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CO-PRODUCTION: ALL THE LADDERS AND NONE OF THE SNAKES



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Introduction

This is a report for anyone considering working with children and young people using a co-production, participatory or collaborative methodology. It also acts as a tool to document the IAP project's use of co-production over time to measure change and to enable reflection for the IAP project workers and partners.

The report is based on three years of work within a five year project and explores to what extent the work the project has carried out could be described as co-production, collaboration or participation. The report is focused on the various tests of change the Inclusion as Prevention project has completed, is currently working on, or that remain in the planning stages. It is supplemented by the reflections of a group of young people, who all work with IAP across different tests of change, when they were asked to consider how they felt about co-production and their work in IAP.

The young people who took part in a session exploring their views and experiences were keen that their comments and descriptions of what makes good co-production be available as a one-page visualisation that would provide a summary for all, and then those who feel they want to know more could continue on to read the full report. As a result of this request, the Ladders without the Snakes game has been included as an example of supporting a group of young people to co-produce together.



What is IAP?

IAP is a 5 year project which has brought together partners from South Lanarkshire Council, Action for Children, Dartington Service Design Lab and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice. The aim is to bring together children and young people, families, communities and professionals to co-produce and co-design change, in order to reduce the chances of young people having police contact or other negative outcomes in the future. Within IAP there are different strands to facilitate this work. The engagement lead brings together and supports individuals and groups in participating in co-production, the embedded evaluator captures learning and evidence of impact and the improvement lead ensures the work leads to system change and improvement. The project aims to embed change and leave a legacy of better longer term outcomes with improved access to services, service responses with earlier interventions and a reduced need for serious system involvement such as justice contact and use of secure care.

The overarching principle of IAP is 'to explore what happens when we focus the system on including people and helping them to do something rather than preventing something'. Different techniques have been used by the project to include people to 'do something'. Systems leadership has been used with professionals in social work, education and health to empower them to make changes within the systems in which they work. Groups of young people participate in working groups where they use improvement methodology as a structure to test out changes they have identified as important to them and other young people.

Why consider co-production now?

This report is part of a series of annual thematic reviews aimed at highlighting the learning from a core element of IAP. The first thematic review was Partnership, the second was Engagement and this report will focus on co-production which is at the heart of IAP.

Children's Rights

Most relevant to co-production and participation of young people within the IAP project is Article 12 of the UNCRC which says:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child,. [and] the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The 6 principles of co-production and good practices of participation by definition support the inclusion of children and young people as actors with agency and the IAP project has always acknowledged the importance of children's rights in all of its work.

What is co-production?

Co-production of ideas, interventions and supports is relatively new in the grand scheme of service provision, where decision making and power have been concepts traditionally reserved for 'specialists' or those in positions of authority. Generally, there has been little or infrequent involvement of those who rely upon services to actually 'serve them well' - in the design, delivery and implementation of the very services, community initiatives and environments they require access to. Terms such as 'Co-Production, Co-Design, Participatory-Led Practice' are often used interchangeably, by authorities who recognise the value of opening up these processes to citizens and who are working hard to remove barriers to participation.

The way IAP does co-production may not be the way other projects have done and may differ again from the way you are doing participatory-led practices of your own. But while the terminology is at times interchangeable in this work, the values, methods available and principles involved are clear in both purpose and value.

Our methodologies within IAP are various and fluid but our overarching aim is to work with children and young people, elevating their lived experiences and expertise to lead the way within 'Tests of Change' projects, to reduce the overall criminalisation of children and young people in the future.

Principles of co-production

The 6 principles of co-production initially described by the New Economics foundation (NEF) are probably the closest one can find of an early definition or characterisation of what Co-Production is and does. The image below is one based on these core principles and was created by the Lambeth Living Well Collaborative in 2010.



Why is everyone talking about co-production?

In order to address increasing demands on public services, a review was commissioned by the Scottish Parliament. The resulting Christie Commission 2011 report: Future Delivery of Public Services, recommended that public services aiming to become more efficient and effective in working collaboratively to achieve desired outcomes should:

- Focus on the needs of people;
- Energise and empower communities and public service workers to find innovative solutions,
- Build personal and community capacity, resilience and autonomy.

The report identified some positive actions already being undertaken including, “communities and services work[ing] together to decide what needs to be done, and how it is going to be done - so that services fit people’s needs, rather than the other way round”.

The Christie Report drew attention and raised the profile of co-production as a way of working, creating a buzz around the idea of this methodology. However, in practice not all co-production adopted by public services is truly co-production but more often different forms of consultation, engagement and participation. This is not a criticism but an acknowledgment of the different ways co-production is understood and practised by different groups.

IAP Co-Production definition

A working definition that best describes how IAP does co-production could be described as a way of working where professionals, service providers or organisations and children and young people work together to design and test changes. The approach recognises that the experience and views of young people in the community is valuable. Collaborating in order to create something new with individuals with life experience can improve their life chances and the life chances of others, for the better. The aim is that these relationships should be equal and reciprocal, but this has not always been possible or appropriate.

What are the benefits and how is it unique?

The literature is broad with different methodologies and practices all falling within the umbrella of co-production. However, there is a general assumption made by most who work in co-production that it has positive impact, both on the children and young people who take part and on the areas of work in which co-production is used. Researchers point to the growing use of co-production as a method, the emergence of Youth Parliaments is a prime example. But thinking something is positive and beneficial simply because of its prevalence runs contrary to what would be expected when examining good evidence based practice. To fully understand the benefits of co-production these key questions should be answered:

- Is there a positive impact on those who take part?
- Is there a positive impact in that the services are improved and remain so?
- Is there a positive impact on service users thereafter with access to improved services?

Yet all too often it is only the first question that is addressed within the evidence-base on co-production.

Some researchers have taken the time to highlight some potential risks when using co-production or participation with children and young people, referring to issues such as increasing vulnerabilities, over-researching with easy to access groups of young people and not involving those who are less available to researchers (Kay & Tisdale, 2017).

However, being reflective, adopting responsive practice and being aware of and vigilant to those potential risks should mitigate them to an extent. Additional financial and capacity costs are also frequently cited as an issue, particularly at the beginning of any co-production work.

The 'act' of co-production, if done well and following the key principles has the potential to be a successful and positive method of working. However, in terms of creating positive impactful change over time, this is less well documented.

Consultation, engagement and co-design encourage people to input by asking for their ideas, experience and opinions. Co-production is different because it also needs people's actions. (Think local, act personal (2011))

The term co-production refers to a way of working where service providers and users, work together to reach a collective outcome. (<https://www.involve.org.uk>)

Co-production is not just a word, it's not just a concept, it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them. (Think Local Act Personal (2011))

The difference between co-production and other forms of influence and participation is that, in co-production, people with lived experience play an equal role in both designing and delivering services, rather than making suggestions that professionals are responsible for deciding upon and implementing. (Lived experience, influence and participation toolkit, Mind.org.uk)

Engagement and participation as aspects of co-production or as steps to co-production?

There are different ways to make use of participation and co-production. These have often been visually represented using models e.g. Harts Ladder of Children's Participation (1992) or more recently, the Lundy model of child participation (2007). These are helpful to reflect on and can highlight areas of 'weaknesses' and 'strengths' in how children and young people participate in co-production projects. These models and others, importantly, acknowledge that there is not a 'one size fits all' idea of participation, and although there are types of participation it might be good practice to avoid, such as tokenistic or manipulative methods, the reality is that there are frequently going to be constraints around aspects of participation, be these financial, capacity (both service and participant capacity), interest or time limitations. Indeed as Lundy (2018) points out even tokenistic participation can have positive benefits for the child or young person who takes part if their limited involvement is ameliorated by providing them with feedback regarding how their involvement had impact.

How much of the work in IAP is co-production, how much is participation, how much is co-design and how much is 'service user involvement' in coming together to identify need and making the change? Where do these lines blur, what are the positives and negatives of each methodology and what are the limitations and potentials of each? The various and different working groups, tests and methodologies within and across IAP allows for broader examination and these will be described throughout this report.

Co-production best practice

Even when engagement, participation and co-production are built into a project as one of its core elements, in practice and in reality that doesn't mean that every group of children and young people will work in the same way, over the same time frame, or be engaged from start to finish. Projects where participation and co-production are core elements need to be trauma informed, need to be flexible, need to be responsive and require frequent and clear communication.

Within IAP the intention is that as much of the power, the decision making, and drives and interests, as possible, is given over to young people and the community but there is still a power imbalance at different stages of any project. IAP can create and support a space for discussion, respond with action in a practical sense and help provide an audience for the work and the achievements. Yet there are boundaries and borders, financial constraints and timescales, and where possible these should be articulated explicitly.



Why co-produce a thematic summary of co-production in IAP

As will be described throughout this report the voice of children and young people is intended to be paramount in the work of IAP. The methodology of IAP takes the form of improvement to services and designing services, improvement methodology utilising tests of change is used to identify new ways of working, test these ideas and then evidence the decision to adopt, amend or abandon these ideas before embedding in existing structures. Similar methods are also being used with professionals and service providers working with IAP on system change.

Across many of these tests it is children and young people who form working groups and 'do the work'. IAP as a project can be seen as a form of support around the children, young people and professionals, in providing the structures, the space (both physically and mentally) to enable them to explore ideas, form actions and carry out the tasks identified in order to test the idea.

IAP can be said to provide a generalised direction of movement, the project has a specific aim and intention after all, but within the boundaries of that direction the work itself is very much child-led and in some cases, led by professionals. It is apt then that this experience, how it feels to be part of this work as a young person, was explored with them in a workshop.

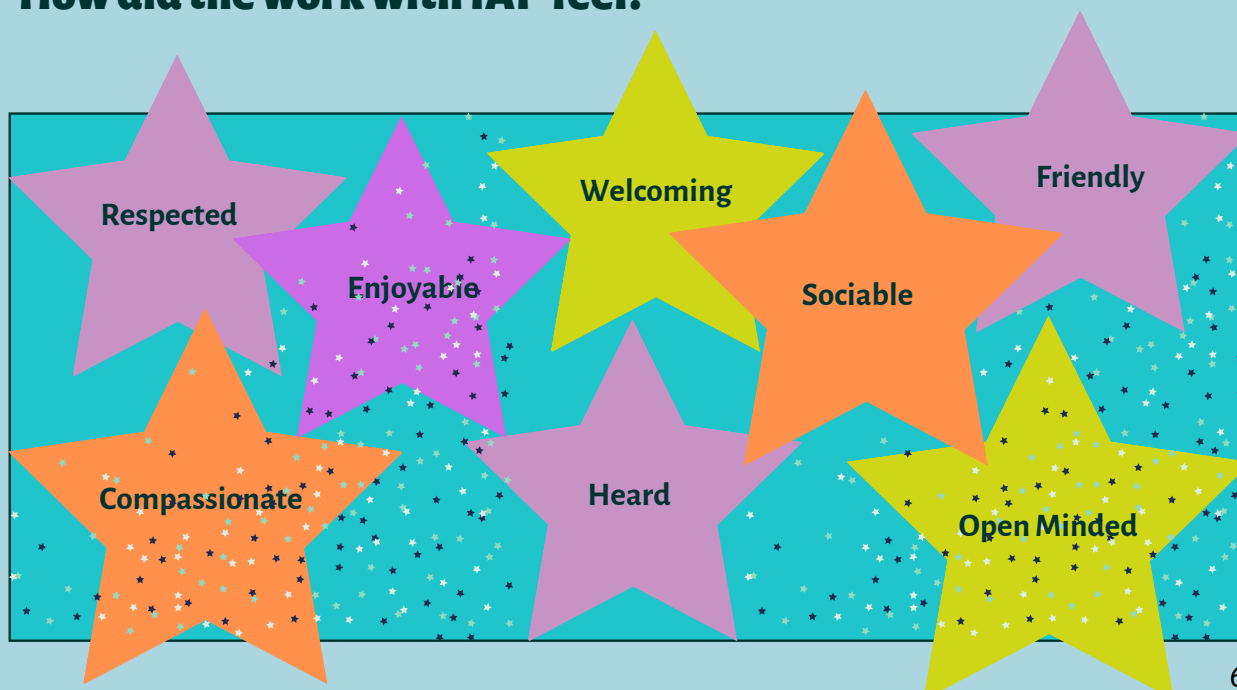
Co-production workshop

Method

Children and young people from four working groups within IAP were invited by the engagement coordinator to attend a morning workshop to explore their thoughts on co-production generally and also to identify and describe how they experienced co-production within IAP.

The morning workshop was facilitated by the IAP evaluator and supported by another researcher, a youth worker and the engagement coordinator (who stepped out of the room during the second half of the session to allow for more open discussion of the experience of co-production). The workshop began with a warm-up game, after which, followed two sessions of focused work with a comfort break in the middle. Throughout the workshop, there were snacks and drinks available and at the end of the session lunch was provided for all young people and facilitators.

How did the work with IAP feel?



How young people described co-production within IAP

Co-production in practice

In two groups the young people discussed aspects of their involvement with IAP and in their co-production tests in terms of things that went 'smoothly' and things that were more 'sticky' and needed additional navigation. Often these sticky and smooth aspects are based on common agreement, however, there were also additional comments from individuals. The participants were asked to place their thoughts on a large poster pinned to the wall, which had a line stretching from "Smooth" on one side of the poster to "Sticky" on the other side. They quickly identified that some points could be described as both smooth and sticky and so created a 'middle' section for these. After they had placed all their sticky notes on this line the group were then asked to think about what comments and points were aligned in some way. They then spent some time grouping these sticky notes into themes which are described below.

The balance of fun and work

The use of games and competitions within the group can be used as a form of icebreaker to 'warm-up' people before starting work. Games can also be used as a type of reward for working hard in a session or as a way to demarcate between focused work and more relaxed fun, chatty times. When working with children and young people they are often a standard activity type, but it is worth noting, as some of the young people did in this session, that not all young people actively enjoy playing these games. In fact for some young people it is not a part of a group session that they enjoy: "the games are boring", or indeed as another two responses made clear, these can be actively unpleasant to take part in, "I don't like games, being competitive stresses me out" and "Less chaotic games".

Something that could be seen as facilitators or participation workers as a standard ice-breaking activity is being experienced by some participants in a way that is not intended. Organisers might want to communicate more, giving more power to the children and young people in the choices they might make to either warm up or unwind after completing focused work. Perhaps asking for suggestions from the young people involved and rotating different activities at each group session would be helpful, and create more inclusivity.

Group dynamics

In several of the groups working with IAP the young people were already known to each other, some pointing out that "we were all from the same school". Where the group was not already established it was described by one participant that they had been introduced to the group by a friend and this had made it easy to make new friends. Another stated that it meant they had been able to connect with other young people from different schools. One made the point that close relationships were built up through regular meetings and this was seen as a benefit. Awareness of choice in participation was highlighted with this comment "you get the choice to not participate if you don't feel comfortable".

Being heard

How topics of work were decided within the group: Being heard was something highlighted by young people as an important aspect of working well together. Some young people described how things are talked over as a group before any decisions are made, for example "Our ideas are all heard", and "listen to everyone ... gather views".

Access and location

Only a few of the young people mentioned practical logistics such as access and location of the group, which might suggest accessing the group and its location has not been a problem for most of the young people. When prompted, however, some young people described that the location or space that they used was a good one for them. One mentioned the importance of 'the aesthetics', while another young person described it as being comfortable with bean bags. Terms were used such as 'welcoming and 'relaxing', access to private spaces and that the location was close to their school, and this was convenient. One individual made the point that there was a cost to them in travelling to the group using public transport. It is unclear, however, if this had been a barrier to other young people who would have otherwise participated.

It's important to acknowledge that for a period of time some of the groups were not able to meet face to face in a shared location as a result of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and so some of the work in groups was carried out distantly using online technology. Young people did identify that this could limit participation as not everyone has the facilities to take part online. The overwhelming view from the young people was that meeting in person was preferable to taking part online. However, it was acknowledged that the engagement coordinator took steps to make regular visits to the young people and this helped create a close relationship.

Relationship between the engagement coordinator and the young people

The relationship between the engagement coordinator and the young people was very important within the groups who took part in this session, but it was clearly articulated by the young people that they felt the groups belonged to them rather than the engagement coordinator, as the quotes on this page highlight.

But evidently the relationship between the young people and engagement coordinator was warm, friendly and trusting. This relationship was equally strong with the group that was formed prior to IAP involvement as with those newly formed groups, brought together to work on IAP tests of change.

This feeling of group ownership was also described in relation to how often and for how long the groups would meet for work, with one comment "we meet for as long as we need" and "we meet regularly and [it's] planned".

"We don't have a group without [the engagement coordinator], [the engagement coordinator] doesn't have a group without us"
(Quote from young person)

"I look forward to {the engagement coordinator} coming, I don't remember a time before that, even though we were already in a group"
(Quote from young person)

"It's OUR group that [the engagement coordinator] is part of"
(Quote from young person)

Relationships within the groups

Within the groups, some of the young people already had relationships with other group members, either because they were already in a group with them with an interest in making change, or because they knew them from school. In some cases the young people had been introduced to the group by their friends which helped integrate them. It was identified as positive that the young people could meet other young people from different schools by working together in a group carrying out a test of change.

It was noted, however, that there are times when some young people don't attend and that this has an impact on both the group cohesion and the work that they are doing. Another individual pointed out that he was the only boy in a group otherwise made up of girls, this comment was placed at the "Sticky" side of the poster so although no other details were recorded it was clearly felt to be something that was not particularly positive. This aspect of group membership is something that the engagement coordinator should be aware of to ensure that everyone is comfortable participating and perhaps revisiting the group membership over time.

Benefits of involvement: to see change

Reciprocity is an important element of co-production and some young people highlighted that there was a benefit to them in working with the engagement coordinator as part of IAP, in that they feel they can make a difference with this additional support. One of the working groups was already partially formed when they first met with the engagement coordinator from IAP and they already had some ideas of what they wanted to work on but they felt that their involvement with IAP had created greater opportunities to see change, for example: "[...] thought about improving community before starting to work with [engagement coordinator]". Another comment made was that by working with IAP this had "expanded our range of sources".

"IAP has given us opportunities we wouldn't have had with any other groups"

From a project perspective, the work that is being done by the young people is acknowledged as being vital to the success of the project overall. Although food and drink provision, and other 'tokens of appreciation' such as day trips provide some type of 'payment in kind' it is not the equivalent of earning a wage. And although there was an acknowledgment that from time to time they received vouchers or treats such as day trips or food deliveries while working with IAP, it was pointed out:

"[it's] nice to get a reward but not always necessary".

Benefits of involvement: personal impact

Some of the immediate personal benefits of their involvement were described by the young people in the workshop session, for example one young person stated: "It's an escape from stress" and another said: "It improves our confidence".

In reflecting on the best way to step away from young people once their work within IAP is complete, and if they have no other interest in other appropriate tests of change, it was realised that young people should be more fully and appropriately recompensed for the time they spent and the skills they gained. Highlighting their work in 'personal statements' for college or university applications or in their CVs is one method adopted by the project but additionally, more formal recognition of their time and efforts can be signified in the form of 'Saltire Awards'. Moreover, the project has recently had confirmation that the young people from many of the groups will be able to qualify, with support, for SQA level 3 or 4 qualifications.

The IAP Multiplicity of Approaches

To illustrate how this multiplicity in approach has worked in concrete terms, brief descriptions of the working groups to identify tests of change within IAP are included below. These descriptions highlight the different ways young people and professionals are involved in different tests.

A pilot was designed to test a model of pathfinders to support transition from primary to secondary school, known as Junior Pathfinders. The original Pathfinders programme had identified that additional support for school transitioning would be beneficial at an earlier stage and that engagement with transitioning children's families would be key to a positive transition. As a result the Junior Pathfinder pilot became the first IAP test of change. Although primarily based on the evaluation of the pathfinders programme and of need identified both within the literature and by education workers, this flexible role within primary schools was also created as a result of a scoping study carried out with parents of children who received input from the Pathfinders programme in the secondary school.

The justice experienced champions group began with a group of justice experienced young people participating in creating and writing a script that described the experience of police custody and the court process. This participation was supported by an external organisation who made space available for them to explore their own ideas but there was a specific aim identified from the start, of producing a script, although the topic and content was left open. Once the script was produced the group themselves drove the direction of travel towards co-developing a peer to peer workshop, that would centre the learning from the original script but also bring in additional knowledge and experience. This could be most accurately described as co-production because the idea, the aims and the work to both design and facilitate it is being carried out by the young people with practical support from IAP and other professional partners in education. This group also co-produced a new piece of social work training being developed by practitioners in a sub group of the system leadership working group.

A short pilot was designed to support the transition of families from intensive family support to universal services, this need had been identified by both practitioners and families who were consulted on the idea of a pilot whereby a dedicated support worker would work with families leaving intensive family therapy. This role would be more fluid in terms of both the type of support provided to each family and the length of time they would be able to continue the relationship.

The group of professionals brought together to work on 'system leadership' were doing co-design within improvement methodology as they were using their knowledge and experience of working with children and families to create mini tests of change to meet the need gaps they were able to identify.

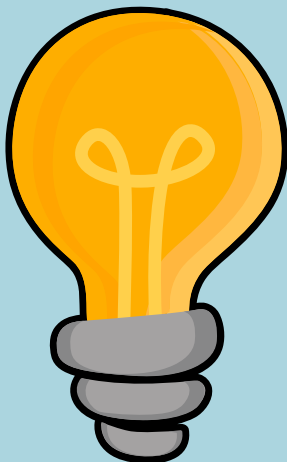
The group working on exploring, understanding and responding to Gender Based Violence are collaborating with the Engagement co-ordinator, embedded evaluator, designer from Dartington and an external partner to co-produce a workshop, as a way of responding to gender based violence experienced by young people. They were already a formed group and were driven to a greater interest in exploring this topic due to a high profile incident that affected them and raised questions. They designed a survey to be distributed to young people across their local authority from which they will create a school based workshop.

The group working on responses to grief and loss experienced by children and young people identified that this was something of interest to them all. They felt there were barriers to young people acknowledging they were experiencing grief and loss and also to reaching out for support in managing those feelings. By spending some time **analysing** the available services they soon realised that there were appropriate services available but perhaps not clearly signposted to young people, and they aimed to work with the organisations to change this. Working with an animator they are **co-producing** short animations to be shared on social media that will direct young people towards the services they need. It is hoped that this will increase visibility and use of these services by young people who will then receive the kind of support in managing their trauma that they really need.

A group of care experienced young people were keen to address an unmet need they had identified. They felt that a focus on general life skills to prepare for adult living was important not only to themselves in residential childcare, but also among other children and young people. They identified that other young people perhaps on the edge of care or whose parents were not available or capable of teaching different skills could also benefit. They had a vision of a regular group where adults could share their skills with them and referred to this as 'Absent skills & Knowledge (ASK)'. They **designed** the idea, and working with IAP and the engagement coordinator and a small budget they held a 'Dragon's Den' style competition to find a partner who could help them make this a reality. They will spend the summer of 2022 **co-designing** the group with that partner organisation, choosing the location and reaching out for group members to attend.

A group of care experienced young people were keen to address a need they had identified among not only themselves in residential childcare but also among other children and young people; general life skills to prepare for adult living. They identified that this was also something that might affect other young people whose parents were not available or capable of teaching different skills. They had a vision of a regular group where adults could share their skills with them and referred to this as 'Absent skills & Knowledge (ASK)'. They **designed** the idea and working with IAP and the engagement coordinator and a small budget they held a 'Dragon's Den' style competition to find a partner who could help them make this a reality. They will spend the Summer of 2022 **co-designing** the group with that partner org, choosing the location and reaching out for group members to attend.

The detached football test of change involved a mixture of service user design in the sense that the young people themselves were **designing** something that they could then go on to make use of. There was also an element of **consultation** as the initial idea was discussed with another group of young people, identified by being involved with the Pathfinder project in schools who identified positives and potential problems with the original suggestion.



The **creation** of a learning & development course for social workers in South Lanarkshire, **co-produced** by practitioners and young people from an early IAP test of change. The Changing the System test of change resulted in a group of justice experienced young people working together with 'Streetcones' to **coproduce** a script exploring the realities of coming into police and justice system contact. Their experiences were captured in a creative output and set the scene for the creation of a training programme focused on Relationship Based Practice: developing positive relationships with young people to reduce the chance of them coming into police and justice contact. The programme has now been completed and the programme trainers will be ready to start the sessions in November 2022.

What model of co-production, co-design or participation does IAP follow?

In its simplest essence, to co-produce is to make something together. IAP is aiming to use co-production and improvement methodologies to affect system change. To include people in ensuring systems and organisations they need; are available at an earlier stage; are effective and responsive to their needs; and so reduce the chance that individuals will require more serious system responses in justice or care further down the line.

Responsive

This fluidity of methodology is a positive aspect of the way IAP works in that it has enabled very different types of work to fall under the IAP umbrella, in the real world, unlike randomised controlled trials, work stops and starts, people become engaged at different times for different reasons and can be encouraged to participate to a lesser or greater extent in different ways. The project itself has structures and deadlines, but as much as possible the young people themselves dictate the focus, the design and the pace of the work.

Impact

Although currently many tests of change are still ongoing, across the final two years of the project the team are beginning to shift focus towards embedding learning and changing the systems to better reflect the needs of the community. In this stage of the project there is a drive to evaluate the tests of change, communicate this learning to partners, and document improvements to services which will have a longer term impact on the young people, children and families who use them. These impacts, as described previously, are vital to be able to demonstrate effective positive co-production.

Changes over time

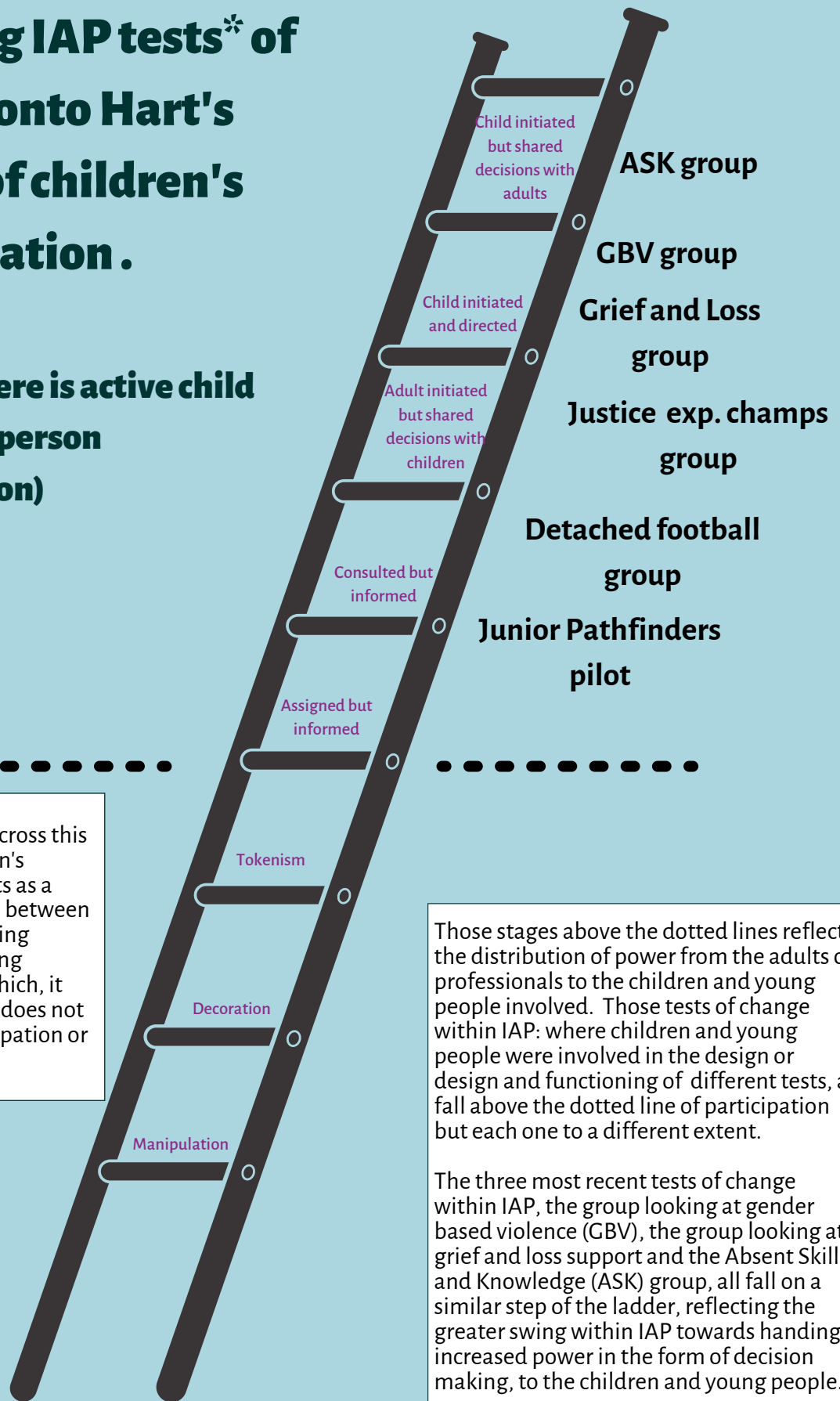
Engagement with children and young people has been integral in many of the working groups carrying out tests of change as part of IAP but this has taken different forms and carried different weights. Although some of the working groups, particularly those that started in the first year of the project and as Covid-19 restrictions emerged, had a limited amount of young person engagement, participation or co-production. However, despite these constraints, in both of these early identified tests of change, the Junior Pathfinders Pilot and the Intensive Family Support (Fas) pilot there was elements of engagement or consultation carried out with children and/or families prior to the design of the tests, which helped shape their aims.

On reflection, in those early days in the life of the project there may have been a feeling of anxiety or pressure to get started; that as a project IAP should start 'doing the work'. These concerns no doubt prompted some of the choices and decisions made regarding the tests of change at that time. Certainly as the restrictions on face to face working with young people were lifted, and the project has gained in experience and confidence, the types of tests of change have become much more child and young person-led.

As a result of this mixture of methodologies over time the 'co' aspect of co-production has changed and the ownership of the work has become more balanced, with the IAP project providing more of a supporting, enabling and practical role within the tests of change.

Mapping IAP tests* of change onto Hart's ladder of children's participation .

(*where there is active child and young person participation)



The dotted line across this 'ladder of children's participation' acts as a demarcation line between aspects of 'involving children and young people', below which, it could be argued, does not constitute participation or co-production.

Those stages above the dotted lines reflect the distribution of power from the adults or professionals to the children and young people involved. Those tests of change within IAP: where children and young people were involved in the design or design and functioning of different tests, all fall above the dotted line of participation but each one to a different extent.

The three most recent tests of change within IAP, the group looking at gender based violence (GBV), the group looking at grief and loss support and the Absent Skills and Knowledge (ASK) group, all fall on a similar step of the ladder, reflecting the greater swing within IAP towards handing increased power in the form of decision making, to the children and young people.

On reflection ...

Reflecting on barriers

In reflecting on the co-production aspect of IAP throughout the life of the project, there are several ways practice might have shifted from the original aims and ethos. Importantly, these should not be seen as failures but as both learning points and as a consequence of the context in which the project was working.

At the point when the project formally started there was no engagement coordinator in post. This limited both the type and quantity of outreach into the community - and with children and young people that is necessary for a project of this type. Once an engagement coordinator was in place, the restrictions on face to face contact at this time continued to limit the type of work the engagement coordinator was able to do.

Despite these obstacles, several tests of change were conceived of and began to take shape with participants and coordinator working remotely. This was not a standard or optimal way of working with young people and as a result, there were additional barriers such as access, communication and relationship building, all additional hurdles to effective participation and co-production.

It is also fair to say that there was an element of anxiety within the IAP team to start the work, to begin to reach out to partners within the local authority and be able to fully describe what IAP was aiming to do by pointing towards some examples. On reflection, some of the tests of change that started in the first year of the project would have looked very different had they started in a different context or indeed, further into the life of the IAP project.

Reflecting on the learning

As described earlier in this piece, each test of change is very different, were identified in very different ways, have very different elements of co-production, participation and engagement and are evaluated differently. Each test of change has taught the IAP working group new and important aspects of co-production, for example the importance of clear and regular communication, both with the young people and other partners, the value of mixing focused work and other fun activities that are vital to maintaining both interest and strong bonds within groups of young people. This includes being flexible but also consistent in setting schedules and deadlines etc.

The IAP project has fluidity and responsiveness built in, in part because it includes multiple tests of change all falling under one umbrella but also due to the various strands (engagement, improvement and evaluation) and the way the project team communicate and shares information and take on different roles. This fluidity and responsiveness has meant that the project as a whole was able to progress despite the limitations of lockdown.

A combination of reduced restrictions on face to face working and a greater confidence and understanding of co-production with children and young people has resulted in the project being brave enough to work with groups, while not necessarily knowing how the work will change shape over time. There are structures and boundaries in place, for example; test of change groups are able to request funds to support aspects of their work, costs such as rooms and venues, refreshments, creative artists, additional partners they would like to work with etc. Within that, the IAP project team are on hand to observe, support and evaluate.

In conclusion ...

The young people who participated in the co-production workshop were uniformly enjoying the work they were doing in their groups and as part of IAP. In the relaxed conversations that took place in between focused sessions the young people chatted and shared experiences with other groups, there was conversation about the different topics they were working on, how and why these topics were chosen and the different methods they were using to test changes. A great deal of credit for this confidence and enthusiasm has to go to the engagement coordinator who could be described as the glue that holds these groups together. The importance of this role was highlighted by the participants, both formally within the workshop tasks and informally.

When asked to consider what makes good co-production, the young people highlighted aspects of behaviour within groups as well as more practical process aspects of working as a group. Listening to everyone, being enthusiastic with a positive attitude, being equally valued and being able to express yourself were perceived to be positive. Other practical things were use of ice-breaker games and being included. Notably, seeing a change as a result of the work was identified by them as important for good co-production. This point has also been made by Lundy in 2007 who said:

“make it uncomfortable for adults to solicit children’s views and then ignore them ...”

Continuing this theme and being able to measure ‘impactful change’ is vital for any co-production project. Within IAP many of the ‘tests of change’ that are part of the portfolio of work are still ongoing, with any potential successful impact still in the future.

However, there are tests that are now complete that have had impact. The intensive family support transition worker that was piloted and supported by IAP for around eight months has now completed their work and the pilot test of change helped identify that priority should be focused on an earlier intervention. By devoting workers' capacity to the recently set-up 'earlier help hub' within the local authority, the aim is that families will receive appropriate help at an earlier stage. This shift in response might result in families receiving much needed support at that earlier stage and no longer requiring intensive family support work and further step down support. In addition, two further tests of change (the work on Gender Based Violence and the Junior Pathfinders pilot) have been included within South Lanarkshire’s Children’s Services Plan. This acknowledgement highlights both a level of interest within the local council and greater visibility and accountability that will hopefully support the work going forward. In one other test of change that has been completed (drop-in access to football sessions) work is ongoing by IAP to replicate that evidenced and successful model in South Lanarkshire.

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