

Housing Co-Production

Briefing Report



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Aim of the report

This briefing report presents findings and recommendations from one-year scoping research of different approaches to housing co-production in the UK. The study was part of an Early Career Fellowship funded by Sheffield Hallam University. It offers an overview of the co-production field in the UK. We outline the different models, define co-production and show how the term is being used; identify the motivations, criteria for success and the challenges along the way, and broad good practice approaches.

Introduction

What we mean by co-production

Co-production has become a buzz word, used in various ways. In essence, it is 'an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their family and their neighbours' (Boyle & Harris, 2009:14). This requires a radical shift in trust and balance of power from the traditional paternalistic approach to social housing or housing development more broadly. In the UK, intensifying austerity policies since 2010 led public bodies to adopt co-production to generate value with increasingly constrained budgets (Alexander, 2021). Housing co-production is part of a policy landscape that includes public participation (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025), tenant/community management (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2013) and, for social housing, the new regulatory landscape of the 2023 Social Housing Act (Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, 2023), with its emphasis on tenants' voice as well as greater professionalism and regulation on health and safety.

We propose a normative definition of housing co-production:

A process where partners 1) meet regularly
2) discuss problems deliberatively and agree on solutions in the same space
3) Participants' roles, responsibilities and powers are clearly defined
4) Accountability procedures are in place.

In reality, co-production is practiced in a range of ways. Common methods and practices in housing co-production include steering groups or project committees; training and financial support enabling participation; power mapping; relational approaches to conflict resolution; and ongoing feedback and accountability within the wider organisation and community. Below we explain the tension between our normative definition and the spectrum of descriptive definitions found in our case studies, ranging from consultation to tenants' leadership.

We identified **different types of co-production partnerships** – with a housing association; private developer; community-led housing enabler – and **different approaches**, ranging from top-down to community-led, with a range of co-production remits: from consultation to collaborative decision making; from architectural or service design only to delivery, too. Each type faces slightly different motivations and challenges.

The study

This report draws on a qualitative study of six case studies of housing co-production in the UK. The cases were selected to represent different geographical areas (rural and urban areas in England, Wales and Scotland); types of co-production partnerships (with a housing association; private developer; community-led housing enabler); and different approaches to co-production (top-

down; bottom-up; light touch or extensive). For each case study, 2-6 participants were interviewed, including members of staff, support workers and prospective residents. Three case studies were still in the development stage, and three had tenants already living in their homes. The projects were selected to represent a range of tenants' experiences, including projects focusing on older people, marginalised communities and people with disabilities.

The methods included semi-structured interviews with 22 people, which were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Thematic analysis identified the motivations, success factors, challenges and constraints. We also looked at how co-production was understood by different participants, and where it was relevant, at the importance of co-design. Following the interviews, participants and stakeholders were invited to a round tables event where they could comment on a draft of this report, network with peers and discuss key issues in co-production. An advisory group offered advice on the framing, case selection and interpretation of the findings.

Types of co-production partnerships

The study included a range of co-production models and partnerships.

- **Social housing provider and tenants:** the most common partnership. We explored models where the initiative came from established communities looking for a developer and / or housing management, and where the initiative came from the housing association itself, with an aim to increase tenants' agency and voice. In two cases, the co-production involved not only prospective residents but also other community

stakeholders (family members, a local CLT). One case study represented an early stage of introducing co-production to a large organisation, involving mainly consultation. Other cases involved extensive co-production and some involvement in decision making, from budget priorities, design, materials and location.

- **Private developer and homeowners:** a relatively rare model in the UK. This model can involve an established community partnering with a developer for the design and building phases, or where a community is formed through the development process, with close support from the developer.
- **Community-led housing enabler:** a relatively rare model in the UK. This model involves a non-profit organisation offering support with the project's development, including managing the building and acting as the landlord, including collecting rent and managing the infrastructure in collaboration with tenants.

Each model represents different contexts and challenges, and it is impossible to describe co-production in a way that is fully relevant to all of them. Some faced more challenges relating to inclusion and engagement, others faced challenges relating to finance or regulations. In some cases, the community owned the land or properties and in others the land was owned by a registered provider. This had impact on the power dynamics between partners. In most cases, co-production was a new experience to all partners.

Why co-produce?

Co-production is attractive to both housing providers and residents for many reasons. The main motivations our participants raised are summarised in this table:

Benefits to residents	Benefits to developers and social providers
• Resilience through affordable housing. • Sharing the workload in development and post-occupation management. • Sharing the financial risk (this is beneficial when the alternative is carrying the full risk alone, but not when the alternative is not sharing the risk at all). • Expert support from professionals. • Empowerment and upskilling. • Belonging and pride of place. • Improved housing.	• Meet social landlords' legal requirements and social purpose. • Open up land in rural/semi rural areas and small plots, enhance community support. • Assist with perpetuity of affordability. • Increase staff's satisfaction. • Cost reduction (long term). • Improve knowledge of sustainable building. • Improved housing. • Reputational gain. • In Wales: meet Welsh government targets for CLH.

Challenges and good practice

Time scale

The co-production process should balance the need to move quickly to meet deadlines (e.g. planning permission, commitment to build on land, financial impact of more staff time) with the time needed to process the information, form as a group, identify needs and build capacity for decision making. Co-production does not always follow a linear path, and each team will have to find a suitable way to communicate and work together. The process can be messy and require a longer time than conventional housing development. The timing of the engagement is crucial: when senior management makes key decisions before a consultation, co-production is limited, and trust is compromised.



Good practice

Partners should be prepared for a long process and budget for a longer lead time and support staff time. Partners should be ready to fail and find ways to work together. The sooner the engagement start, the more meaningful and impactful the co-production will be.

Finance

Decisions must be understood and agreed by all sides, considering the financial implications. When residents feel they have a real say, they are more likely to 'own the decision' and accept cuts and changes. Where the developer or landlord makes a financial decision with no consultation, it affects trust and can lead to tenants disengaging or leaving the project altogether.



Good practice

Frame financial decisions as a prioritising exercise, offering transparency and sharing some decision-making powers, rather than deciding on a solution top-down. This is easier to do in smaller projects or where power is devolved.

Managing expectations: legal obligations and technical knowledge

Power sharing varies between projects. Housing providers and developers often make some decisions themselves, for example technical decisions, or decisions related to fire regulations or health and safety. Different communities have different levels of interest in technical aspects (e.g. building materials, energy sources). Legal liability and the added cost of detailed consultations can have a chilling effect on social providers' ability and willingness to delegate powers.



Good practice

Partners should be honest about the remit of co-production and be clear about which powers they can devolve to the group. Some technical decisions and responsibilities can be shared with lay people with some training and trust. Where those cannot be shared, a consultation can explore different ways to implement statutory obligations. Written agreements with 'red lines' can clarify the remit of co-production.

Trust (and organisational culture)

Some partners are concerned that tenants will have unreasonable demands. Where senior decisionmakers are not involved in the process, partners can only engage in consultation, compromising participants' trust in the process due to its limited impact on outcomes. One manager in an organisation new to co-production was concerned that 'obviously residents are going to tell you they want everything under the sun and they're going to tell you what they think should be implemented, but like I said the final decision is always driven by financial considerations.' In another organisation, a director noted that tenants, especially those who are not used to being consulted, are not confident to ask for changes. When residents gain confidence, they said, 'most people don't ask for unreasonable or impossible things, and it's rare that adjustments can't be made.'



Good practice

Co-production must be part of the organisational culture and ethos, supported by the board and senior leadership. Staff and tenants can learn to trust each other through experiencing positive outcomes of co-production. Importantly, partners should trust the process. Co-production works best when the values and ethos of the partners are aligned.

Capacity

Co-production requires active, assertive participation from tenants. The process might take longer or be limited in its scope when tenants are not united as a group, have little experience in organising, a language barrier or challenges in life that limit their availability for participation. Established communities with a clear vision that approach a partner for collaboration have more confidence, voice and influence than communities that are invited to co-produce by a developer. One community member reflected on the way a privileged position led to a positive co-production experience: 'I think our qualifications gave us some respect in the team'; conversely, there is a risk that community members with no formal qualifications will face disrespect.



Good practice

A member of staff or a paid external facilitator should help the group build friendships and capacity and facilitate interactions between the partners. Working with established community groups that worked together before helps to achieve greater power sharing in a shorter timeframe. A group of tenants that meets socially can feel more united and work together effectively in a way that meets their needs.

Engagement and inclusion

Co-production is often a novel concept for all partners. It can be difficult to engage tenants

in the process, especially if they had negative experiences in the past, if they are marginalised, if the community is very large, or if they have limited capacity to participate. It is often easier to engage with healthy older people who have fewer work and family responsibilities. Co-production can sometimes involve dominant residents that do not necessarily represent the range of needs of the community. The processes can be complex and difficult to understand, and information may not be accessible. Staff may also struggle to engage well in co-production without appropriate training, organisational support and commitment.



Good practice

Successful engagement involves personal connection, door knocking, face to face interaction and practical support to attend and participate in meetings (e.g. filling out surveys, lifts, interpreting). It is easier to engage effectively in smaller communities, and where a paid worker is employed to do it. To include younger people, it is helpful to schedule meetings outside of working hours and offer childcare and financial compensation for people's time. Inclusive facilitation creates a more equitable space where different people are heard and are encouraged to speak. Information should be shared with the audience in mind; as one participant said: 'dissemination is not communication'.

Differences between models

Each approach operates in unique circumstances: regulations, financial commitments, organisational mission, socio-demographic makeup, expectations. These circumstances shape the partnership through the levels of engagement, trust and capacity from residents, and the time scale of the project. Additionally, projects are often shaped by the individuals involved: for example, an enthusiastic housing officer can make a difference in highly regulated, risk averse environments. The table below reflects the findings from the case studies and does not necessarily predict outcomes for other similar set-ups. However, these findings reflect some circumstances that many similar partnerships are likely to have in common.

	Registered provider top-down	Registered provider bottom up	Private developer top-down	Private developer bottom-up	Enabling hub bottom up
Speed of development	Med-high	Low-med	High	High	Low
Tenants capacity	Low	High	Medium	High	High
Engagement and inclusion	Low-med	Medium	Medium	High	High
Finance	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	High
Managing expectations	Low-med	Med-high	High	High	High
Trust	Low-med	Med-high	Med-high	Med-high	High
Scale potential	High	Low-med	Med-high	Low	Low

Future research needed

Future research should explore the long-term impact of co-production on tenants' satisfaction and agency, the skills and satisfaction of members of staff, organisational culture, housing design and financial planning. Practitioners would benefit from specific recommendations on ways to build trust and develop processes for effective power sharing.

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