

SANDRA DANIELS

I think coproduction is important:

Let me provide some personal background. I have been a disabled activist for 25 years and more recently involved in mainstream campaigning and trade union activities. We tend to see coproduction too narrowly in my opinion; simply about service development, I want to argue it has wider application. As socialists and trade unions we need to look closer to home because I have found our practice far from accessible and inclusive. There is also a tendency on the Left to speak for disabled people rather than facilitating OUR involvement and promoting working together in partnership.

As a disabled person and the acting chair of Reclaim Social Care I want to see campaigning activities co-produced involving disabled people of all ages. I believe this approach will open up the opportunity for real and lasting changes; where we can build and strengthen campaigns, and in turn, assist to motivate people into creating a vision of inclusion where people can work together to exercise their powers and their responsibilities as citizens.

Over the last 20 years Disabled people have experienced good and poor examples of coproduction, but recognising at the same time that it does have value if correctly applied. It is a way of realising what lies behind the Disabled People's Movement's slogan: 'Nothing About Us, Without Us'.

My involvement in coproduction:

For many years I worked in the advocacy and self-advocacy field and was employed at People First Birmingham. My job at People First was to work in coproduction with learning disabled committee members and volunteers to support the running of the self-advocacy project and to achieve its aims and objectives.

People First Birmingham was founded by and for learning disabled people. In the mid 90's Bernard London a local learning disabled man set up in local day centres, "speaking up" groups and used the groups to identify the need for a People First self-advocacy project in Birmingham. Bernard's wish was for learning disabled people to have the resources and support needed to get their voices heard within wider society, to enable them to have choice, control, and inclusion, in order to promote better life chances.

To achieve the aims of People First Birmingham speaking up group meetings were organised in several community locations in Birmingham to capture the views of learning disabled people and give them a voice. People First

Birmingham's committee members and volunteers would then represent their members views at meetings such as the Valuing People Partnership Board and the local authority user involvement group meetings to influence the development of local and national services.

Valuing People ('A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century') was a government White Paper published in March 2001, by the Department of Health, who during the consultation process assumed the role of 'lead department'. The introduction to the White Paper explained its significance: this is the first White Paper on learning disability for thirty years and sets out an ambitious challenging programme of action for improving services. It became part of my role at People First Birmingham to support learning disabled self-advocates to take part in the Partnership Board meetings.

The main **aims** of the **partnership board** were to: improve the lives of local **learning disabled people**, improve the lives of local family carers. make sure people with **learning disabilities** and their carers have a say in the work to make services better.

This all sounds good in theory, but It is vital to acknowledge existing power inequalities in relations within the Partnership Boards and among its contributors, which consisted of local authority officers who had a duty to organise the Partnership Board meetings and report on the way forward set out in the white paper.

The board also had representatives from the voluntary, charity and private sectors and of course there was the allocation of financial resources to be considered and at that time there was a market-place of services being developed and promoted under a New Labour government.

Even back in 2001 before austerity measures were implemented by local authorities their systems were still very bureaucratic and inaccessible. Council officers were often under pressure to drive through ideas and policies without consideration or the acknowledgement and understanding of disabled people's access requirements.

For the People First Birmingham's self-advocates to attend meetings, they needed support; to have the paperwork before the meetings in easy words and pictures (Easy Read) was a crucial resource for their involvement on the Board. Without those resources the self-advocates would continue to be disempowered, be seen as passive recipients of service and have their skills and experience ignored. It would actively deny them decision-making powers.

The People First Birmingham's self-advocates I supported certainly did not allow themselves to be treated as passive recipients by the Board, they

fought to get their access requirements implemented, they stood together and challenged lack of access and the power imbalance.

On several occasions, I remember the self-advocates walking out of meetings, due to agreed access requirements not being adhered to. The local authority user involvement group meetings

raised similar issues but with the added factor that coproduction barriers are not always "them and us" between officers and service users, but can arise through power imbalance between groups of service users, ignorance and prejudice, not to mention the loudest voices coming from "the usual suspects". At times coproduction barriers were due to conflicting access requirements.

For those of you that are not familiar with Easy read: it is written information in a format in which clear words and phrases are used, supported by pictures, diagrams, symbols and / or photographs and of course learning disabled people need to be involved in creating Easy Read documents.

The age of austerity and coproduction:

2010 brought in the election of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition government and the age of austerity was born. The Valuing People Strategy started to come to an end and local authorities needed to reduce finances year after year; shrink the council workforce, thus reducing its responsibilities to the local community. This resulted in local authorities developing citizen involvement groups to look at how the coalition government's austerity measures could be implemented. The local authorities talked about working in coproduction and how this meant everyone having equal power, but from what I witnessed the only power lay with the coalition government who were determined to change the relationship between the state and people who used services.

In 2014 People First Birmingham started to face funding uncertainty and even after the restructuring of the project activities it became financially unsustainable and the project closed its doors for the last time in 2016. This is not an isolated picture; it is a widespread issue. Without self-advocacy, talk of citizen democracy or coproduction, is hypocritical.

Closing comments:

Service users should be regarded as an asset and encouraged to work alongside campaigners and professionals as partners in the design and delivery of services. Real and lasting changes are possible with approaches that build or strengthen inclusion and social networks. This approach has to be

central to delivering of community services and also needs to underpin how we build our campaign.

Differences in how to move forward will exist, but with openness and transparency, mutual respect, and tolerance, we have an opportunity to turn the crisis into a pathway which mirrors the vision of a founding father of our Movement.

Vic Finkelstein wrote:

“If we look at the conceivable lifestyles of disabled people then we are faced with an infinite variety of situations which might be entered and many diverse activities that could be carried out. Disability, quite simply, is concerned with the barriers that may prevent this. It is not about who we are or what might be wrong with us, as professionals and politicians would have us believe. A dynamic approach means we look at the total social situation in which everyone interacts.”