Listen out for ideas and strengths

You have gathered together your co-production group. You now need to build a shared understanding and good working practices, by listening to everyone's values, experiences, and ideas.

Create a space where everyone can share what they know and think about the challenge you have gathered to address. As well as the data from professionals, hear people's lived experience and listen out for their strengths, ideas and potential solutions. (When you identify strengths, see if you can leverage them in your project. This is part of building on all the resources available to us collectively.)

Start the dialogue with a “tell me about...” question. (For example: “tell me about what a typical day looks like for you as a carer”) Keep the question topical but open, and framed in a way that elicits people's stories. Keep the questions about your service at the back of your mind for now, and start by listening to people's experiences and ideas. (You can ask follow-up questions after.) You'll get all the information you need through dialogue but the energy is different: “we're here to listen to you”, vs “we're here to talk about us”.

Allow people to talk about what they want to talk about. If it seems like the topic is drifting, ask questions about how their story relates to the challenge you are solving together, or tease out the links yourself. (For example in one workshop, a comment about dog fouling led to a wider conversation about green spaces, exercise, community connections and isolation - a number of key determinants of health.)

Another useful question is “what does a good outcome look like” or “what does a good life look like for you”. Don't be worried about people asking for things that are outside of your power to influence (for example, winning the lottery!) - use this as a springboard to find out more about what this would enable them to do, which reveals what they need (rather than what they want).

Of course, we want to manage expectations and be honest about what we can and can't act on directly; but sometimes we might be able to influence or partner with other organisations who can!

Finally, make sure you build into your dialogue some questions around ideas and solutions.
What's worked in the past? What ideas do people have? What's worked elsewhere? Think more broadly about what might be possible, rather than starting with a menu of what's available. People often come up with simpler (and therefore cheaper!) solutions.

As the conversation flows and evolves, you will cover an analysis of the current situation and data, and tease out potential solutions which you will shape into an action plan to test out, evaluate and adjust. Decide who does what and when you’ll come back together to feed back and reflect. Remember everyone has a role to play, but not everyone will play the same role.
Top tip! To prepare the ground before the “main co-production meeting”, you may want to work with different groups separately before bringing them together, for example professionals together to discuss co-production mindsets and behaviours; and service users and/or carers together to discuss rights, confidence and expectations. There is strength in peer learning! Then together they will be ready to have a constructive dialogue. (Just because it’s co-production doesn’t mean everyone has to be in the same room all the time. But make sure that they do meet and co-design together after laying the groundwork, otherwise it’s not co-production!)