Guide to Chairing Co-Productive Meetings

Introduction

In the consultation it was noted how certain chairing styles helped facilitate coproduction and which stifled it.

This document is the starting point for providing guidance on how to effectively co-produce meetings

The Forum are open to further ideas and suggestions for good practice in chairing and will keep this document up to date to reflect the contributions made.

Opening the meeting

After everyone has been welcomed it is important for people to be given the opportunity to introduce themselves. This is even more important if there are new members or visitors in attendance.

To make sure people feel included and engaged in the meeting it is a good idea to check how attendees are feeling about the meeting and if there is anything that they are looking forward to or want to take away from the meeting.

This gives the chair an opportunity to help steer the meeting and ensure people's goals are met while giving the chair the opportunity to support those who need it.

If you have co-production principles it useful to run through them with people at the beginning of the session.

People need to be encouraged to abide by the etiquette of meetings ensuring that equality of voice is maintained. i.e. ensuring that everyone has space to be heard by requesting that people try to be brief in their contributions.

It is also helpful to ensure the smooth running of meetings by requesting that people raise their hands when they want to speak and wait for the chair to invite them to do so.

Inclusion

The theme of inclusion was the most frequently raised in the consultation.

In the spirit of coproduction, it is important to give service users and carers equal opportunity to chair meetings. Support should be available for those who request it from the respective organisation.

Ensuring that all voices have an opportunity to be heard is fundamental to the engagement process.

Chairing online meetings

When doing introductions in an online meeting there is an option for people to introduce themselves in ‘chat’. This is a good idea if there is a busy agenda.

However it is still preferable for those who are unable to give verbal introductions.

It is important to be familiar with the platform being used for the meeting; for instance when electronic hands are raised in Zoom and Teams the names of the people who raised their hands come to the top of the participants list in the order in which they raised their hands. This is useful for fair chairing. (In Zoom, the first to raise their hand also appears in the top left-hand corner of the screen.)

People cannot always find the electronic hand option, so it is still necessary to keep an eye open for people physically raising their hands, and also to keep an eye on chat to pick up on the questions and comments raised by those who either communicate better that way, or those who haven’t been able to get a chance to join the verbal conversation. One way to ensure that you are picking up everything is to delegate someone to monitor the chat window so that people’s points are not missed. This person can be a vice-chair or a volunteer.

When a discussion is lively and yet a few people haven’t contributed it is always worth asking them directly by name if they have anything to add. Or you could invite them to comment in chat if they don’t want to speak. Similarly, if one person has dominated the conversation, it is worth inviting comments from those who have not already spoken, again either verbally or in chat depending on the time available, to say if they agree with what has been said or if they have anything else to add.

Whilst best practice is to ensure that those who need them have hard copy papers, it can also help to screen share minutes and action logs, for those parts of the agenda. For the minutes you can either scroll down slowly so people can scan the notes, or as you scroll verbally summarise what is on each page so the people are reminded of anything they wanted to raise in the minutes. The latter is going to be more inclusive as some people are slow readers and won’t be able to keep up with scrolling.

When sharing your screen those who raise their hands electronically will appear on the front or top of the videos you can see. Otherwise, if you go off full screen you can see chat or the participants list beside the shared document.

Chairing hybrid meetings

This is the upcoming challenge for chairing meetings, although it is like chairing meetings where you have people dialling in on the telephone. There are two main issues to keep in mind. The virtual participants may be finding it hard to hear the conversations going on in the face-to-face meeting. If this is the case, and you can't improve the situation by repositioning any microphone, you will need to pause frequently to summarise what has been said and to ask if the virtual members want to comment.

You will have to be especially attentive to ensure that you don't miss any hands being raised, or chat comments from the virtual members during discussions. Again, it is worth pausing from time to time to check with virtual members to see if they want to speak.

It would be helpful to delegate the vice chair or volunteer to monitor the on-line participants to ensure that they are fully included.

Chairing face-to-face meetings

It is always challenging to ensure that people raise their hands when they want to speak rather than just jumping in. You know you've lost control of the meeting when the chair needs to raise their hand themselves to get an opportunity to be heard!

It may be necessary to remind people of the need to follow the process to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to be heard.

It also helps to acknowledge when people raise their hands and to list the people who raised their hands in order so that contributors know when it will be their turn to speak. This also helps to ensure that contributors don't feel they are being made to wait unfairly. To make this work you will need to keep a note of who raises their hands. Again, a vice chair sitting next to you can be an extra pair of eyes to ensure that you have picked up everyone who wants to speak.

As with virtual and hybrid meetings it is important to check with silent members from time to time to see if they agree with what has been said or if they want to add anything else.

Checking group decisions

Following a group discussion, it is always helpful to summarise what has been said to ensure that you have understood things, and to reflect on the conclusions of the discussion and actions that therefore need to be taken forward. If the group agree with your suggested conclusions and actions, it is then necessary to seek people to take responsibility for those actions, and to agree a timescale for when they will report back.

This needs to be recorded in an action log, which will need regular review, and occasional editing to remove any actions that are no longer relevant.

Conflict resolution

There will be conflicts in co-productive meetings. Conflict resolution works best when the power balance is even so that both are equally bound to find a mutually acceptable solution. If one is more powerful than the other, they can simply refuse to negotiate. As chair you can invite people to suggest how they are prepared to compromise or ask the group to see if it can come up with any solutions which equally value the different viewpoints. Sometimes the situation can be resolved through a vote. On some occasions due to agenda pressures, it may be necessary to continue controversial discussions outside of the main meeting.

Creative solution development

Where views are opposing it may be possible to base a solution on the principle of flexibility to allow choice. For instance, where people won't agree on a one size fits all solution, they are more likely to agree to giving people the choice. Where they are based on a standard of behaviour you can set the minimum standard and have an additional gold standard.

Taking issues outside of the meeting

It may not be possible for yourself or members to find a solution for a conflict within the timescale of a meeting.

In which case it may be wise to invite those concerned to continue seeking a solution outside of the meeting.

Other circumstances for asking for things to be taken outside of the meeting include situations where the time is not available to do justice to the issue in the meeting, or when the issue isn't relevant to the agenda.

Timings

People like meetings to run to time. They have other commitments in their lives and will plan around the times set out in the agenda. Sometimes people may only be coming for one item in which case it is helpful to take that item first and only start the general business of the meeting such as minutes and actions once the guest agenda item is finished. In addition, key people may have to leave meetings early, so any issue that is particularly important for them to participate in may need to be taken out of order.

It is vitally important to develop a protocol and clear expectations around how long people have for reports and presentations. Timings on agendas help. It is only fair to help people prepare for their contribution to let them know how much time they will have to present and how much time will be available for subsequent discussion. It is difficult and unfair to have to stop someone mid-flow in a long presentation when there is only time for a short one.

Finally, even the best chairs and well-timed agendas will occasionally fail to cater for an overflow of discussion which can prolong a meeting if not quickly acted on by the chair. As a result, people may want to continue the conversation beyond the time available. It is helpful to ask people to put their comments in writing to include in the minutes and/or for you to raise it with an appropriate member of the group outside of the meeting and possibly facilitate for a further conversation to take place between meetings.

Actions

If there are no actions set within a meeting, they are just talking shops. It needs to be noted which people are dedicated to delivering an action. There needs to be a deadline for when actions are to be completed. This needs to be followed up at future meetings. If for any reason the person allocated the action is unable to complete it, then it is their responsibility to reassign the action to another appropriate team member.

There is a risk of work being delayed if actions are not completed.

People generally feel that a meeting is worthwhile if something is going to happen as a result.

Signing off

As well as the usual Any Other Business at the end of an agenda it would be helpful to give participants an opportunity to give feedback or ask questions either verbally or if they prefer by e-mail (providing contact details) after the meeting.