Invite people to join you

You have mapped what you know and who you know, the foundation of your engagement and communications plan; it is time to invite people to get involved.

1. Start building your multidisciplinary co-production team

For Groups 1, 2 and 3 who will be contributing to your co-production team, consider:

- **existing contacts**, who you have an existing relationship with and who you are able to reach out to directly (whether they be professionals in your organisation or other organisations, service users, or carers);
- **new contacts**, who you also need to reach and invite in, but don't already have contact with directly.

Build up your engagement and communications plan by thinking about each person you want to reach:

- What are their preferred communication channels?
- What do their days and priorities look like?
- What invitation will “land” and interest them?
- How can you demonstrate that you value them and their input?
- Can you remove any barriers to their taking part?

For new contacts, work with and through other organisations, whether statutory or third sector, and local community groups. By building your relationship with them, and valuing their knowledge and experience, you form trusted allies and partners who can help you access insights and cultural context, and reach the people who you are looking for in the right way.

2. Craft your invitations

There won’t be a one-size-fits-all, so give people a choice about how (and how much) to get involved: offer a few options, like meeting in person, or a backup online meeting for those who can’t attend in person, or a one-to-one phone call if they want to share their ideas but can’t attend a group setting, or an online survey if they want to share some thoughts but don’t have much time, etc.

An appealing invitation also gives people a reason to get involved: what’s in it for them? What difference will this make, to them and their families, to the service that supports them? Will there be lunch provided, vouchers, or payment in recognition for their time and contribution?

It’s helpful if the invitation also demonstrates that you have thought carefully about people’s access and comfort: this shows in the time and duration you select, the location (including online), the format of the event, and any access provisions you have organised.

3. Keep an eye on inclusion and diversity
Disseminate your invitations and monitor the responses.

Make sure that you include all the seldom heard voices: partly because it’s the right thing to do, and partly because when you design from the margins, everyone benefits. (“Design From the Margins” (DFM) is a design approach that calls for centering the most impacted and vulnerable individuals in our society into the design process, from idea to execution. This is beneficial for all, because understanding the needs and wants of the more specific, complex and vulnerable communities, not only supports and protects them, but cases can always be generalised and bring transferable benefits for the broader audience.) Lean towards overrepresenting the underrepresented voices, as that is how you will gain the most insights.

As part of ensuring that your group is representative and diverse, check that the widest variety of situations and experiences is represented - for example, carers can be parent carers, young carers, dementia carers, etc., so one carer can’t (and shouldn’t have to) speak for all. Likewise, try to have more than one rep for a whole category, region, etc. so that the responsibility is spread across several shoulders and it’s sustainable for people to participate.

Remember that service users and carers are taking part on top of their other work and life commitments and responsibilities, and they are dealing with life situations that are precisely the reason why their lived experience and input are so important. People are generally not paid to co-produce (well, they should be, but that’s another wider topic!) - so it’s not their job to get involved, and they don’t owe us their time or their interest. How can we demonstrate that we value them, and support them to take part?

4. Keep building your co-production group

You won’t get everyone on your wishlist to get involved from the word go. First of all, it’s ok to work with small numbers. This is co-production, not research: a good idea is as good if just one person has it! But also, it’s an ongoing dialogue, not a one-off conversation, so you can continue bringing more stakeholders and people into the conversation: keep asking “Who’s not here?”

If people don’t show up, don’t assume lack of interest, lack of engagement, or worse, apathy! Have you found the channels and messages that work for them yet?

Top tip!

Do a mini co-production loop: co-design the events and invitation materials with some of your service users and carers. When we are embedded in organisations and processes, we are so used to them that we forget what it’s like to encounter them as an outsider, and we need fresh eyes! Don’t get defensive, the aim is to do better together: listen, understand and improve.

5. Keep other people in the know
Your Group 4 (low impact / low interest) are people who are relatively interested in the outcomes as part of their bigger picture; they might be funders or commissioners, for example. Make sure you keep them informed of developments. They might have the power to be enablers or blockers to your co-production approach, so it’s important to take them into account and share an appropriate level of information, without them taking centre stage and calling the shots in the co-production process.

Now you’ve started building your group, it’s time to listen! In the next section, where we reflect on the third value (“doing what matters for the people involved”), we look at building a shared understanding by listening to people’s values, experiences, and ideas.