



SHARED OWNERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING

Making change through co-production

Decision-making is often led by professionals without the input of the people directly affected by that decision. When those that use the services and support are not involved in shaping the decisions, services can struggle to meet the real needs and priorities of communities.

Co-production sits beyond consultation and co-design. It is the deepest level of collaboration, where communities and professionals work side by side as equal decision-makers. It allows an equal level of power-sharing and influence over decisions. By sharing ownership and making decisions together, services become more relevant, effective and innovative. They reflect what matters most to the people who use them and are more likely to create real impact.

Better Start has made a commitment to keep the community at the heart of decision making. Developing the co-production model that works for families and communities has been an iterative process over the past 8 years. We have been able to test and learn through a range of projects in Blackpool and have refined ways of working which have the most success. The following three elements have emerged as key to meaningful co-production:

1. Shared Power

For co-production to work, everyone involved needs to be fully committed to sharing decision making. It is important that both professional and lived experience hold the same weight in shaping the direction and priorities.

Co-production can be very different to how people typically work together. For professionals, it can feel at odds with prior experience or learning. Professionals often hold more organisational knowledge, confidence, or perceived authority, and it's important to be aware the those with lived experience may feel that their input will be judged or overlooked.

How shared power is achieved:

- Invest time before the sessions start to get to know each other. This builds trust and a confidence to share perspectives.
- Use an inclusive, neutral environment. Avoid venues that feel corporate or clinical.
- Use accessible language, and be mindful of using organisational acronyms.
- Agree 'working together' guidelines that reinforce respect and boundaries.
- Set time for conversations and preparation prior to sessions so that individuals arrive feeling informed and comfortable.

I've had so many negative experiences in my life through the system. If my input can help change the system for the better, even if it's not for myself, it's for someone else, that's what matters to me.

**Lived Experience Parent,
Born into Care Co-Production Team**

In the process, the people with lived experience were every bit as valid as the experience of those with professional or work experience.

Social Worker, Co-production Participant

The magic happened when we explored what Blackpool could do together and we created a space where people could feel like they were truly equal.

**Claire Mason, Research Fellow,
The Centre for Child & Family Justice
Research, Lancaster University**

2. Create a safe and brave space

Co-production thrives in an environment where people feel safe enough to have honest conversations. For those with lived experience, discussions can often involve re-visiting experiences which are difficult. Individuals may, at times, feel triggered by discussions and feel emotionally exposed, particularly when talking about sensitive topics. Facilitators need to be trauma-informed and skilled at holding and responding to these emotional discussions.

How these spaces are achieved:

- Be trauma-informed and responsive
- Be aware of individual emotional safety planning. Create processes at each session which provide space to debrief. These include check-ins and check-outs, regular breaks and safeguarding processes.
- Always have at least two facilitators: one to lead the session and another to offer support. Consider sitting next to individuals with lived experience to offer support.
- Provide time for debrief after sessions. Individuals may need to talk things through, get clarity on discussions or have time to reflect.

3. Keeping momentum

Co-production can often take longer than traditional decision-making approaches. Time-scales need to be realistic, with expectations clarified from the outset. With competing demands, it can sometimes be difficult for professionals to have the capacity to take part, so it is important to have senior leaders who fully understand the benefit of co-production.

It is also important to consider any barriers to attendance for individuals who lived experience to attend sessions, such as childcare, work or travel costs.

How keeping momentum is achieved:

- Ensure that everyone involved understands the value of co-production. Having ownership of joint decision-making is powerful motivation.
- Be flexible. Offer both in-person and online sessions, where appropriate, or offer one-to-one meetings if an individual feels they are not ready to be in a group setting so that their voice can still be heard.
- Be accessible. Support individuals to overcome barriers to attendance.
- Ensure individuals with lived experience are paid for their time. This ensures that everyone's contribution is equally valued.
- Celebrate positive changes. Although co-production takes time and the end goal can sometimes feel out of reach, there are often small changes identified which can be implemented quickly. Be sure to record and celebrate these as a group.

Better Start's Commitment to Co-production

In Blackpool, the methodology of co-production has been developed and refined over the past 5 years. It is underpinned by:

1. Transparency

We clearly communicate the purpose, scope, and any limitations of the work (resources, capacity, legislation, time-scales). Together, we set guidelines upfront to manage expectations.

2. Family-Led

Families' voices guide our decisions. We respect and value their lived experience and expertise.

3. Inclusive Opportunities

We create accessible ways for families to contribute, using environments, methods, and tools that meet needs.

4. Iterative Learning

We adapt through the process and embrace challenges and value learning throughout.

5. Sustained Engagement

Families are involved at every stage; from planning to sharing outcomes, through regular, meaningful communication.

6. Time & Resources

We understand that co-production takes time. We are realistic about time-scales allocating resources to support collaboration.

7. Fairness

We provide fair recognition, including financial payment supported by organisational policies.

8. Workforce Development

Co-production is valued system wide. Staff receive training and support to embed co-production, ensuring consistent practice and language across services.



Whilst co-production has its challenges, the rewards are overwhelming. When power is truly shared, support is prioritised, and individuals are given the time and tools they need to participate meaningfully, co-production leads to deeper insights, stronger relationships and changes that genuinely reflect the needs of families and communities.

Adrienne McKie, Development Support Officer Better Start



We are ensuring we are grounding all of our work in local, lived experience and making sure that we are transforming systems alongside families.

Clare Law, Director Better Start

Case Studies



Born into Care: Driving Change Through Co-Production

Over four years of co-production, bringing together professionals and parents with lived experience, one message stood out: Blackpool needed to do more for families facing recurrent care; those who have experienced multiple separations from their babies.

Guided by real experiences, international research, local service mapping, and lessons from across the UK, this collaboration sparked something transformative: Waves.

Waves is a specialist offer designed to support parents after the permanent removal of one or more children through care proceedings. It provides two clear pathways:

- Pre-birth support for parents currently pregnant who have previously experienced a child's removal
- Post-proceedings support for parents within 12 months of a child being permanently removed

Every family receives:

- A dedicated key worker
- Support from two parent supporters
- Engagement as early in pregnancy as possible
- Support that continues post-birth regardless of outcome

The Parent Supporter Role

Unique to Blackpool, this role was created because parents told us they wanted someone who truly understands—someone who has walked in their shoes. Parent supporters blend three evidence-based approaches: peer mentoring, peer support, and befriending. They bring lived experience of the children's social care system, and it's a paid role for parents who are no longer in the system and feel ready to use their experience to help others.



Early Child Development Campaign: How Co-Production Transforms Practice

In June 2023, a bold idea was approved: a co-produced Early Child Development Campaign, set to launch at the October 2023 annual conference. The vision was to celebrate and raise awareness of how families support early child development in their everyday lives.

Staff quickly realised that this wasn't just about creating a campaign - it was about changing the way we work. Recruitment, forming working groups, and scheduling meetings meant balancing holidays, school runs, and children's needs. It took time and flexibility, but the process revealed something invaluable: being part of co-production is as rewarding as the final product.

The focus shifted from hitting deadlines to making the process family-led. Families shaped everything - from concept and design to how the campaign was photographed. Instead of asking children to "act" to a certain way, the team embraced authenticity, capturing real moments without prompts.

The key learning is that co-production takes time, trust, and flexibility, and the results are richer and more meaningful.

The first stage of early child development campaign was launched in Summer 2025 and included images of local parents and their children. It received high engagement on social media locally and provided valuable hits and tips to parents around their role in their child's development.. Following evaluation, phase two will be launched in 2026 including a poster campaign around the town.

