Coproduction must put community power into practice

Paul Stepczak's challenge to organisations claiming to coproduce their services deserves attention. Surveys, consultation events and partnerships between providers can serve useful purposes. Whether they constitute coproduction depends on the power communities exercise. His emphasis on co-design, co-delivery and co-ownership, within equal, reciprocal and ongoing relationships, brings that question into focus.

For Co-operatives Wales, this connects directly with our commitment to putting co-operative principles at the heart of services and community life. "Nothing About Us Without Us" requires meaningful rights to influence decisions, challenge priorities and hold decision-makers accountable. People's involvement must have consequences for what organisations do and how resources are used.

Coproduction begins before the agenda is settled. People drawing on services, unpaid carers, workers and communities should help define the problem, consider alternatives and determine what success means. Their knowledge must carry weight alongside professional expertise. Participation becomes unequal when institutions control every significant decision while communities are invited to comment on implementation.

Paul Stepczak's inclusion of co-ownership opens a particularly important discussion. Ownership can describe shared responsibility for a process or its outcomes. From a co-operative perspective, we should also examine ownership of the organisations, land, buildings and other assets through which services operate. Democratic collective ownership can make community influence more durable.

A community might help design a service while a provider retains control over its budget, staffing and future. A co-operative model can give members continuing rights to elect representatives, scrutinise finances and determine priorities. Depending on its purpose, membership can bring together people receiving support, workers, carers and wider community stakeholders.

This creates opportunities for reciprocity: everyone contributes knowledge, experience or resources, and everyone benefits from shared endeavour. Surpluses can support service improvements, workforce development and wider community priorities. The additional community dividend may include stronger relationships, mutual support, local skills and assets preserved for future generations. These outcomes deserve recognition alongside service measures.

Public authorities remain essential partners, with responsibilities for quality, equality, access and stewardship of public money. Coproducing within publicly owned services has substantial value. Authorities should provide clear decision-making rights and practical support, while enabling routes towards community ownership where communities want it and a sustainable model can be established.

However, ownership alone cannot guarantee equality. Co-operatives must practise democracy through open membership, accessible information, transparent decisions and accountable elections. Participation requires time, support and resources. Disabled people, people experiencing poverty and those whose voices are routinely marginalised must be able to influence decisions throughout the organisation, rather than occupy symbolic places within it.

Paul Stepczak's suggestion that we speak of "coproducing" recognises that relationships require continuing attention. Co-operative democracy makes the same demand. We should repeatedly ask whose knowledge counts, who controls resources, who can challenge a decision and what happens when members disagree with those delivering or funding a service.

Our ambition should be services and institutions where communities exercise lasting power. Consultation can open a conversation; coproduction must sustain shared decision-making. Co-operative ownership can give that relationship an enduring democratic foundation, supported by investment, inclusion and accountability. That is how "Nothing About Us Without Us" becomes everyday practice.