It's in our DNA: perspectives on co-producing services in the UK voluntary sector.

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"It's in our DNA": Perspectives on co-producing services in the UK voluntary sector

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Abstract
We report on the perceptions of co-production in the UK voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector from those directly involved. Five case studies were conducted involving interviews with two people who had formed a co-production relationship. We find positive perceptions of co-production from all interviewees. We suggest organisational and individual factors that are important to successful co-production and provide practical examples. We reflect on implications for practice by considering co-production relationships, time and resources.

Keywords: co-production, volunteers, service provision

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Introduction
There is significant, and growing, interest in the co-production of services from voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector stakeholders and policymakers. Co-production can be defined as the *active involvement* of end-users in various stages of the production process (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Voorberg *et al.*, (2015) present three different types of co-production activities as co-initiation (suggesting an idea for a new service), co-design (designing a new service) and co-implementation (helping to implement the service). Whilst co-production in the VCSE sector is perceived by many as improving service quality (Martin, 2009) and promoting inclusion, empowerment and equity (McLennan, 2020; Vanleene *et al.*, 2018), there is a shortage of empirical studies about how it can or should be carried out (Lam and Dearden, 2015; Meijer, 2016). Scholars note how co-production has an influential role in service provision, yet its formal evidence based is limited (Durose *et al.*, 2017). Recent work on co-production argues that the 'co-' concept is polysemic – it means different things to different people – and hence can be difficult to implement (Dudau *et al.*, 2019; Nabatchi *et al.*, 2017). Notwithstanding the ambiguities surrounding the concept of co-production, anecdotal evidence suggests that due to the fast pace of the VCSE sector those involved in co-production rarely get the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, meaning that relevant learning is not considered in future projects.

To offer an opportunity for reflection on co-production experiences, this paper draws on empirical research examining perceptions of co-production from those involved in the process. It uses self-described examples of the co-production of local services from VCSE providers in a Northern region of the UK to develop a more nuanced understanding of the co-production process. We begin by outlining the design of the research and detailing the five case study organisations involved. We then present the key themes from the study as factors supporting successful co-production and provide practical examples of each. Finally, we reflect on the practical implications of our findings and offer recommendations for further work.

Research Design
To capture UK VCSE sector perspectives on co-producing services, we draw on a research project conducted in 2019 funded by the Community University Partnerships Initiative (CUPI). CUPI, part of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, provided seedcorn funding to support community organisations and universities to develop research collaborations. The purpose of our collaborative project was to respond to a considerable interest in co-production among policymakers and VCSE sector representatives in Greater Manchester. There are relatively limited empirical examples of grassroots co-production activities. We therefore wanted to discuss and understand the process of co-production, with a focus on the operational implications for VCSE organisations, with those directly involved.

Co-producing the study
We engaged with research participants and practitioner audiences throughout the research because we wanted to ensure that the research was useful for them. Despite a modest budget we aimed to ensure that the research process mirrored the theme of co-production. We involved potential research participants in the research design by hosting a focus group at a regional co-production network that was being facilitated by the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Voluntary Sector Engagement Project. Participants from 15 organisations attended the focus group, one of whom later responded to the call for research participants that we published on the GMCVO website and disseminated to co-production network members. We received many applications, from which we purposively selected different types of services thus permitting us to examine a range of examples and contexts. The aim was to recruit organisations that were engaged in co-production and to discuss a self-identified example of their practice to develop a nuanced understanding of what co-production involves. Due to time and budgetary constraints we selected five case study organisations.

For each of the case studies we conducted interviews with two people who had formed a co-production relationship; one person was a representative from the VCSE organisation and the other was a service user of this organisation involved in co-producing services. These dyadic interviews allowed us to frame questions about the co-production process to both parties involved in the relationship, and to permit space for reflection for the two interviewees to evaluate their co-production journey. One semi-structured interview was conducted per case, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. Each was recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis of this qualitative data was conducted. Across the five cases, there were examples of all three phases of co-production as distinguished by Voorberg *et al.*, (2015): co-initiation, co-design and co-implementation. Table 1 provides an overview of the five VCSE organisations, details of the interviewees and of the types of co-production activities being used.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The interview data was used to create a poster depicting the key themes for each organisation. This was an output that participants of the original focus group had been interested in. We first drafted the content of the posters and invited comments from the five organisational participants, who then contributed feedback and photographs to be included in the posters. These were displayed and discussed at a regional co-production network event to which most of the case study organisations sent representatives who could expand on the contents of the posters. This was a good opportunity for these organisations to showcase their services to an audience of policymakers and commissioners who shared an interest in co-production. At this event we also co-facilitated a workshop in collaboration with one of the participants, where we discussed our research findings. A report about the findings was shared with interviewees and disseminated to interested stakeholders.

Findings
In examining how co-production was carried out, our findings suggest organisational and individual factors as essential to success; organisational ethos, organisational processes and individual skills and lived experience.

Organisational Ethos
The main factor that enabled co-production in each of the five case study organisations was a conviction that co-production was central to their mission. This conviction was despite recognition of a funding environment that generally did not consider the full resource

implications of co-producing services. In consequence, there was no discussion about whether co-production should be done or whether it was affordable. Instead, an ethos of co-production was embedded in the culture of each organisation. As one of our focus group participants put it, "*an awful lot of VCSE organisations do co-production. It's in our DNA. We've always done it.*"

This overall commitment is what led to staff being allowed to 'get on with things', rather than management being too prescriptive: "*We're lucky here, [our director] doesn't breathe down our neck, [putting pressure that] we've got to deliver X, Y, Z. ... So... we can just keep making improvements all the time*" (Operations Manager, Organisation B). Empowering staff was important because co-production required having a flexible remit, and a willingness to share information and power with co-production partners "*It is about nothing being imposed from the top and it all being a journey that we're on together*" (Member of the Cancer Programme, Organisation D).

Organisational learning and adaptation were seen as crucial in response to service user input. Organisation E's Customer Engagement Officer describes what this requires: "*Taking everything off the table that, organisationally, we had an idea about, because as soon as you [say] 'This is the end point we want to get to', I think you limit the room for creativity ..., the room for debate about what the product should look like.*" However, at a very basic level, co-production appeared to be underpinned by the existence of established communication channels with potential co-production partners. Most of the organisations drew on existing members or beneficiaries. Only one organisation reached out to new people through door knocking, leafleting and partnership working with other organisations.

Organisational Processes
Across all case studies three process factors affected how organisations facilitated co-production in practice.

Time
At the heart of these organisations' co-production practices was an iterative process of engaging with service users over a considerable period of time, often using a variety of communication channels. Staff involved in co-production attempted to maintain an ongoing awareness of the types of issues that were raised by service users. This can feel overwhelming at times, as the Operations Manager of Organisation B notes when describing the process by which she co-designs the activity schedule with members: "*So, it's just ... being aware of what's been suggested already and, when you have a conversation with people, [checking], 'Oh, such a body has mentioned this, is that something you're interested in as well?' And then I ... make sure I keep a note of it until I get a bit of a build-up ...it feels a bit like having a million things in your head all the time.*"

For co-initiation in particular, it can take time before the effort invested in co-production pays off, as illustrated by the process of initiating a women-only sports club: "*We had ... people wanting to do it ... but ... nobody would [fund it] , ... and this is going back ... six years ... Then recently, last year, there was an opportunity [to get funds for increasing physical activity levels among BME women] and we jumped at it. ... So we said, '... let's touch back base with [the people who were interested in] the women's sports club and see if there is a demand*" (Chief Executive, Organisation C).

Boundaries

Our findings also highlight a potential tension arising from a need to set process boundaries whilst simultaneously fostering a co-production environment of creativity and flexibility. Examples were given in which boundaries were required to ensure that the purpose and outcomes of co-production activities were clear, and within these boundaries creativity was encouraged to achieve these outcomes. *"I didn't want to put any expectations on what people's stories were. So, at that first session, I talked about [Organisation D]'s remit. ... Organisation D is very adamant that we don't do anything before diagnosis of cancer.... So, I talked to the group about how we could do stuff on when you're diagnosed, ... on end of life,... on your experience of being treated and how you felt during that. ... But I said, 'I'm not going to impose any of these, this is just for us to have a look at and to have a think about how our experiences might relate to it'"* (Group Coordinator, Organisation D).

Interviewees stressed that economic decisions (e.g. whether a suggestion was viable) had to be included as part of the process. Indeed, sometimes the co-production process itself was able to raise awareness of constraints that organisations encountered in providing services. One of Organisation B's members, who was involved in the event planning exercise commented: *"It was interesting, doing that. ... [because] you can see what [the Operations Manager] has to put up with.... I think [the members] think 'Oh, we can just do it any day, any time,' but [planning events together] proves that you've got to work round [practical constraints]."* Because co-production was ultimately not 'free-rein' it required being transparent about which aspects were open for discussion and which were non-negotiable. Similarly, it was seen as important to be realistic in terms of what can be achieved.

Spaces
Spaces for co-production were often kept deliberately informal. Creating a safe space appeared to challenge normative power dynamics. Service users' familiarity with the VCSE organisation meant that its premises tended to be taken for granted as a safe meeting space, where certain rules of engagement prevailed. The importance of the right atmosphere and the negative influence of hierarchies becomes clear in the following exchange from Organisation A:
"Staff member: [Here] you're never going to get told 'This is what we're doing and that's it.' It's like 'What do you think?' kind of thing, and that's just how we work here. ... It's not like this everywhere, is it?
Peer mentor: No, I've been to places [where] ... you've got the staff thinking they're the boss and then you've got the volunteers thinking they own the place and... it's not nice. It just makes you feel out of place."

This sometimes meant that VCSE organisations' premises could be used as neutral meeting spaces in order to facilitate dialogue between service users and statutory agencies, as for example in the cancer programme as described in the following quote: *"I think ... [the statutory agencies] are sort of a captive audience, they can't get away from you, basically. So, you can question them, and ... you're putting some pretty difficult questions sometimes. And they can't get out of it, because they're in the group ... We could actually put to them some of the things that we'd experienced and perhaps they weren't aware of. And then, they'd hopefully go away and do something about it"* (Member of Cancer Programme, Organisation D). This approach appeared to shift power dynamics and permit open dialogue.

Individual Skills and Lived Experience
In the interviews we discussed the need for skills in co-production. Interestingly, interviewees understood the topic of skills to mainly refer to the service users, rather than discussing the skills needed by staff – although these were sometimes implied in their comments. Whilst some

service users brought with them skills from participating in other forms of engagement, their involvement in co-production was valued primarily because there was an organisational need to utilise their lived experience. An example from the Operations Manager of Organisation B illustrates this point: "*So, from my point of view, they [service users] can offer me boots on the ground to ask questions [about age-friendliness]…everyone's got something to contribute, I think.*"

Lived experience was seen as service users' source of expertise that can complement organisational expertise: "*What [the Peer Mentor] brings to the table is priceless … I wouldn't be able to do my job without her*" (Organisation A, Staff reflecting on relationship with Peer Mentor). Having lived experience did not only enable service users involved in co-production to help with building trust between their peers and organisational staff, but seemed to elevate them to a status that was seen as similar to that of staff: "*Co-production to me meant that we're all working together … because we're all professionals*" (Resident who is on Organisation E's funding panel).

Training was only seen as necessary for co-implementation, e.g. where service users had become co-production partners with greater levels of responsibility. Where their volunteering was seen as an organic progression from being a service user, e.g. fulfilling the role of a volunteer host for Organisation B, this was not formalised by training. In fact, sometimes training was seen as defying the purpose of co-production: "*There wasn't any training and there's a reason for that, because we wanted the [product] to represent our customers*" (Operations Manager, Organisation E).

Although interviewees did not always explicitly mention personality traits that might be conducive to being in a co-productive relationship, these were often implied and included the ability to:
- listen
- learn from other participants
- compromise
- participate
- adhere to formal agreements, i.e. meeting times
- acknowledge and embrace the expertise they themselves had to offer to the process
- deal with conflict constructively
- facilitate discussion without dominating it.

Discussion: Implications for Practice
In reflecting on the implications of our findings for practice with the interview participants, a focus on building relationships and an acceptance that co-production takes time and requires resourcing were perceived as crucial

Co-production requires a focus on building relationships
Our findings show how co-production enabled close relationships to be built and maintained between VCSE organisational staff and service users. This mainly involved deepening relationships with existing users, rather than developing new ones. Indeed, our data showed evidence of a journey; becoming a user of the service, becoming more involved in the service through more frequent attendance and/or joining a committee or governance structure prior to volunteering to be involved in a co-production project. A clear example of this journey was from Organisation A where the Peer Mentor described the journey of firstly using the

organisation's services, over time becoming more involved in the running of the services and most recently acting as a Peer Mentor. In this process, co-producing service users could also serve as a link to other service users, who were not directly involved. As recognised by Lam and Dearden (2015), we also found that investing in relationships allowed VCSE organisations to have continuous access to the opinion and participation of users in developing services. It also allowed the organisation to utilise the skills and experience of service users by engaging them specifically where needed. We found limited evidence of VCSE organisations reaching out beyond a relatively limited pool of engaged service users. Whilst the approach of working with the willing proved fruitful in our examples, there is also a case for broadening engagement to elicit feedback and new ideas from a wider range of people (Nabatchi *et al*., 2017). However, broadening engagement can be fraught with challenges (Lam and Dearden, 2015) with pragmatism and cost-effective ways of working often taking precedence (Durose *et al.,* 2017).

Co-production takes time and requires resourcing
Although service users participated in co-production without being paid, it was stressed how co-production takes time and so has resource implications for paid staff, especially as the approach to co-production in many of the case study organisations was ongoing, iterative, and amounted to an 'open door' policy. It was noted how co-production can at times feel overwhelming as it is operationally demanding. In our case study organisations, the ethos of co-production appeared to be relatively informal and organic, with no obvious guidance as to how and when co-production partners became part of the process and what was expected of them. This approach is contrary to advice from Lam and Dearden (2015), who stress clarity about the level and extent of involvement in 'co-' activities from the outset as crucial. Over time the co-productive relationship allowed organisations to draw on the skills, ideas, and sometimes the capacity of volunteers in initiating, designing and implementing services, and hence organisations could subsequently offer additional or enhanced services (e.g. Peer Mentors, Event Hosts and Employment Co-ordinators). It was noted, however, that because of the time and resources required to co-produce a service, funders were usually unlikely to fund its true cost. This reinforces anecdotal evidence from the sector that co-production is simply what the VCSE organisations 'should' do and may be one of the reasons why funders choose to work with the sector rather than with their public or private sector counterparts. There is a danger, however, that this ethos may prevent a critical examination of costs and benefits and subsequent resourcing by funders.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Work
Our paper provides practical examples of organisational and individual factors that appear crucial to co-production, highlighting how co-production is a complex process requiring considerable commitment on the part of VCSE staff and their service users. In reflecting on the implications of our findings for practice, we discuss the themes of relationship building, time and resources. It is important to note that our study focused solely on the co-production process and did not discuss the outcomes of co-produced VCSE sector services. Further, in eliciting support for our study from attendees at co-production events, our interviewees were engaged with, and usually advocates of, co-production. It would therefore be interesting for further studies to examine examples in which co-production has been unsuccessful so as to shed light on the challenges faced by VCSE organisations co-producing services. As co-production was perceived by the case study organisations as integral to achieving their mission, it was an accepted approach that appeared to be unquestioned. As noted in recent research, co-production is not the only participatory approach to designing and delivering services (Durose *et* al., 2017). Further, there is conceptual confusion about co-production (Nabatchi *et al*., 2017; Dudau *et al*., 2019) and a tendency to conflate coproduction and collaboration (Williams *et al*.,

2020). Recent work by Dudau *et al.*, (2019) raises questions about whether the public sector is becoming disenchanted with the 'co-' paradigm and calls for more research investigating the relationship between co-production and value creation. We did not witness disenchantment from any of the interviewees in our study; it was exactly the opposite. This unquestioning 'pro' co-production perspective may also raise challenges however, as the rationale for adopting co-production may not be defined (Williams *et al.*, 2020) nor co-production necessarily be considered as the 'gold standard' (Williams *et al.*, 2020). In recognising the funding constraints experienced by the VCSE sector, and the requirement for more empirical evidence linking co-production to improved services, VCSE organisations may wish to evaluate whether co-production is the most appropriate approach for a project or service. By building on our findings, we encourage further studies with a broader range of participants to develop understanding of the outcomes of co-production, to examine the boundaries around the co-production process and to assess whether the benefits outweigh the true costs.

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Tables

Organisation	Description	Interviewees	Types of Co-production
A	Centre that supports people who are homeless or who have experience of homelessness. Interview focused on service users becoming Peer Mentors supporting new clients with accessing the Centre's services.	Member of Staff (Organisation) Peer Mentor (Service User)	• Co-initiation (e.g. suggesting welcome packs for new starters) • Co-design (e.g. designing a peer mentoring system) • Co-implementation (e.g. facilitating planning meetings)
B	Membership organisation offering social events for older people. Interview explored how an ongoing dialogue with members informs the events calendar and how members act as event hosts.	Operations Manager (Organisation) Member and Event Host (Service User)	• Co-initiation (e.g. suggesting visits and events for members to attend) • Co-design (e.g. designing the annual calendar of events) • Co-implementation (e.g. running events)
C	Community-led organisation focused on providing inclusive support and activities to combat health inequalities and social exclusion. Interview explored how the organisation created a women-only sports club.	Chief Executive (Organisation) Employment Co-ordinator (Service User)	• Co-initiation (e.g. suggesting women-only sports club) • Co-design (e.g. canvassing local community to find out what they would like from the sports club) • Co-implementation (e.g. running the weekly sports club)
D	Organisation hosting a programme that raises awareness about the inequalities faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) cancer patients. Interview focused on its work with a group of LGBT people living with and affected by cancer to instigate service improvements.	Programme Coordinator (Organisation) Group Member recovering from cancer (Service User)	• Co-design (e.g. suggesting the focus of the discussions within the LGBT cancer group) • Co-implementation (e.g. participating in training delivery for organisations involved in cancer care)
E	Housing association. Interview explored the work of its customer engagement and inclusion team, working with a panel of residents to redesign the criteria for the	Customer Engagement Officer (Organisation)	• Co-design (e.g. designing the application process and criteria for community grants)

| | association's Community Fund, a grant scheme that supports small community-based organisations. | Resident volunteering on the panel (Service User) | • Co-implementation (e.g. serving on the grants panel that scores the grant applications) |

Table 1 – Overview of the VCSE Organisations, Interviewees and Co-production Activities