Collaboration and co-production

Aims

This module is about working *with* women with learning disabilities – not just *for* them. Collaboration and co-production are approaches that help services design and deliver support that fully meets people's real needs.

The aims of this module are to improve understanding of:

- What collaboration and co-production are
- Why they matter
- What your organisation can do to embed the principles of collaboration and co-production in your services.

Learning outcomes

By completing this module, you will have a better understanding of how to:

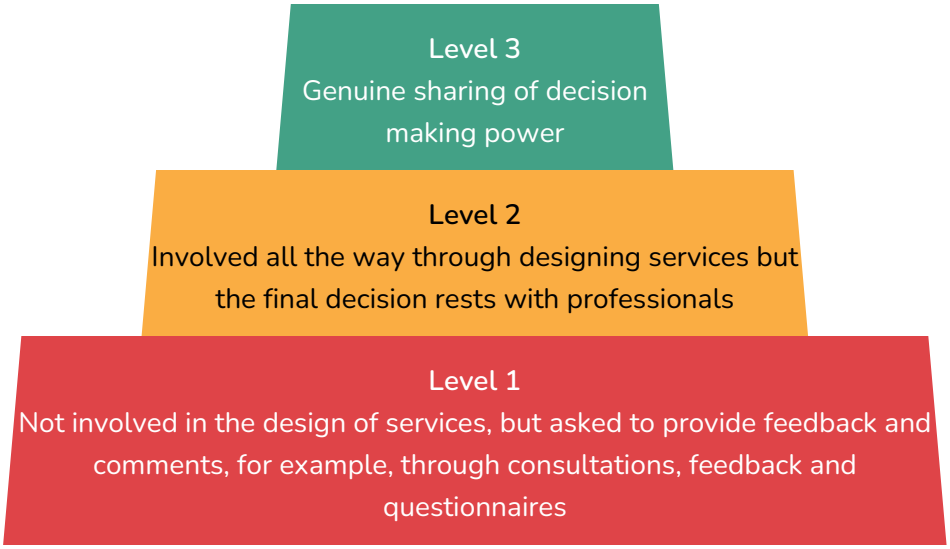
- Work with women with learning disabilities to shape services.
- Gather feedback, act on suggestions, and support participation.
- Identify opportunities to collaborate with women with learning disabilities more meaningfully.
- What meaningful collaboration and co-production look like in practice.
- Recognise why co-production is particularly important when working with women with learning disabilities who have been affected by gender-based violence.
- Identify practical steps your organisation can take to embed co-production into everyday work.

What we mean by collaboration and co-production

In the context of this module, collaboration means all forms of activity where services and people with lived experience work together to make services better.

Co-production is a specific kind of collaboration. It means services and people with lived experience making decisions together and sharing power in the process.

Not all collaboration is the same. It can be helpful to think in stages. Here is a way of understanding what each means in the diagram below:



Level one of the pyramid involves consultation. This kind of collaboration means listening and gathering feedback from women with lived experience. Gathering views about an existing service is valuable but on its own is not co-production.

Level two involves co-design. This means involving women with lived experience in the development of services while plans are still being developed and they can influence their direction. An example of this could be designing accessible resources together. Again, this is valuable but on its own is not co-production. At this level the big decisions are still being made by the service e.g., the decision to create the document in the first place.

Level three is co-production. This means acting on the suggestions of women with lived experience and sharing decision-making power where services and women with lived experience make decisions together about priorities, design, language, accessibility, and delivery. For example, some women who use your service suggest setting up a peer support group and are involved at every stage of developing the new service.

All collaboration is important, because in different ways you are listening to the voices of people with lived experience and using their insight to improve your service. However, the more power you give women with lived experience to make decisions, the greater the possible impact of the collaboration. In other words, co-production (Level 3) is more impactful than consultation (Level 1).

Sharing decision-making power with people with lived experience can be scary or difficult. For example, if you think the best way to improve your service is to do A, but the women you are collaborating with say you should do B, do you take the risk of believing them and trusting their judgement?

Also, there will be other factors that limit how much decision-making power you hand over: the law, operating conditions laid down by your funders, and your own finances are three of these factors.

With these limits in mind, the rest of this module will focus on co-production as the most impactful kind of collaboration and will look at ways your service can maximise opportunities for co-production.

Why co-production matters to women with learning disabilities

For women whose voices have often been ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood, co-production is a more effective way of delivering safe, efficient, and sustainable services.

Women with learning disabilities who experience gender-based violence often face:

- Disbelief or minimisation
- Over-protection and/or removal of their autonomy
- Inaccessible services
- Decisions being made without their involvement and/or consent.

When services are designed without their input, barriers are often built in unintentionally.

Co-produced services can help women with learning disabilities by:

- Improving their accessibility and relevance
- Reducing assumptions about what support they need
- Strengthening trust
- Increasing engagement
- Creating more effective safeguarding and support.

Most importantly, it recognises lived experience as expertise.

Co-production means:

- Involving women early, not after decisions are made
- Giving them real influence over decisions
- Providing the support they need to participate meaningfully
- Valuing their lived experience equally alongside professional knowledge.

Co-production is not:

- A one-off consultation
- Asking for feedback on a finished plan
- Inviting someone to attend a meeting without power to shape outcomes
- Tokenistic representation.

Common challenges to good co-production

Good co-production means people being able to give the best of themselves. This will not happen if someone's confidence is low or attendance is inconsistent – it might help to build smaller, regular groups and offer one-to-one options if possible. Most importantly, *ask* what would help.

Emotional impact – Asking people to draw on their lived experience can be emotionally difficult – provide debrief space and ensure support pathways are available.

Power imbalance – This can be between group members: a group facilitator should actively reflect on who is speaking and who is not, and make sure they give space and encouragement to quieter members, and those who take longer to reflect on an issue. The imbalance can also be between workers and women with lived experience. Some women may not want to openly disagree with a worker, or might even assume the worker must be right.

Time pressures – Co-production takes time but prevents costly redesign later. Anticipate this, and build time into the process so that for each meeting there is enough time for people to prepare beforhand, to participate in the meeting, and to process and reflect afterwards.

For more suggestions about how to address these challenges and embed good co-production in your practice, look at the Recommendations section below.

Co-production at different levels

Co-production can sit at all levels of an organisation's hierarchy and can be used to influence:

- peer support development
- referral pathways
- accessibility of written materials
- training content
- evaluation processes
- policy and procedure review.

Even small, consistent involvement improves services.

Co-production in practice

Activity 1

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to explore what poor collaboration looks like and how to avoid these practices.

Activity

Watch this short animation.

Watch our video on co-production – poor practice *(https://vimeo.com/1165980030)*

Now reflect and make notes on:

- The support worker's practice in terms of collaboration.
- How the support worker could have collaborated better with the woman with a learning disability.

Need some help?

Think about:

- What the support worker missed/did wrong.
- What the potential short and long-term consequences could be for other victim/survivors with a learning disability.
- How a co-production approach could have helped.

Now listen to what members of People First (Scotland)'s Equally Safe Group say about co-production.

Watch our Equally Safe Group video: co-production *(https://vimeo.com/1165980063)*

Activity 2

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to think about what good collaboration looks like and how to promote good practice in your organisation.

Activity

Watch this short video of the same professional offering support to another woman with learning disabilities.

Watch our video on co-production – good practice *(https://vimeo.com/1165980060)*

Now reflect and take notes on:

- What practitioners can do to embed co-production with women with learning disabilities in their everyday work.
- What service providers can do to embed co-production with women with learning disabilities in their organisations' policies and procedures.

Need some help?

Think about:

- The types of collaboration and co-production you have previously used with victim/survivors, whether they were effective, why they were/were not effective, and how they could be improved.
- Whether you and/or your colleagues feel confident in co-producing services with women with learning disabilities and, if not, what would help, for example further information, resources, guidance, or training.
- Which policies and procedures could help your organisation to embed collaboration and co-production, for example Equality Diversity and Inclusion strategies, staff induction, and professional development procedures.
- What practical barriers might prevent meaningful collaboration.
- One realistic step you could take in the next six months to strengthen collaboration and co-production.

The co-production guide

For further guidance and advice about how to put co-production into practice, click here *(www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/guide)*

Recommendations for practitioners and organisations

Co-production doesn't require large budgets or complex systems. It requires intentional practice.

1. Start with relationships

Trust is essential, especially where trauma is present:

- Use consistent facilitators where possible
- Allow time for trust to develop
- Do not rush participation to meet deadlines – safety and predictability matter.

2. Be clear and honest about purpose and influence

One of the biggest mistakes with co-production is over-promising the decision-making power that women will have, when certain courses of action have already been ruled out. Women should understand from the start:

- What the work is about
- What decisions are open to change as well as those that are not
- How their input will shape outcomes – transparency prevents frustration and builds trust.

3. Provide practical support to participate

Consider that removing barriers is part of sharing power. This includes:

- Accessible materials
- Easy-read summaries
- Travel reimbursement
- Flexible meeting formats
- Additional preparation time
- Advocacy support if requested.

4. Adapt communication

- Use clear, respectful language
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Check understanding without being patronising
- Don't dilute complex information, break it down and explain it accessibly.
- Make sure that the meaning of an easy read document is the same as the original document. Don't let things get lost in translation.

5. Share power intentionally

Professional roles carry real and perceived power. Co-production requires you to actively balance this by:

- Inviting women to co-chair discussions
- Sharing draft materials early
- Documenting how decisions were reached
- Showing clearly what changed because of lived experience input.

6. Close the loop

After engagement:

- Share what was agreed
- Explain what could not change and why
- Show how people's input influenced final outcomes.

Quiz

You can now test your understanding of co-production by completing this short true or false quiz.

Read the following statements and choose whether you think they are true or false by clicking on your answer.

Once you have selected your answer, we will explain why the answer you gave is correct or incorrect.

1. Asking women with learning disabilities for feedback after a service or policy is already designed counts as co-production.

> **False:** Co-production means involving women from the beginning, before decisions are made, not asking for opinions once plans and/or practice is already in place.

2. Co-production means women must do the planning, writing or presenting themselves to prove the value of their involvement.

> **False:** Real co-production is about sharing ideas, voices and influence – not who physically produces documents or implements changes. In the best co-production, *everyone* plays to their strengths.

3. Co-production takes more time than traditional approaches but leads to better and more effective services.

> **True:** While it may take longer at the start, co-produced services are more accessible, trusted and accurate which reduces problems later on.

4. Professionals and organisations still hold power in co-production even when working with lived experience groups.

> **True:** Recognising power differences is essential. Co-production requires professionals to share power, listen carefully and be open to challenge.

5. If women with learning disabilities are supported to take part in service design and improvement, services are more likely to meet real needs rather than assumed ones.

> **True:** Women with lived experience understand barriers, risks, and solutions in ways that professional development alone cannot.

6. Co-production is only relevant at strategic or policy level, not in every-day service delivery.

> **False:** Co-production should shape day-to-day practice, including how services communicate, make decisions and respond to feedback.

Further information and resources

For further information about collaboration and co-production see the THINK: Collaboration and co-production *(https://equallysafe.scld.org.uk/toolkit/think-collaboration-and-co-production-8/)* section of the Equally Safe and Supported self-assessment toolkit.

To access additional resources that can help you to co-produce services with victim/survivors with learning disabilities, click here: Inclusive resources and signposting | Toolkit | Equally Safe and Supported *(https://equallysafe.scld.org.uk/toolkit/inclusive-resources-and-signposting-9/#rlslider_4)*