



The Democratic Society

Better democracy, everywhere

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The Democratic Society would like to thank all of our speakers and the participants who made this event possible, in particular Jessica Russell from SAVS (Southend Volunteer Service), John Routley, Noreen Blanluet from the Co-production Network for Wales and Susan Paxton from the SCDC (Scottish Community Development Centre)

# Public Square Event Report:

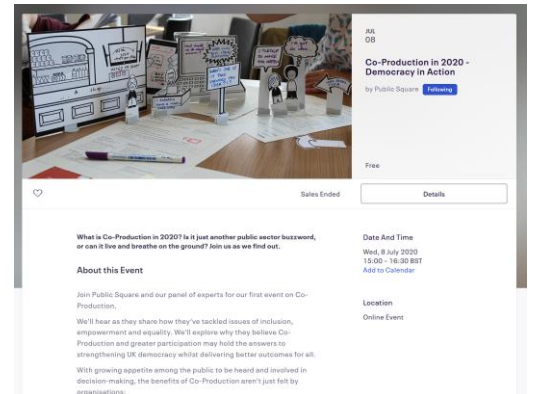
## “Co-Production in 2020 – Democracy in Action”

### Summary

As part of Public Square’s ongoing action-research into participatory democratic processes across the UK, on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020 we organised an online meeting of over 120 democratic practitioners, local government representatives, public service providers and members of the public from across the UK and beyond.

The date of the event coincided with England’s Co-Production week, allowing us to leverage this interest to boost attendance. The event received good attention online through our social media channels, and the recording continues to be a useful source of insights and resources for Public Square.

To help focus our minds and as part of our aim to continuously learn throughout Public Square’s work, we set some informal objectives and signs of success for the event, below:



### Objectives

- Convene a discussion on the benefits of participatory processes to citizens, decision-makers and society at large.
- Leverage England’s Co-Production Week to secure interest, speakers, attendance and attention online.
- Pool and share learning on Co-Production, identify potential leads for follow-up that could be added to Public Square’s resources and learning.

### Signs of Success

- Attendance of over 30 people from across local government, civil society groups and others.
- Generation of resources and content for Public Square. Quotes and feedback from speakers that people new to Co-Production would find useful and interesting. Video recording of the event and a write-up for website.
- Follow-up leads generated – how Co-Production fits into Public Square’s wider mission to pool and share knowledge on participatory democracy with the aim of encouraging system change. How useful is co-production as a way of framing and approaching these discussions with councils and local authorities?

## Intended Audience

- Practitioners in democratic participation (local council staff, “tech providers”, planners, councillors, LGA, COSLA, MHCLG, people like us (Demsoc, mySociety etc.), community organisations, service designers, digital transformation, civic tech, Public Square Technical Reference Group.

## Planning

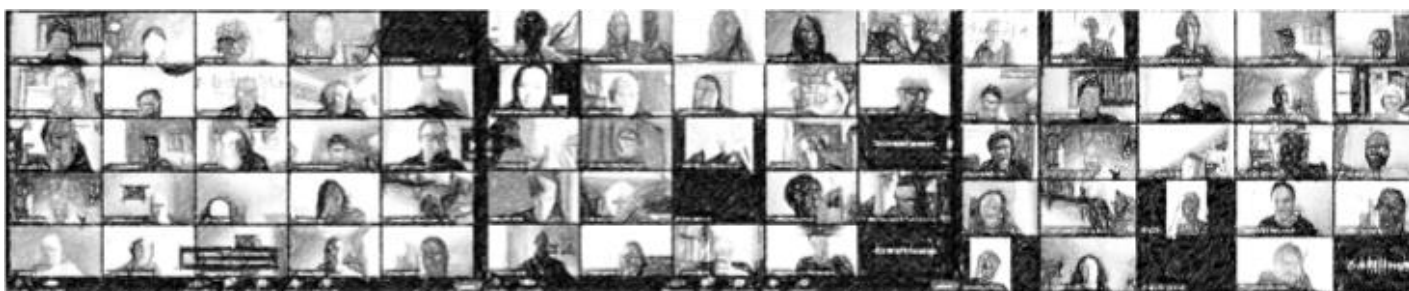
Through the Democratic Society’s strong relationships with local democracy practitioners across the UK, we secured four speakers for the event:

- Noreen Blanluet, Lead Consultant, [Co-Production Network for Wales](#)
- Jessica Russell, Co-production Champion, [SAVS \(Southend Volunteer Service\)](#)
- Susan Paxton, Head of Programmes, SCDC (Scottish Community Development Centre) and Lead for the [Scottish Co-Production Network](#)
- John Routley, Former [Lucas Aerospace Shop Steward](#)

We sought to involve the speakers in the organisation of the event as much as possible during the short timeframe available and without placing unwanted pressure on them given their other commitments.

We spoke individually with each speaker to get their input into what they would like to discuss at the event and gave each the opportunity to decide which questions they’d like to be asked (pictured in the event agenda on the right).

Following discussions with the speakers we also agreed to organise the event as a Meeting rather than a Webinar, to reduce the hierarchical nature of the event being organised as a panel of speakers. This meant that all the attendees appeared on an equal footing and could have the option to have their cameras or mics turned on during the event (below).



## Outputs

### Key Findings

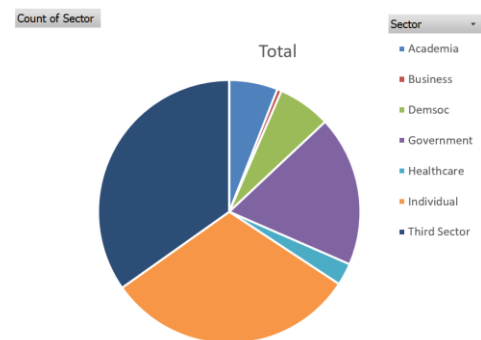
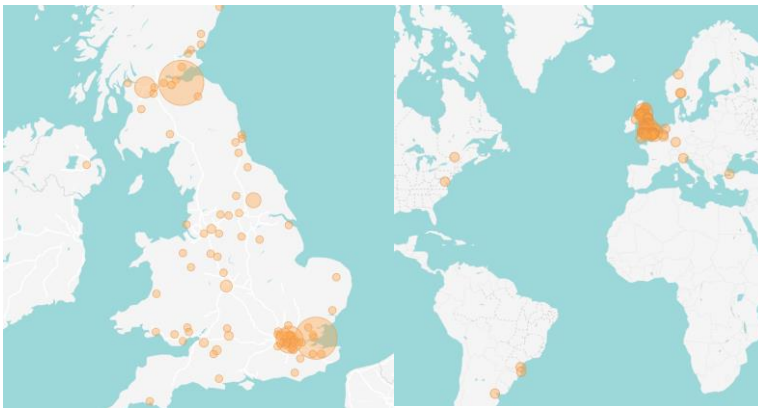
We've shared our key findings and reflections from the event [on our blog here](#). **Key insights shared by our speakers included the importance of:**

- Asking those who are affected by decision-making
- Empowering people by giving them opportunities to participate in decision-making
- Truly listening to everyone involved
- Meeting people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to you
- Creating opportunities for on ongoing dialogue
- Building strong and trusting relationships
- Continually asking “Who’s not in the room?”
- Making as many avenues of communication available as possible to make the process accessible
- Ensuring people’s lived experiences inform policies and services
- Understanding the purpose behind what you are doing
- Not assuming it’s Co-Production – you might need a different tool
- Taking a chance on Co-Production – the process itself is part of the solution
- Finding your tribe – who else wants to do Co-Production?

Alternatively, you can watch the whole recording from the event [here](#).

### Attendance

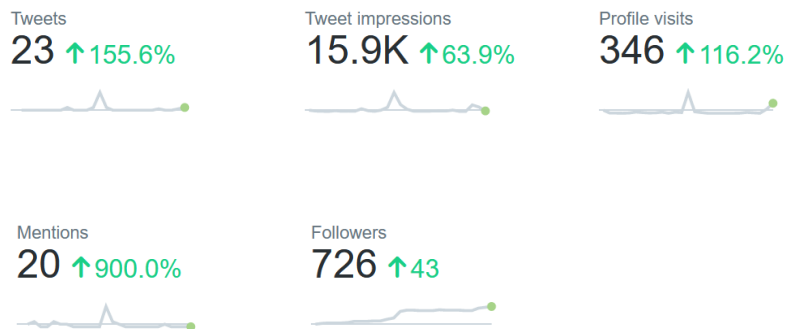
The event was strongly attended with over 120 practitioners, local government representatives, public service providers and members of the public registering from across the UK and beyond.



## Attention

The event also generated good coverage on social media, raising the profile of Public Square to further our objective of sharing useful resources for local councils to embed a culture of participation in local government.

### 28 day summary with change over previous period



## Follow-Up & Attendee Feedback

Following on from the event, we emailed all of those who registered with links to the write-up, as well as links to resources shared by our speakers, the video recording of the event, and a record of the event's chat transcript where many useful discussions took place.

All attendees were also given the opportunity to provide feedback via a post-event survey. **The feedback was broadly positive, with attendees rating the event an average of 8.4 / 10.** A few highlights from their responses are shared below:

### 1. Attendee Feedback: What made the event useful or not useful?

*"Very useful - as always, hearing lived experience is a really good way to help make a difference and brings to life ideas. It also serves as an incentive to push yourself to make a difference and hearing the examples from the people in the session was really very interesting."*

*"It was fantastic to be able to hear from the panellists about how Co-production has worked across a number of different sectors, but also to have the chat where all participants shared their thoughts."*

*"I think you actually explained what it is really well compared to another event I attended recently."*

*"The speakers had had different experiences resulting wide range of information and methods towards overcoming difficulties in co-production projects."*

**2. Attendee Feedback:** What did you learn from the event?

*"I learned that Co-Production is possible across every sector, even private corporations. It was great to be able to learn about what it takes to truly co-produce a service or initiative for the people it is supposed to work for."*

*"Having been a number of years since being involved in co-production it refreshed my knowledge and introduced new methodology to involvement in projects."*

*"I really liked the reality check around falling in love with solutions and remembering that we might know the answer but that bringing people along for the ride is the thing."*

*"Give people time to think, give questions ahead of time 'Tell me about...' rather than leading questions Asking who is not in the room Go back to people to let them know what has been done with their feedback - ongoing discussions"*

**3. Attendee Feedback:** What actions will you take now?

*"I will discuss with my colleagues and we will decide the best way to move this forward."*

*"I'm working on incorporating coproduction into my work and our Town Council"*

*"Identify our tribe! We were lucky to have a number of our councillors on the call and I am sure that that will inform future work."*

Another key takeaway from the event was that **the appetite is very strong for this discussion to continue** past this introductory-style event.

We therefore intend to organise a smaller scale event over the next two months to enable a more involved and advanced discussion with practitioners and local government representatives. Attendees and speakers also stressed how useful it would be for England to have a Co-Production Network of its own, something Public Square will explore with our network and at future events.

## Lines of Enquiry

The event was particularly useful in exploring the following questions in Public Square's Key Lines of Enquiry:

### 1. Defining the problem

#### b. What difference does meaningful participation make to decision making?

In the context of healthcare and the NHS, when asked to respond to those who claim that, "due to deadlines they don't have the time to fully incorporate a Co-Produced approach" speaker Jessica Russell set out the hidden cost of doing business as usual:

*"Do decision makers have time to waste money on poor health outcomes for the community? Do decision makers have time to have people coming to them in poorer health with a less likelihood of a good outcome? I just throw it straight back because if you want to spend money and not time, then fine, go ahead. But I would definitely say that the investment in terms of understanding what it is that patients need and want from services will repay that investment of time - which does cost money - you know, I can't put quantity on it, I'm just going to say threefold. And there's research that shows that the relationship between patients and doctors, if they have that co productive mindset, that the outcomes are better for the patients.*

*So, you know, there's the outcomes and the financial side of things, but I'd also just say it's an ethical, moral question for systems. It's not an "I don't have time" question, actually, I would flip it and say, "Does the system have time and resource to waste when lives are at risk?", And that's at the acute end of medicine. There's a whole other public health preventative piece which is ideally suited to Co-Production."*

**Jessica Russell**, Co-production Champion, SAVS (Southend Volunteer Service)

#### c. What gets in the way of achieving this?

Often the will might exist among individuals within a system for involving and empowering residents, service users and staff, but decision and change makers lack the practical tools, skills and culture necessary to do this:

*"The stuff we've talked about doing with our communities, with our citizens, with the people we're trying to Co-Produce with, he has to happen within organisations. We can't expect somebody to have warm life enhancing human interactions with the people they support, if they're part of a system that's all about key performance indicators and about slaps on the wrist if they don't do the thing by the book. So, we've got to have this culture change. And for me, that's the biggest enabler and it's the most frustrating thing to say, because I can't say, "Okay, everyone goes 'do culture change!'", and it'll be great. Actually, we have to chip away at it bit by bit.*

*And so the things that will enable it, that will get us over these hurdles, is everybody doing their little bit just because you write policy, or just because you're working on the front line doesn't mean you don't have a role to play in this bigger picture. So, everyone has to have a commitment to this*



*approach. And like Susan said, right at the beginning, I don't care if you never call it Co-Production. Doesn't matter, but it's that value space, the way of saying, "How do we think about power? How do we show up?"*

**Noreen Blanluet**, Lead Consultant, Co-production Network for Wales

**d. Are there wider social benefits from doing meaningful participation in this way? (for example, increasing community cohesion, increasing trust)**

Speakers highlighted how the process of co-production can be an end in and of itself, by strengthening community links and building a shared sense of ownership:

*"In a lot of cases, the decision isn't the important thing... Community workers, when embedded in their communities, probably know what's the thing that needs to happen. But the thing is, that doesn't create the ownership and doesn't create the shared vision around it. And so the relationship building and the shared ownership and the everybody participating in the debate, and being part of that decision means that we might come to the same result on paper, the same decision is made, but actually the, the engagement with it and the fact that we feel that we're all doing this together, the dynamics of it is completely different.*

*So the relationship building creates this, "It's all of us deciding this together," as opposed to somebody having the power delegated to them, and the relationship aspect really ties in closely to the power aspect. If somebody on their own has to write this thing, it's their responsibility, but also, they hold the power to call the shots. Whereas if we're doing it together, we still have the option to come to a different result or different strategy or different option because we've decided this together."*

**Noreen Blanluet**, Lead Consultant, Co-production Network for Wales

**2. Understanding the current context:**

**d. What innovations are there in other settings that could be applicable in local government?**

Sharing his experiences from working on the [Lucas Plan](#) during the 1980s, John Routley said:

*"We had to make sure that we add the support of everyone as we went along. We couldn't take control of the situation and say to our members, we know what's right for you. We had to take on board what they believed was right for them. And I totally believe in empowering people by giving them the opportunity to be part of the democratic process, and from that giving them empowerment. And from that you gain commitment. And that's what happened in our case. The members were committed to each other, and they were committed to each site.*

*Across the board, we were all part of the same problem. So, we have to collectively find the solutions. Now that brought, for example, people on the shop floor having a great idea, but not knowing how to convert it into a product. So we went and took the idea to a design team. The design team looked at the concept and use their skills to design a way forward. So, it's a collective approach, once the design was put together it back to the person*

*whose idea was to say, "This is what you were looking at. This is what you were thinking about, could it be improved?"*

*One example for me was, I was an electrician in those days. I remember machines breaking down, I used to, when I started off, go up to a machine and work my way through trying to find the fault. I'd be there for quite a while. And I learned quite quickly from an older electrician. If you've got a problem, go to the operator and say to the operator, "What's the problem?" And they can usually tell you, "This problem's happened on a number of occasions. This is where you should look." And I believe that is true in everything that we do. We have to ask the questions of the people affected."*

**John Routley**, Former Lucas Aerospace Shop Steward

### 3. Understanding opportunities and challenges

#### b. What holds citizens and organisations back from engaging with local government, and other local public sector organisations? How can this be overcome? What motivates and enables people to get involved?

Several speakers highlighted the importance of practitioners and local government going to citizens and engaging with them on their own terms, rather than expecting citizens to come to them. Similarly, there shouldn't be an expectation for citizens to be immediately comfortable engaging in unfamiliar processes:

*"The answer for me is to try and create opportunities where you're having conversations with people who aren't necessarily involved in community activities or community life. And quite often, that just means that we need to go to different places where people are and find a way of having that conversation that's not necessarily about immediately then bringing them into those types of processes that we have planned and that we do as professionals.*

*We've seen quite a lot of examples of that in the participatory budgeting programmes and processes in Scotland, where instead of expecting people to come to you, and you invite them into your pre-planned events, etc., you need to go where people are at. And people are everywhere, the trick is just finding out what your best chances are of kind of harnessing the types of things that people are getting involved in as they go about their daily business in their own communities."*

**Susan Paxton**, Head of Programmes, SCDC (Scottish Community Development Centre)

*"People are where they are. And if you invite them into you, that's lovely. But actually, I always think there's always a bit of a potential power-play in that. And if you go to where people are, then immediately it's more equal. But I think you have to be visible and you have to be seen to be doing that. And those relationships aren't just going to come because you decide one day you're going to click your fingers and do some consultation. I think you have to put in the effort and you have to mean it... Somebody who has those links into the community will often know what the solution is. But the*

*point is that you build the relationships and bring people around those conversations as you go.”*

**Jessica Russell**, Co-production Champion, SAVS (Southend Volunteer Service)

**d. How do we make participation work for those who lack skills, capacity and confidence? (This is for all actors)**

Speakers pointed out the importance of continually seeking to bring new perspectives into the conversation when attempting to build participatory processes:

*“You might start with two people. And that's fewer than you were hoping for. But that's okay. Because over time others will see what's going on and will want to join in because they see things going on. And especially if it's fun or if change actually tangibly happens, then people will come on the journey with you.*

*You don't have to get it completely 100% right from the beginning. But do keep asking the question: "Who's not in the room?" Because often, you'll get your first two people and they're the early adopters. They're the ones who are already committed to this kind of cause and to working with you and to doing the thing, but actually, they will know who else isn't in the room. And when you bring in more people into the conversation, keep asking "Who's not here? Who's not here?" and use your networks of networks. You're not expected to know everybody you need to know right from the off, but between all of you together, you will be able to reach everyone eventually.”*

**Noreen Blanluet**, Lead Consultant, Co-production Network for Wales

**5. Dissemination**

**a. What are the best ways to join up efforts, ensure lessons are shared, and work with councils to develop an open, common toolkit for civic participation?**

Several speakers suggested the need for an English Co-Production Network to share best practice on the topic, and how one aligned Co-Production week in the UK would help link up efforts within the sector. For those new to Co-Production, speakers also mentioned the importance of linking up with potential allies and approaching participatory work with an open mind:

*“Assuming that there are some other people find them. Find them and don't think too much about it until you found them, because if you get too attached to your idea or your solution or what you see as the problem, you suck out the air a little bit for other people to join in. I like to think of things having their own energy and more people create more energy but if you've dictated it and you know, you take a up all - and I'm very prone to this with my brilliant ideas. And they're not brilliant, they're just my ideas. So, I've had to learn to go, "Actually your ideas aren't that great", and they'll be better with other people around them.”*

**Jessica Russell**, Co-production Champion, SAVS (Southend Volunteer Service)

*“If you're starting a Co-Production project, with the caveat that there aren't really any Co-Production projects, you're building and Co-Production relationship, so it builds on what came before and stuff will happen after. But if you've got something specific, a specific piece of work that you're looking at, start by mapping the people whose lives are touched by what you're trying to do. All the stakeholders - who's got a stake in this?*

*It could be partner organisations, it could be your own teams and colleagues, it could be lots of different kinds of people in the community. So map that out and treat that as a living document because there'll be gaps in that and the more you talk to people, the more you'll find gaps but also, the more you'll find and discover more groups to add to the picture. And on the back of that go and talk to different people in those different audiences.*

*And the best question you can ever ask if you don't know what else to ask is, "Just tell me about, what is it like to live with dementia? What is it like to be a young person coming out of care? What is it like to be living in lockdown in your context?" And listen. The biggest thing you can do is just listen, you'll learn so much just from doing that. So put your assumptions and put your questions to one side. It's not to say they're not valid and actually past knowledge, past research, all the stuff that happened before we're not throwing it out. Actually try and start by listening first to give like to give, get a picture of what's going on, in front of you that you might not be privy to.*

**Noreen Blanluet**, Lead Consultant, Co-production Network for Wales

**c. How best can you leverage central and devolved governments' interest and investment in participation?**

Several speakers identified the importance of involving communities in the recovery process after COVID-19, which may provide a chance to change the way government works for the better:

*“Communities will have to be redesigned to meet the new demands that are going to be taking place and the new pressures that we put on to local communities as we move forward. It's going to take a whole range of people to work collectively to work that way forward. There'll be new models of Co-Production, I'm sure, as things progress, and they'll be different demands put upon us. But you're quite right, the things that Susan and Jessica and Noreen have alluded to, is that we have to make sure that we're there to support but we don't always have to lead. But what we can do is use our expertise to help pull people together.*

*I love the analogy that Noreen used about the rocket. The question is where do we target it? Where's the destination? We can build it. We can put the expertise in and design it, but we need to know, where are we aiming for? Where is that target? And those questions need to be asked at the beginning it has to be asked for the people who need that change. What is it you actually want?”*

**John Routley**, Former Lucas Aerospace Shop Steward