
Cordis Bright has recently been involved in designing and conducting research alongside an Expert by Experience (EbyE) research group, to co-produce an evaluation of the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) Approach. This blog outlines the key lessons learned and is designed to be a helpful tool for co-producing research with people with lived experience.

Evaluation background

The project involves evaluating work in different areas across the country that use the MEAM Approach to support people facing multiple disadvantage (people experiencing a combination of problems including homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health). For more information about this work please see the evaluation reports which have been published so far: <http://meam.org.uk/the-meam-approach/meam-approach-evaluation/>. The research group consists of eight members who have lived experience of multiple disadvantage.

What is co-production?

Co-production refers to when clients, providers, citizens and decisions makers, work together to create a decision, service, or product (in our case, a piece of research) that works for them all. It can also involve those with lived experience, defined as 'individuals or groups who share a common experience of a social and health issue'. It is increasingly being adopted in health, social care and criminal justice contexts in recognition that it can improve service planning, local representation and the adoption of local knowledge.

"It's about giving back, sharing my knowledge, and changing the system."

Rachelle – EbyE researcher

Why work with people with lived experience?

We wanted to work with EbyE researchers to make sure that our research included the insights and first-hand experience of people who have been supported by a similar approach to the one we were evaluating. We found that EbyE researchers brought knowledge to each stage of the research process that would not otherwise have been available. Including such knowledge is important, as evidence suggests using insights from people with lived experience in research and developing services make it more likely that they will have the desired effect.

"In interviews, the EbyE researchers were able to ask follow-up that drew out greater meaning, through building on their own knowledge of the system."

Suzie – Cordis Bright researcher

We also found that EbyEs formed positive relationships with some of the clients who were involved in our research, with some clients saying the experience had made them think about becoming involved in co-production themselves. This effect of EbyEs encouraging further co-production is detailed in [other evidence and literature](#), and means that the positive effects can be spread throughout other organisations and services.

EbyEs themselves also reported that as well as making valuable contributions to the research, they gained knowledge and skills that they hope to use in the future, and enjoyed the process.

“I had a thoroughly great time, I learned and I added value.”

Anne – EbyE researcher

Key principles for successful co-production

There are a number of challenges that sometimes deter organisations from co-producing research. These include the difficulty of adopting a definitive interpretation of what co-production actually looks like and why it may be useful, and the extra time it will involve for staff to organise. EbyEs themselves may also be unwilling to participate due to relationship inequality within the research team.

However, there are a number of key principles that can be drawn upon when thinking about co-producing research that may help to tackle some of these reservations. They provide a useful framework for a shared understanding of what co-production looks like in research, and can help ensure it is done to an effective standard that will add value. These principles include:

- EbyEs being [active participants](#) in research, fully involved in [decision-making](#) related to designing and delivering the research
- A [reciprocal relationship](#) based on mutual respect between the professional researchers and the EbyEs, where both partners are [equal](#) with [mutual responsibilities and expectations](#).
- [Building capacity](#), by recognising and growing people’s capabilities and actively supporting them to use them at a community level.

How did we do it?

Drawing on these principles, we wanted to include EbyEs in an equal and reciprocal way in each stage of the research process.

Figure 1: How EbyEs were involved in the research process



What went well?

- **Research Skills Workshops.** These were a good opportunity for the professional and EbyE researchers to build relationships with each other before fieldwork began. EbyEs also felt they were useful in preparing for fieldwork days, with explanations of terminology being particularly helpful.

"We had an awesome 2 days of learning. It was valuable that we were involved in every step of the way."

Mero – EbyE researcher

- **Collaborative approach to interviews and analysis.** Both groups of researchers felt that they worked well together, bringing different experiences, interpretations and knowledge to the tasks. EbyE researchers reported that they felt valued and supported by the professional researchers.
- **Ongoing communication between professional and EbyE researchers.** This ensured that any unanticipated needs could be accommodated. EbyE researchers felt welcomed and reassured by professional researchers, and high levels of communication and organisation meant the whole process ran smoothly.

"Cordis Bright researchers were really professional and helpful, and they made sure I was alright."

Anne - EbyE researcher

Were there any challenges?

- **Recruiting EbyEs from MEAM Approach areas.** Prior to developing the EbyE research group, Cordis Bright did not have a relationship with EbyEs in the local areas involved with the MEAM Approach. This meant that we had to ask for support from local areas in identifying EbyEs who might be interested in participating and therefore were not able to use an open recruitment process. In addition, some local areas were at a relatively early stage in their own journeys of co-production and thus were not always able to provide names of people with lived experience. We therefore recruited people who were interested from elsewhere. As previously mentioned, involving EbyEs in interviews with clients may help to encourage them to participate in co-production in the future.

“We had to ask for help from local areas and from MEAM to identify and get into contact with EbyEs who might be interested in working with us on the evaluation. We appreciated this help; it was a pragmatic way to recruit to the group and the EbyEs who became involved proved to be an excellent team to work alongside. But it did mean that we were only able to recruit people who were already known to local services or to MEAM, which might have precluded the involvement of other people who would have liked to contribute but did not have these existing relationships with others.”

Hannah – Cordis Bright researcher

- **Navigating boundaries.** EbyE researchers reported sometimes being unsure of which questions and comments were appropriate to make and which were not, for example, in instances where they felt they may be able to offer clients advice through their own knowledge of the system. However, interviewing in partnership meant that both professional and EbyE researchers were able to support each other with navigating these boundaries, which is a common challenge in fieldwork.
- **Separating experience from evidence.** EbyE researchers’ experiences naturally inform their opinions on services, and what they offer, but at times it’s difficult to separate these views from the evidence we have. We were able to overcome this challenge through the analysis workshops, during which collaborative interpretation and discussion of the data, based on the strong and respectful relationships that had been built between the professional and EbyE researchers, produced effective and accurate analysis.

Key success factors

Overall, both EbyE and professional researchers reported that they felt co-production had enhanced every aspect of the research process. A key success identified by all involved was the relationships between the professional and the EbyE researchers; **establishing a reciprocal and equal relationship is integral in ensuring that the process is a success** and in addressing the challenges outlined above. Particularly evident was how collaboration is beneficial both ways; professional researchers gain the insight offered by the EbyEs researchers and the EbyE researchers have an opportunity to learn new skills and have new experiences. The data produced, analysed and the final research report was certainly enriched by the involvement of experts by experience.