

Community Explorers: Unlocking the Power of Co-Production

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Event Overview

On 27th of April, Manchester Community Central hosted a Community Explorers event focused on “Unlocking the Power of Co-Production.”

As Manchester begins to refresh the city’s Compact and explores how the VCSE sector can influence the future of local services through initiatives like Public Service Reform, Live Well and others, we brought together participants to share good practices, discuss the principles we value and, most importantly, identify the steps needed to turn co-production and collaborative working into tangible action across the city.

The event was attended by approximately 50 representatives from VCSE organisations and statutory partners across Manchester, with the speakers including:

- Jennifer Rouse, VCFSE Accord Strategic Lead, GMCA - Greater Manchester VCFSE Accord
- Kim Bridge, Services Manager (Multiple Disadvantage), Back on Track (and others tbc) - Co-production in Inclusive Employment Support
- Katie Fraser, Head of Practice, Women in Prison – Co-Production Constitution and Still I Rise Magazine

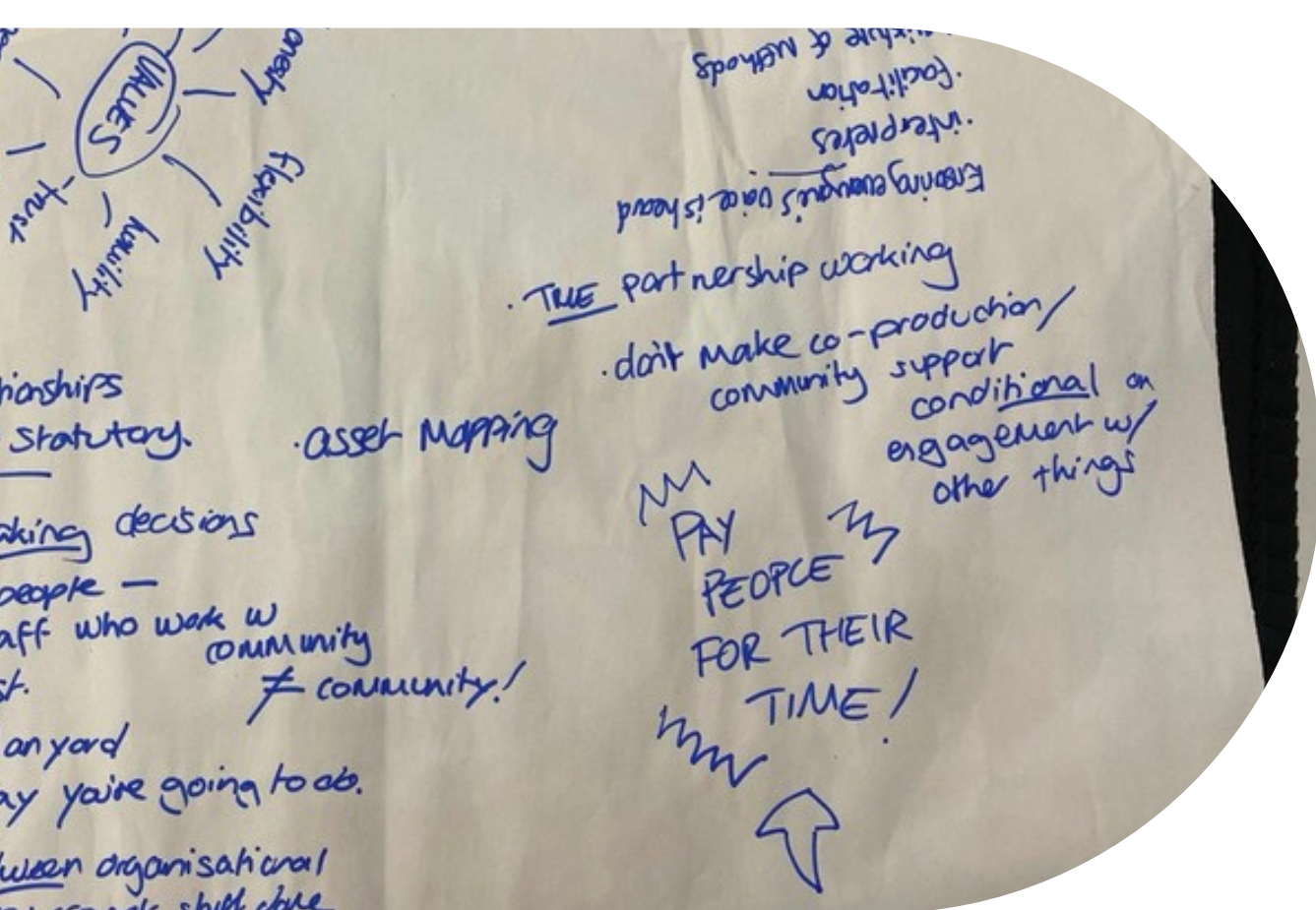


- Zara Hakobyan, Policy & Influence Manager, Manchester Community Central - Public Service Reform Cross-Sector Group and Refresh of the Manchester Compact

Participants engaged in discussions after the presentations, sharing their experiences of co-production, cross-sector collaboration and shared values. They explored what co-production means for their organisations and how we can increase collaborative efforts to unlock its full potential for Manchester, building a cohesive ecosystem of partners rooted in principles of equity, inclusion and a level playing field.

This report outlines the key findings and insights gathered from the table discussions held during the event.





Discussion 1: Co-production in Manchester's VCSE sector

Setting the Scene

We asked the attendees the following questions to guide the conversation:

- What values should underpin successful co-production?
- What does genuine partnership look like in practice?
- How can we build reciprocal, trusting relationships between communities and the statutory sector?
- What are the common barriers to establishing trust, and how can we overcome them?
- How can we ensure feedback loops are meaningful and valued to strengthen relationships?
- What are simple ways to ensure everyone's voice is heard and influences decisions in a meaningful way?
- What are the biggest challenges to sharing power in co-production, and how can we overcome them?
- What are the key practices or steps for effective and sustainable co-production?
- What are the dos and don'ts to keep in mind to avoid pitfalls and ensure success?

- How can we turn conversations about co-production into real actions that make a difference?
- How can we measure the success of co-production efforts?
- What evidence or examples demonstrate successful co-production in practice?
- What support do VCSE organisations need to participate fully? How can we remove barriers for those who are not at the table to be in the room and participate equally?

The following values/ key considerations were identified by attendees as essential for successful co-production:

- Curiosity
- Flexibility
- Patience to ensure inclusivity
- Authenticity
- Trust
- Ensure that the outcomes reflect the process even if you don't like/weren't expecting them
- Transparency



- Don't over promise and under deliver
- Connection within and between communities and audiences
- Willingness to do things differently
- Comfort in discomfort, allowing to create new systems and ways of working together

We also asked our participants what does successful co-production look like?

- A change in something, a strategy shift or re-distribution of power
- Results don't have to be perfect but "insight has informed or led to an outcome" and lessons can be learnt from this
- The people engaged to have enjoyed it, gained confidence, feel valued and respected
- Co-production is ongoing and doesn't end after a specific project, there is a continuous cycle of impact



“Don't over promise and under deliver”.

- Timescales, priorities and goals are decided by participants from the outset.

Emerging Themes

Sharing Power

Both the presentations and discussion sessions asserted the importance of giving up and sharing power for real co-production. Attendees explored how it can feel uncomfortable for people or groups to give up power over decision making, but how this is the first step towards true co-production and is absolutely necessary.

Handing over this power is difficult to encourage – attendees noted the difficulty in changing mindsets of teams, especially ones who don't work on a frontline. The culture change required for the distribution of power is difficult to navigate. Attendees specifically noted that Manchester City Council's bureaucracy, risk averse nature and focus on quantitative/demonstrable outcomes makes it hard to create systems that share power and extremely difficult to adopt new models of working. A true co-production approach must be different from the usual approach to partnership working, for example, top-down approaches or coming to consult with a group on a problem that needs to be solved.



This was especially reflected in Kate's presentation where she discussed the transition of the Still I Rise magazine from being partly designed by women in prison to being fully and truly co-produced by women in prison. This transition was largely down to Kate's intervention, showing the power of individuals' passion, questioning the status quo and trying out new ideas. Kate recognised the untapped potential and skills of the women, which were realised once the power was properly shifted.

The conversation about power should consider all levels of organisational governance, from delivery to board level. This approach can be seen through organisations like the Booth Centre, who are led as an organisation by the value of co-production, involving people with lived experience of homelessness in their decision making at delivery and board level via their advisory committee. Attendees noted that while not every aspect of an organisation's decision-making can (or should) be co-produced, it is important to recognise and enable the value of co-production wherever possible.

In particular, it was suggested that local authorities need to be asked what power they are willing to give up, and to identify where they can employ people with diverse lived and professional experience. For example, attendees recommended questioning how many members of the council actually need to be present at certain steering group or board meetings as their attendance can limit space available for VCSE/ lived experience representatives while also shifting the power dynamics.

In discussions around practically addressing power imbalances, one group shared a case study of having a meeting where no one was able to say their role title, in an attempt to take away power structures and create a level playing field. It was also noted that how people dress is an important contributing factor to perception of power status. Other examples included creating multiple roles or shared positions in meetings and swapping chairs to distribute power. Time-keeping was



also raised as an important consideration, essential for making sure everyone gets a chance to be heard.

Time Constraints vs Relationship Building

One of the main barriers to effective co-production is lack of time. Attendees agreed that true co-production necessarily requires trusted relationships between all partners involved. This relationship building requires long periods of time both before, during and after any co-production process or, preferably, to completely embed co-production in an organisation or a system.

For example, GM Homelessness Action Network shared that they are co-producing the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Homelessness strategy, but that GMCA have strict deadlines to work towards which results in rushing. Tight deadlines, and short-term funding inhibit the ability to build trusted relationships with people and often result in more consultation-style, transactional interactions which can lead to damaged trust when not properly followed up. Consistency is important, with groups often feeling as though once an organisation has completed a 'tick box' exercise, relationships seem to end and progress "drops off a cliff".



Groups highlighted the need for statutory bodies to build better relationships with communities by coming into communities and meeting them where they are (physically and in issue framing). Gaventa's power cube was referenced and the idea that where a decision-making space is located shapes power dynamics and makes a partnership more or less equitable and inclusive. It was recommended to explore the relationships that the council has with communities, and how these can be built upon and further valued. This includes better connections between these relationships and more senior council decision making spaces – it is important that these existing relationships have a real impact on high level decision making.

Attendees discussed that an important aspect of building trusted relationships is transparency. Transparency is needed regarding processes, progress, budgets and key feedback etc. True co-production must invest in communities and communications and bring everyone along throughout all processes and decisions. Confusion and discontent often arises from improper communication, leading to damaged relationships and trust.

Specifically on feedback, groups discussed how important it is to present the changes that have been made as a result of any co-produced work, this maintains trusted relationships and showcases the value of co-production and the impact that it has.

Supporting participants and VSCE organisations

Discussions explored the importance of and how best to support people with lived experience to be involved in co-production.

One aspect raised was the need for plain language and reduced jargon - people need to be able to relate to conversations. This is also true for cross-sector working, with different institutions having their own jargon and communication styles, inhibiting collaboration in general and creating barriers to things like funding applications.

“It takes a long time to effectively co-produce something”

Communities need to also be resourced and supported to organise themselves. Communicating with the public is very important, but things like language barriers must be considered and how to adapt communications and outreach to ensure the right voices are heard. The VCFSE sector is a valuable asset in reaching communities and utilising existing trusted relationships, often with established communication streams and knowledge.

Other aspects that need to be considered to remove barriers and support people to participate in co-production are covering expenses, offering online and hybrid meetings, carefully considering locations of meetings, offering meetings at times that suit participants (this can often be outside normal working hours). The importance of providing training to participants was also raised. People must be prepared and supported to enter spaces which they may not be familiar with and be empowered to represent themselves and others with knowledge of different systems.

Groups discussed the importance of taking the time to make sure meetings of people with lived experience were representative and diverse. There is a lot of pressure in representing a group of people, and it is important that participants feel as supported as possible and that the process is not rushed. For example, groups shared that it is important to set aside time to identify gaps in background, experience, knowledge in



meetings and empower participants. / staff to cancel or postpone meetings if they do not have a representative group; “nothing about us without us”.

“Nothing about us without us”

For VCSE organisations, the main enabler for co-production work is funding. VCSE groups hold trusted relationships and community connections inherently, but require specific, flexible funding to take these projects on. Groups discussed unrealistic funding criteria and short-term funding pots making true co-production inaccessible. For co-production to be embedded in Manchester’s systems, the cost (and time) of co-production must be factored into grants and funding opportunities. Groups highlighted the need for partners to utilise agreements like the VCFSE Accord and Fair Funding Protocol.

In terms of support, VCSE groups also would like to see some training on co-production and how best to do it. Attendees discussed how they could be learning from examples of best practice and previous success stories, to make the most of any future opportunities and avoid repeating mistakes. For example, attendees raised questions about managing diversity of choice in co-production, navigating potential tensions between a diverse group of people with different perspectives and facilitating that space.

Valuing Lived Experience

Discussions around monetary compensation are complex to navigate. While it is important to properly compensate people for their time, organisations must consider the best way to do so and be sensitive to individuals’ circumstances. For example, someone may be apprehensive to accept money for

participation due to concern over the impacts on benefits. Some groups explained that they have used vouchers in the past, and highlighted how important it is to have participants take part in the remuneration decision making, to ask them what they want.

Other non-monetary benefits must also be considered, such as progression pathways for any participants if relevant. For example, if training or skills development can be offered as a part of the participation process. Such benefits have been seen through projects like the Booth Centre/ Charity Service’s participatory grant making project, where participants noted the benefits to their own skills development and confidence development as a part of the process.

Attendees also noted that co-production budgets in statutory organisations are often significantly underspent. This money should be invested in empowering communities to make the most of co-production opportunities.

Valuing the impact of involving lived experience in decision making must also be a part of flexible funding opportunities. For example, case studies are often seen as a less legitimate form of evaluation in terms of success measurement. Often with co-production, success is difficult to measure in quantitative terms and may not fit into standard reporting requirements. Reporting requirements for any funded projects must be flexible and reflect the complex, holistic positive impacts of this type of work.

“Relationships take time”





Discussion 2 – The Manchester Compact

Zara Hakobyan, the Policy and Influence Manager at Macc, outlined the current work underway to convene a VCSE-led cross-sector group to inform Manchester City Council's work regarding the Public Service Reform programme and the VCSE-related commitments alongside the refresh of the Manchester Compact.

We asked the following questions:

- Are you familiar with the existing shared framework or agreement for working with VCFSE partners - the Manchester Compact? If so, how well do you think it is understood and applied within your organisation or across the board?
- What strategies or actions can we take to ensure that this framework/the new Compact does not just stay on paper but is actively embedded in daily practice and decision-making?
- What key elements, principles or shared objectives should the new Compact include to ensure it is inclusive, practical and meaningful for all partners?

Most attendees in the room were not aware of the Manchester Compact, and there was a general sense of confusion and disillusionment, similar to the GM VCFSE Accord, with all of the different strategies and documents there seems to be.

There was general confusion between the Manchester Compact and GM VCFSE Accord, and many did not understand why there has to be two documents. It was suggested that the GM Accord just be adapted or further broken down to apply to Manchester specifically. Any document needs to be accessible and translated across sector. Individuals commented on the usefulness of the VCFSE Accord summary leaflet as an example.

Attendees agreed that creating a diagram to map out various spaces and strategic areas would be helpful in clarifying where different activities and responsibilities fit, identifying accountability and highlighting opportunities for influence. There was a shared view that raising awareness of the Compact and its significance to the sector is essential.



It is worth noting that Macc has already conducted a mapping of key strategic and influencing spaces within the city. This information is available on our website, regularly updated and shared with the sector.

People discussed the need for clear guidelines on how to use a document like the Compact - what use is it to VCFSE organisations and how can they make sure they are utilising it? It is important to teach the VCFSE sector (and the statutory sector) what it means, especially since not many people currently know it even exists. Some suggested a breakdown into what it means for strategic roles, frontline roles and management roles.

A disconnect in information sharing within the Council was also noted. Some MCC staff present at the event were unaware of the PSR Cross-Sector group and its progress despite being linked to teams that have a presence in the PSR Cross-Sector group.

This issue was not limited to the public sector. Participants also expressed a sense of disconnect with leaders in the VCSE sector, noting that many grassroots organisations were unaware of the leadership and representative roles that senior VCSE staff hold - both within their own organisations and across the wider sector. In particular, groups were largely unfamiliar with the leaders involved in Macc's VCSE Leaders Group. Despite communications going out regularly.

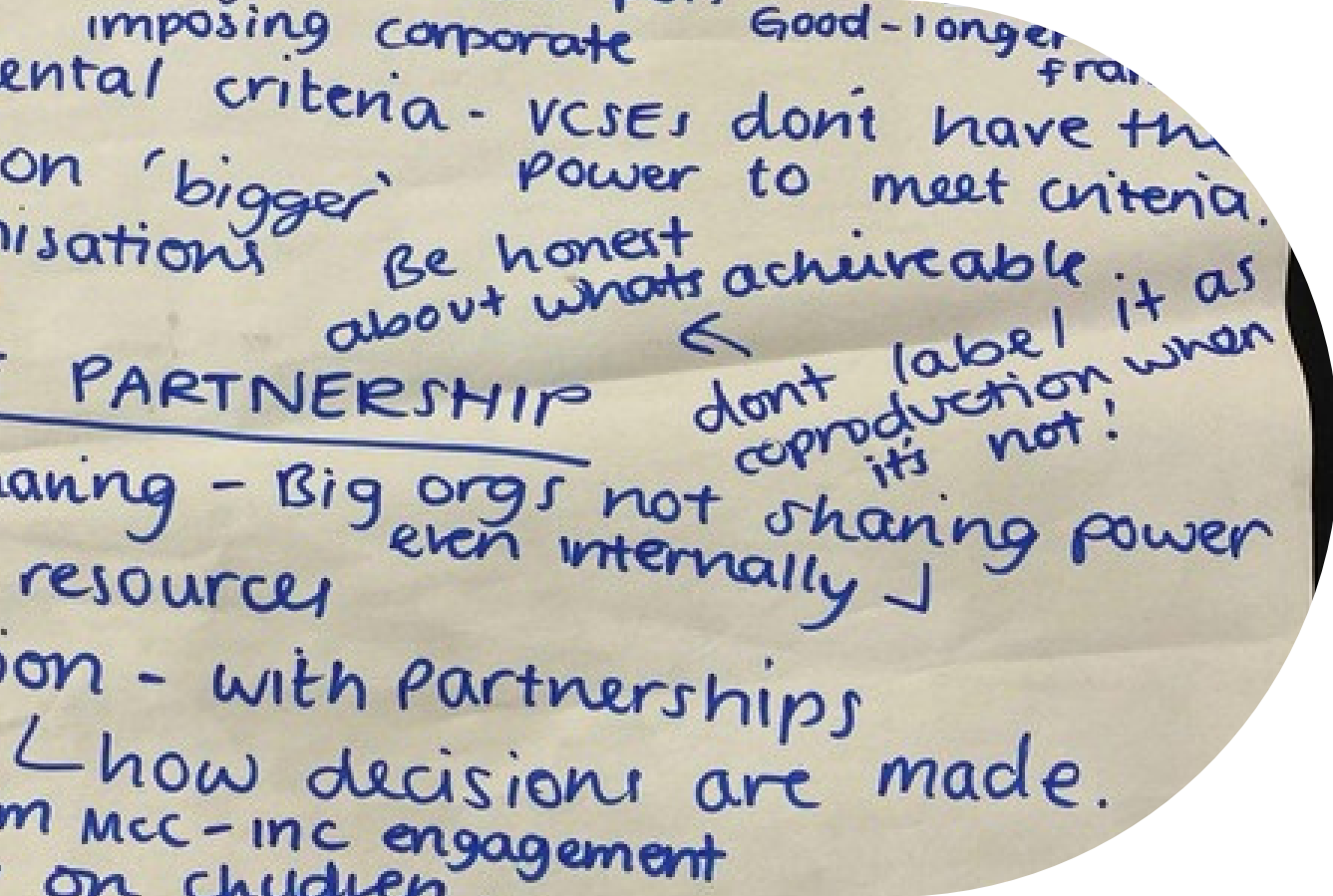
Attendees were also interested in the VCFSE representatives of the PSR cross-sector group and wanted more information about who is representing them as a sector. This point is something for the PSR Cross-Sector Group to consider when designing communications with the sector and providing updates on progress of work and how their views are being represented.

The Cross-Sector group could consider communicating a 'meet the representatives' piece or convening an open meeting for this purpose.

It was suggested to have a wider group of VCSE representatives to sit in the cross-sector group. The group is currently limited by funding constraints. With more resource, representation could be increased.

Attendees questioned how the PSR Cross-Sector Group will make sure the wider VCSE sector is represented and whether the sector will be feeding into the group via existing mechanisms such as the Community Explorers network and the VCSE representatives' own networks and circles of influence.





Resources

The below resources demonstrate existing examples of best practice in co-production, some further information and existing guidance:

From the event

- [GM VCFSE Accord](#)
- [Still I Rise Magazine](#)
- [Back on Track - Voices for Change](#)

Wider Greater Manchester Resources, Examples & Information

- [Uncertain Futures](#)
- [GM VCSFE Leadership Group & GM=EqAl guidance for Including the voice of lived experience in policy making](#)
- [GM Asylum Hotels Group](#)
- [Booth Centre x Charity Service Participatory Grantmaking Programme](#)

Learning from other areas

- [Blackpool Co-Production Team](#)







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