

# The Way Ahead: Civil Society at the Heart of London

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## Pragmatic co-production: a briefing

### Introduction

*The Way Ahead: Civil Society at the Heart of London* sets out the recommendations from the Review of Civil Society Support in London. The Review was commissioned by London Funders working alongside Greater London Volunteering and the London Voluntary Service Council. The Review was carried out by Srabani Sen OBE & Associates and supported by the City of London Corporation's charity, City Bridge Trust. *The Way Ahead* is available at <http://tinyurl.com/RevOfCivSocSuppt>

In developing the recommendations in *The Way Ahead*, the Review Team, (which consisted of the Reference Group for the Review and Srabani Sen OBE & Associates), developed the concept of “pragmatic co-production”. The Review Team believes pragmatic co-production should be at the heart of how civil society works. This briefing paper describes pragmatic co-production.

### Context

By proposing co-production as a core principle, the Review Team is building on an increasing recognition of the importance of community involvement in addressing the issues they face. Co-production is a theme in many recent reports and reviews such as the recommendations of the London Communities Commission (January 2016), the interim report of the *Joint Review of Investment in Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Organisations in Health and Social Care Sector* from the Department of Health (March 2015) and *Community Capital: The Value of Connected Communities* from the RSA (October 2015). These reviews and reports are highlighted in Chapter 3 of *The Way Ahead*.

Co-production is being increasingly adopted as an approach. For example co-production has been enshrined in legislation, namely the *Children and Families Act 2014*, which requires local authorities in England to work with families with disabled children to develop a “local offer” of services.



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## Definition of “co-production”

Whilst “co-production” is a concept that has grown in prominence in recent years within civil society and the public sector, there are many different interpretations of what the term “co-production” means. The Review Team developed the following top level definition of co-production:

*“Co-production is where Londoners work with those in power, and each other, in a way in which all voices are heard equally in developing a shared understanding of need and in crafting solutions to make London a better place.”*

To be clear, effective co-production goes well beyond consultation. Consultation is “we are thinking of delivering ‘x’, what do you think”? Co-production is “let’s work together on ‘y’ issue” to identify and solve that issue or problem.

## What is *pragmatic* co-production?

Co-production can be seen by some as an open-ended, Utopian approach, disconnected from the reality of, for example, pressures on resources. The Review Team therefore developed the concept of “pragmatic co-production”.

Pragmatic co-production is an approach in which honest conversations are held between communities, funders and civil society about the constraints. These constraints could be financial, practical or driven by policy. These constraints should provide a context and parameters for communities, funders and civil society, within which to develop a shared understanding of need and discuss solutions.

An aspect of pragmatic co-production will be the need to acknowledge that the different viewpoints of all those involved in pragmatic co-production may lead to tensions. These tensions will need to be openly discussed and resolved as part of the pragmatic co-production process.



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## What should pragmatic co-production cover?

The Review Team contends that pragmatic co-production should cover a continuum of activity that includes:

- communities identifying for themselves, with support if needed, what their needs are
- funders, the public sector and civil society's understanding of need being based on what communities identify for themselves
- communities being enabled to change their own lives for the better
- communities shaping solutions and responses to opportunities
- communities shaping services delivered by others, whether these be public sector or civil society services
- communities advocating and campaigning on their own behalf, with support if needed

Pragmatic co-production is about more than an approach to tackling the big or entrenched problems and issues faced by communities. Co-production approaches can be invaluable in developing individuals and communities, and making the most of opportunities and the strengths that lie within communities. Co-production can happen at an individual, relationship level, for example in the design of mentoring approaches.

### *Continuum of pragmatic co-production*



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## Why pragmatic co-production?

In an era of austerity, the Review Team argues that pragmatic co-production is the best approach to ensuring scarce resources are more efficiently applied in ways that genuinely meet the needs and aspirations of communities. This has already been proven in sectors such as children's disability, where co-production has become increasingly central to how services are shaped within the overall context of finite resources.

Placing pragmatic co-production at the centre of every aspect civil society will ensure that community voices and the "lived" experience of communities are always to the fore. This provides a solid basis and legitimacy for campaigning and influencing. It will also better enable communities themselves to exert influence and campaign if they so choose.

The Review Team recognises that co-production as a process needs funding, but argues that up-front investment in this approach will enable the targeting of limited statutory and independent funding in ways that are much more likely to address needs whilst making the most of available resources. It is therefore an investment worth making.

There are other advantages to pragmatic co-production. Collaborating with others in pragmatic co-production to define needs would enable funders to work more strategically, based on an understanding that is shared across communities, civil society and other funders. Developing a *shared* understanding of need would allow funders to target resources not only in relation to their own priorities, but also in relation to other funders' priorities.

Pragmatic co-production would enable efficiencies for civil society too, by ensuring a consistent framework upon which to develop funding bids. Currently, civil society reports having to twist funding applications to meet different funders' differing understanding of the needs of the same communities. Pragmatic co-production of a shared understanding of need would minimise the differences between funders' understanding of need. It would also provide a basis for aligning evaluation and measurement methods across funders.



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## Should pragmatic co-production apply to all communities?

The Review Team believes that there should always be a presumption that pragmatic co-production is the starting point for any engagement with communities. However, we recognise that not all people in any given community will want or be able to take an active part in co-production. Some may want to express views, thus providing valuable insight, but not get involved in anything more proactive. In adopting pragmatic co-production, the choice of individuals in communities to take part or not should be respected, alongside offering a range of ways in which people can participate, including for example, through the use of social media. This would enable the fullest range of people to have a say in decisions, in ways which suit them.

There will be communities which are fragile or particularly vulnerable for whom pragmatic co-production may not be immediately accessible. Civil society organisations and support bodies may need to continue to play an intermediary role, whilst work is carried out to build the capacity and confidence of these communities to engage in pragmatic co-production at a later date. However, as stated above, the Review Team argues that there should always be a presumption that pragmatic co-production is the starting point.

## The role of civil society support in pragmatic co-production

From pragmatic co-production emerges a clear role for civil society support as a catalyst to enable it to happen, and to support more vulnerable communities to articulate their views, working with frontline volunteers, groups and organisations. The Review Team also proposes that pragmatic co-production should apply equally to civil society support organisations in how they work. Support organisations should co-produce an understanding of the needs of those that turn to them for support, and co-design solutions that will empower these volunteers, groups and organisations to become more self-reliant.

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