), I suggest that when deciding whether or not to involve citizens in public service delivery, there is a need to also consider whether citizen inputs are *substituting* those of paid professionals, or whether citizen and professional inputs are *complementary*. All of the cases against co-production – when it is inadequately resourced, when it substitutes paid work and when it asks too much of citizens – highlight that true co-production necessitates a synergy between what professionals offer and what citizens offer [39]. This complementarity, rather than instances where citizens take over the role of professionals, is where there is the potential for positive outcomes.

Finally, for practitioners considering whether or not to involve citizens in co-production, another crucial aspect to take into account is whether this involvement will be ad hoc (thereby limiting the value for participants and the service) or whether it can be nurtured into a sustainable, long-term endeavour. A model of sustainable co-production [9] comprises four elements: structure (design and framework for co-production), skills (of both professionals and citizens, as well as the training needs to acquire these), resources (time and funding), and finally mutual commitment from both sides to continue to stay involved. These four elements can be thought of as a tandem bicycle: where *structure* makes up the bicycle's frame, the wheels are *skills* and *resources,* and *mutual commitment* is the professional and citizen riders. Co-production can only be sustainable – and the bike can only move forward – if the bike frame is the right size and shape, the wheels fit, and the cyclists are pedalling forward.

Despite the pessimistic tone of this article, there is certainly much potential in co-production, and it likely can create positive value when done with sufficient resources, skills, and support. Arguing 'against' the co-production silver bullet is intended to ensure that practitioners are being thoughtful about the involvement of citizens – not just 'doing co-production' because it is perceived to be good, but supporting true collaboration between citizens and professionals in ways that are mutually beneficial.

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