

Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
Planning Research

Evaluating the Public Health Outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits Project

Working paper 2

Introduction to co-production in
research: summary report

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1 The evaluation

The Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES) enables people who are introducing innovative public health initiatives to work in partnership with the National Institute for Health Research School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR) to conduct rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness. This scheme is particularly focused on local initiatives.

The aim of the evaluation of the public health outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project in Wisbech is to determine its potential to tackle social exclusion, loneliness and deprivation and to assess the extent to which it can reduce health inequalities. The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) is carrying out this research in collaboration with the Cambridgeshire County Council Community Engagement Team, Spice, and the Cambridge Institute of Public Health (CIPH).

The research uses a mixed methods approach that engages service users, practitioners and policy makers through interviews, surveys, focus groups and ethnographic research methods. One of the key research objectives is to analyse how this type of project can best secure positive health outcomes and how it could be sustainably established in other localities, should these benefits be demonstrated.

This report summarises the concept of co-production, which is central to the Spice Time Credits ethos, and gives an overview of the opportunities and challenges of co-production in research.

The first Working Paper provided an overview of time banking and Time Credits, how they work, the benefits associated with time banking and Time Credits, and their key characteristics and core values¹.

For more information about the evaluation please contact Dr Gemma Burgess on glb36@cam.ac.uk or 01223 764547.

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¹ <http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Projects/Start-Year/2015/Evaluating-Public-Health-Outcomes-Cambridgeshire-Time-Credits-Project>

2 Co-production in research

In recent years, research councils and academic trusts have adopted an increasingly instrumental view of research, emphasising the need for academic research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, and the communities within which research takes place (Beebeejaun et al, 2014 and 2015; Martin, 2010). This requirement for greater 'accountability' and more 'engaged' scholarship has increased attention on the interactive ways of producing knowledge (Beebeejaun et al, 2015).

In very general terms, co-production means working together for an agreed outcome. It is a collaborative and interactive process involving academic and non-academic participants in the production of knowledge (Pohl et al, 2010)

Co-production means working together and building relationships between different groups of people to generate knowledge that coherently incorporates the different viewpoints (Pohl et al, 2010).

Co-production in research builds on the belief that the best research practice lies in a synthesis of academic research, practitioner knowledge and research participant 'expertise by experience' (for example, see Beebeejaun et al, 2015; Elliott et al, 2002).

Beebeejaun et al (2013: 37) see co-production as "conducting research 'with' communities rather than 'on' communities." According to their understanding, co-production in research must have the following elements:

- Transparent research design and key objectives.
- Active goal (typically to alter the prevalent social conditions or to resolve a conflict).
- A more equal relationship between the researchers, practitioners and communities.
- Mutual learning and interaction to understand issues and create knowledge.
- Production process that allows genuine participation at all stages.

In this kind of highly co-productive research project, the different stakeholder parties are actively involved in the decision-making processes as equals and, as a result, the boundaries between the roles of academic and non-academic actors may become blurred (Pohl et al, 2010).

Pohl et al (2010) provide examples of action research projects where co-production of knowledge was used to reach a mutually acceptable outcome. One of these projects was set in Bolivia, and sought to resolve a conflict between indigenous peasants who inhabited the Tunari National Park area, and the central government who wished to promote conservation in the area by placing severe restrictions on the land use. By discussing the issues with both of the parties, systematically analysing the results, and utilising their own disciplinary knowledge, the researcher was able to demonstrate that the peasants' traditional land use practices were in fact very effective in maintaining ecosystem diversity. When the government officials became aware of this, their objections to the peasants' presence were dissipated.

Further examples of co-productive research can be drawn from health research and social research. Health care in particular has a well-established tradition of involving service users (including patients, carers and the general public), in research. The typical methods involve providing opportunities for the service users to share their opinions via storytelling, participation in focus groups or keeping health diaries (Smith et al, 2008). In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from including the service users as 'subjects' of the research to also involving them in the planning, undertaking and evaluating of health research (Smith et al, 2008).

Even when the overall research design cannot be co-produced, specific co-productive research methods can be included. For example, co-productive research methods such as art, video or performance that do not rely on text can help overcome some of the barriers to active involvement and to incentivise broader segments of the population to participate in the research process (Beebeejaun et al, 2013).

Another fairly popular co-productive practice involves training people with no research background to work as peer interviewers. There is some evidence to suggest that involving service users in health service research as co-researchers (peer-interviewers) can result in 'richer' or more representative data. For example, health service users may be more honest in their accounts regarding the nature of their experiences when interviewed by their peers rather than professional researchers or service providers (see Simpson and House, 2002). Positive outcomes have also been recorded from training 'insiders' to carry out peer-interviews with hard-to-reach populations, such as parents who use illegal drugs (Elliott et al, 2002).

In dissemination, co-productive activities such as, performance, art and video are increasingly used to better reflect "the lived experience of those involved" (Beebeejaun et al, 2013: 37). In addition to making the research findings accessible to broader audiences, these participant-produced outputs empower the participants by enabling them retain greater control over the representation of their experiences (Beebeejaun et al, 2013: 37).

2.1 The benefits of co-production in research

Co-production is believed to empower the research participants and reduce power imbalances (Beebeejaun et al, 2013; Elliott et al, 2002; Gillard et al, 2012). Even where no 'innovative' methods are used, a co-productive approach to knowledge generation entails a greater degree of equality between the researcher and the participants, as well as between the participants themselves (Pohl et al, 2010).

Co-produced evidence and knowledge is generally believed to be more socially robust, truthful, comprehensive, inclusive, and overall a more accurately representative of reality (Beebeejaun et al, 2013; Durose et al, 2012; Gillard et al, 2012; Pohl, 2010; Smith et al, 2008). Participatory action research where knowledge is co-produced via mutual learning can yield a more comprehensive or balanced and adoptable understanding of an issue and corresponding solutions (Pohl et al, 2010). Use of peer-researchers may also speed up qualitative data collection by providing ready access to their existing social networks (Elliott et al, 2002).

Sustainable change and translation of knowledge into practice is more likely when the research has been co-produced together with practitioners (Gillard et al, 2012; Smith et al, 2008).

2.2 Challenges to co-production of knowledge

The prerequisites to co-production in research are the willingness and ability of the participants to get involved, and for the researcher to appreciate their contributions (Martin, 2010; Durose et al, 2012).

Co-production in research interferes with conventional practices and self-conceptions of researchers in a fundamental way. Including participants with no research background in the decision-making entails significantly changes the researcher's role and the power-relationship between the different parties (Pohl et al, 2010).

Many of the skills researchers need to co-produce knowledge or to lead a co-productive research project are not included in conventional training. Co-production of knowledge can also be challenging for the participants, who are required to engage in open and frank discussions and confront one another's worldviews – a process which, in most instances, involves moving away from one's comfort zone (Pohl et al, 2010).

Some traditional academic practices and guidelines present barriers to co-production in research and knowledge generation. For example, the requirement for text-based tools in data collection, analysis, writing up and dissemination, still prevalent in academia, can make it difficult to form an equal partnership with the non-academic participants and limits opportunities for co-production (Beebeejaun et al, 2013). Certain 'good' research protocols and ethics requirements, such as informed consent forms, can also stand in the way of co-productive research by maintaining traditional power asymmetries (Beebeejaun et al, 2015).

Knowledge co-production can be slow, labour-intensive and time consuming, and often requires ongoing commitment for the different parties. Unless all participants have been involved in the research from the pre-commencement stage, it can take a long time to recruit members and get the activities started (Scottish Government, 2011). Successful co-production of knowledge thus requires flexibility and time to 'learn by doing', which does not fit well with deadlines and detailed plans regarding outputs (Pohl et al, 2010).

Sometimes practical considerations make it difficult to utilise co-productive approaches, even when the researcher may wish to do so. Peer-interviewers often require extensive training and support, and the issue of payment can be difficult to address (Elliott et al, 2002; Simpson and House, 2002).

As a result, extensive co-production may not always be feasible, or even appropriate, for every research study. There is a need for researchers to carefully consider the benefits and barriers to co-productive research, and decide what works, when, for whom, and in which kind of context (Beebeejaun et al, 2015; Martin, 2010). The researcher must be aware of the risks and challenges associated with co-productive study design and the use of co-productive methods (Martin, 2010).

Some of the key risks associated with co-production in the available literature include:

- Potential loss of objectivity and positive response bias, compromising the research findings and (potentially) recommendations based on these findings (Durose et al, 2012).
- High levels of user engagement, in particular when working with public sector practitioners, may risk politicising the research process (Martin, 2010).
- (Assumed) limitations to people's ability to fully understand and analyse their motivations and behaviour purely on the basis of experience (Beebeejaun et al, 2014; Durose et al, 2012).

3 Spice Time Credits as a tool for co-production

Spice's understanding of co-production builds on the co-operative, egalitarian 'core values' they share with the time banking movement. These include:

- Inclusion and recognition of people as assets: everyone has something to give, and everyone's contribution is welcomed.
- Redefinition of work to include the typically unpaid 'core economy' work in the neighbourhood and community: everyday skills are valuable and needed in the development of sustainable social development.
- Equality: everyone's contribution is valued equally. One hour of time given always equals one Time Credit, regardless of the level of skill required or the type of task.
- Community and social capital: Time Credits seek to provide the framework for the development of supportive and secure social networks.

(Boyle and Bird, 2014; Bretherton and Pleace 2014; NEF, 2001; Weaver et al, 2015)

Time Credits were developed as a tool for building stronger communities and co-produced services where people are active and equal participants. The Time Credits model seeks to encourage co-production at individual, group and community level. Through Time Credits, people are encouraged to get involved in their community, to make decisions about how services are run, and to help create and actively deliver services alongside professionals.

The Spice model allows each participant organisation or a group to make their own decisions about how they use Time Credits to encourage co-production within their organisation. By supporting co-production within groups, organisations and communities, Time Credits help to reduce dependency, aid prevention, and build individual self-esteem and community resilience. Participant engagement can help organisations to serve more clients, or to help improve the quality or range of services they provide. As a result, Time Credits can help make services and activities more cost-effective, as service users and their communities increasingly help to design and deliver services and outcomes (Apteligen, 2015).

The definition of co-production which underpins the Spice theory of change is that of Boyle and Harris (2009). The authors define co-production as:

"...delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change" (p. 11, quoted in Apteligen, 2014).

Although not a precondition for participation, many Spice partners recruit a significant proportion of their volunteers from groups of service users, such as the parents of school-aged children, residents at a homeless hostel, or members of a credit union. This often involves people who would not normally volunteer to give time. Involvement from the individuals' part is always voluntary and requires active behaviour (people actively 'giving' their time) to generate a positive outcome and participate in delivering an activity or service.

4 Co-production in the evaluation

In line with Spice's strong commitment to co-production, the values and approach associated with the co-production of knowledge have been incorporated into the overall research design and strategy of this evaluation wherever possible.

The research project is co-governed by a team including representatives from the key stakeholders (Spice, Cambridgeshire County Council and CHS Group), and the research team from the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR). This group meets once a month to discuss the project progress. In these discussions, CCHPR updates other project partners about how the fieldwork (undertaken by CCHPR), and informs the others when outputs can be expected to be available. Any issues that have arisen during the previous month are brought up and discussed in an open dialogue, where all parties are invited to participate as equals. Wherever problems are identified with the research process, solutions are sought and discussed collaboratively, with each party bringing into the discussion their specialist knowledge and viewpoint resulting in a more rounded perspective than would otherwise be possible.

The Wisbech partners are included in the governance of the research project via a steering group, which meets once every quarter in Wisbech. All of the Wisbech Time Credits partner organisations were invited to join the steering group, although some regretted not being able to make such commitment. The steering group also includes representatives from Spice and Cambridgeshire County Council. Each Wisbech local partner is invited to send one or two representatives from their group or organisation, as well as one or two Time Credit volunteers.

The purpose of the steering group is to ensure that the local partners' have an opportunity to engage with the research project and voice their views and opinions. The support of the local partner organisations is crucial for the data collection, and in many ways the success of the project depends on the research core team's ability to connect with the local partners, to understand what they want to get out of the research, and find ways to make the research relevant for them. The steering group is designed to assist in this process by providing an open forum where all local partners are welcome to join and voice their concerns, opinions and make suggestions for the direction of the research as well as individual methods that could be used to collect data and engage participants. The role of the steering group members as the 'experts by experience' is substantial, and it is essential to ensure that the local partners feel ownership over the research project.

The steering group sessions are run as co-productive workshops, where the local partners are invited to put forward their views regarding various issues relevant for the specific stage of the research process, to comment on draft questionnaires, topic guides and other fieldwork tools, and to make suggestions for how best engage the local Time Credits volunteers with the research. As research findings begin to become available, these will be presented to the steering group members, who will be invited to offer their opinions, highlight shortcoming and offer alternative interpretations before the findings are circulated to broader audiences. The steering group members will also be consulted and invited to put forward ideas for the dissemination of the research findings.

In addition to the steering group sessions, the partners are consulted on a one-to-one basis by the lead field researcher at frequent intervals. The project also has a Facebook page where partner organisations as well as individual Time Credit members can contact the research team. Suggestions and proposals from individual Time Credit members have been explicitly encouraged.

The funding proposal for this research project on the public health outcomes of the Time Credits project in Wisbech was drafted co-productively, in collaboration with Spice, Cambridgeshire County Council, CHS Group, Cambridge Institute of Public Health (CIPH), and the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR).

The methodology was developed by CCHPR, and shared and discussed with the other partners. CCHPR took the lead and drafted the first version, all parties were consulted and invited to suggest changes before a final set of methods were agreed. The methodology was designed to incorporate a wide variety of different types of data collection methods, including surveys, qualitative interviews, ethnographic methods and co-productive 'innovative' methods. The specific methods and the co-productive element associated with each are summarised in the Table below.

Table 1 Co-productive elements in research methodology

Method	Co-productive elements
Literature review / background context/ secondary data analysis	Cross-disciplinary discussions with public health, discussions with regional and local stakeholders and local service providers.
Interviews with regional and local stakeholders	Information sharing. Co-produced knowledge instrumental in helping to develop the analytical framework and the content of the new members' survey.
'New members' Survey (Waves 1 and 2) New participants who join the Wisbech TC scheme	Survey content co-designed with relevant stakeholders and public health experts. Knowledge co-produced with respondents.
Scoping visits	Co-production of knowledge through dialogue and development of interpersonal relationships. Trust, which is essential to co-productive working relationship, is built by getting to know each other.
Informal field visits	Active participation of local partner organisations and volunteers to co-design a programme for ethnographic fieldwork with the researcher to ensure selected approaches will be desirable and meaningful to participants.
Participant observation	Researcher participation in working together with the other volunteers and local partner organisations to co-produce events, services and outcomes.
Steering group	Co-designing topic guides. Co-designing the ethnographic fieldwork plan, including considering different options for co-producing knowledge using ethnographic research methods.
Existing members' Survey Paper survey	Active participation of existing Time Credit volunteers in co-producing knowledge by taking the survey.
Interviews with existing members	Active participation of existing Time Credit volunteers in co-producing knowledge by sharing their stories with the researcher. Possibility of peer interviewing if there is interest.
Ethnographic option 1: Ethnographies 'life in a day'	Active involvement of individual volunteers to co-produce knowledge and meaning by sharing their day with the researcher and discussing it afterwards, using their own words and frames of reference to ensure authenticity.
Ethnographic option 2: Visual ethnographies / scrap books (group / individual) A selection of interested TC scheme participants	Active involvement of individual volunteers to co-produce knowledge and meaning via the production of scrap-books, visual diaries or photographs.

<p>Additional ethnographic options (as suggested by partners and members)</p>	<p>Active involvement of individual volunteers in co-designing the research approaches and co-producing knowledge and meaning via the production of concrete or abstract outputs of their own choosing (such as art work, short video clips, written or spoken diaries, recordings etc).</p>
<p>Ethnographic option 3: Film</p>	<p>Active involvement of individual volunteers to co-design the film outline (possible a focus group activity with interested parties). The decisions what to film, who to film and where to film to be made in collaboration with the local participants.</p> <p>Active involvement of individual volunteers to co-produce knowledge and meaning by using their own words and frames of reference.</p>
<p>Interviews with project partners (earn and spend) Semi-structured interviews</p>	<p>Steering group involvement in co-designing the topic guide for these interviews.</p> <p>Earn and spend partners sharing their perceptions, views and experiences, participating in the co-production of knowledge.</p>
<p>National survey of time credit networks and time banks On-line (Qualtrics)</p>	<p>Active participation of people who are active in time-based currency research or involved with time-based currency initiatives in developing the content of the survey, potentially via consultations and workshops.</p>
<p>Interviews with relevant organisations and policy makers – national level</p>	<p>Active participation of relevant project leaders and stakeholders in co-production of knowledge.</p>
<p>Scoping review</p>	<p>Co-produced with researchers at the Cambridge Institute of Public Health.</p>
<p>Interviews / focus group with local residents NOT involved in the Time Credit scheme</p>	<p>Active participation of local non-members and representatives of organisations who have heard about the Time Credits but decided to not participate to co-produce knowledge of factors informing decisions to not participate.</p>

5 Conclusions

Within the last decade or so, there has been a growing movement to encourage more interactive and collaborative practices in the generation of knowledge. The concept of co-production has emerged as a response to these demands, to describe practices that involve various actors, often from different social or professional positions, working together interactively. In the coming years, the demand for this type of inclusive and participatory practices is likely to increase further. In very general terms, co-production means people working together for an agreed outcome.

In relation to research, co-production is an interactive and collaborative process of knowledge generation. In simple terms, this means working together and building relationships between different groups of people to generate knowledge that coherently incorporates different viewpoints. Co-production is conducting research 'with' communities rather than 'on' communities.

Co-production in research should have a transparent research design and key objectives, an active goal, a more equal relationship between the researchers, practitioners and communities, mutual learning and interaction to understand issues and create knowledge, and a production process that allows participation at all stages. Co-production in research and knowledge generation is believed to have several positive implications for inclusivity, data quality and the implementation of findings. Co-produced evidence and knowledge is generally believed to be more socially robust, truthful, comprehensive, inclusive, and overall more accurately representative of reality.

Key challenges to the co-production of research and knowledge relate to the skills required to facilitate the co-production of knowledge, traditional academic practices and requirements, and the practical challenges associated with involving people with no research background in data collection in an active capacity.

The Spice Time Credits model seeks to encourage co-production at individual, group and community levels. Through Time Credits, people are encouraged to get involved in their community, to make decisions about how services are run, and to help create and actively deliver services alongside professionals.

In line with Spice's strong commitment to co-production, the values and approach associated with the co-production of knowledge have been incorporated into the overall design and strategy of this evaluation wherever possible. This includes mutual dialogue amongst a range of different stakeholders and a methodology that was designed to incorporate a wide variety of different types of data collection methods, including surveys, qualitative interviews, ethnographic methods and co-productive 'innovative' methods.

Co-production may be best described by its underlying principles and values of mutuality, reciprocity and equality. The aim of the evaluation is to embed this co-productive approach within the research as far as possible and to reflect on the success of this approach as the research progresses.

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