A GUIDE TO COCOMMISSINING ACTION RESEARCH COLLECTIVES

Learning from PAC 2021–2023

March 2023

The Peer Action Collective (PAC) is a £5.2 million programme, which aims to give young people the chance to make their communities safer, fairer places to live. It is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op Group. PAC was set up in 2021 to create a network of young people resourced to lead research and take action on issues related to youth violence. They worked in 10 areas of England and Wales, each supported by a Delivery Partnership.

The University of Central Lancashire's Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, and associates from the Institute for Connected Communities at the University of East London, collaborated with this network, as learning partners, to learn from and share experiences and cocreate resources[1]. We provided a guide developed from **previous research**, at the beginning of PAC.

This guide reports on what was learned together during PAC[2]. It provides guidance on how to put in place the essential grounding elements of a network and partnership. More details are in the PAC Guide to Peer Research and Action.

This briefing tells you about what has been learned about likely effective approaches to collaborative commissioning, monitoring and shared leadership in peer research and social action.

Co-produced commissioning approaches, prioritises the empowerment and support of citizens/beneficiaries to shape the programmes for themselves. They aim to ensure programmes are reflective of their needs and that accessible information is readily available. They also supports front-line staff to become champions of the programme and promotes new ways of supporting and engaging providers and other stakeholders.

This short report is structured around the four steps of commissioning:

- analysis
- planning
- doing
- review

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[1] See www.UCanMakeChange2.org/advice for cocreated resources

[2] Peer Researchers (PRs) completed a survey (129/17) completed at the beginning, 88 middle and 59 at the end of the project). 178 changemakers completed a survey towards the end of their engagement. 21 young people completed an early exit survey. PRs attended repeat reflective focus groups in every DP (online and face to face). A sample of young people (26), including young people who were less vocal in group situations, were interviewed in the last two months of the programme. 24 young people took part in a creative evaluation activity at the closing event. Delivery partner coordination staff engaged in monthly repeat interviews.

It concludes with a checklist.

1. Prepare (Analysis)

To ensure that the research programme is commissioned in a way that responds to the changing needs of young people, fulfils funders criteria and supports effective delivery from providers, the commissioning body should outline what research is needed and how support to peer researchers should be provided. A position statement outlining the research programme specifications should be co-produced by an advisory collective made-up of young people and adults who share a common concern on reducing youth violence.

People to involve in the advisory collective could include:
- young people affected by the issues,
- young people who have been involved in PAC before,
- adult professionals working in the field,
- policy makers committed to action on related issues,
- academics with experience in peer research or youth violence.
- funders

Secure funding that this advisory collective can direct and identify:

- any restrictions on its use
- links between the funding and adult/ institutional goals
- any benefits of working with sponsor organisations.

Share with the advisory board learning from previous PAC projects, evaluations and current opportunities, to understand:

- Priority concerns arising from previous work that could inform funding criteria
- Opportunities for influence (e.g., policy frameworks, events) that relate to young people's known concerns and the funding available
- Locations and groups of children who continue to be excluded from this work or who would particularly benefit
- Difficulties that have arisen in the past
- Advice about the location and spread of potential delivery partnerships, colocation of support and research activities, and the expertise (e.g., research, social action, pastoral care, networks of potential participants

and stakeholder engagement) that delivery partnerships need to have or secure

> **Note:** **It is beneficial to include funders in these discussions from the start and throughout the journey of co-commissioning, and development of monitoring and reporting criteria so that they become part of the process of cocreating feasible metrics and storytelling activities that are not overly onerous or duplicative.**

Work with the advisory board to prepare provisional information about:

- the funding
- aims
- criteria
- opportunities for influence

This section emphasises the need for evidence-based decision making when commissioning future PAC research. This takes into account known needs gathered from the sector and young people, partnerships and collaborations that worked well and not so well, and the quality and financial constraints of the intended programme.

Top tips: Blurring boundaries between delivering and receiving services

> In collaborative commissioning the usual line between those people who fund, design and deliver services and those who use them is blurred. More people involved in getting things done.

2. Connect and invite co-creation of programme specification and working methods (Planning)

Effective co-produced commissioning ensures that the balance of activities is managed, and the form of engagement follows its function. To establish a research programme where activities meet the aims of the programme, 1) invite expressions of interest from intergenerational groups, and 2) hold information events to answer questions and to understand:

- What potential participating organisations feel is achievable

- What goals potential participating intergenerational groups would expect to be important
- What approaches to communicating they would value, including how to network and how to tell the stories of individual and community journeys

Through the intergenerational advisory board, use the learning from the information events to create and then share:

- Revised funding criteria and accessible application forms that are young people friendly
- Flexible timescales that are young people friendly and culturally appropriate and acceptable
- Co-create a SMART and streamlined monitoring criteria (i.e., funders can collapse their monitoring requirements into a common set of indicators) (detailed later)

Through the intergenerational advisory board, and programme team (and any additional national organisations providing capacity), use the learning from the information events to create:

- Data sharing agreements, contracts, invoicing information/templates
- Make explicit performance data from outcome/impact data and linking M&E returns to payment
- Plans for potential communication channels and activities that meet with expected needs
- Inclusive, accessible, relevant and road-tested summaries of relevant policy, and approaches to social action related to the focus issues
- Activities guides or workshops plans that would enable newly recruited peer researcher teams to research themselves, redefining the potential monitoring criteria developed in the information session and trying out the suggested methods for telling stories about individual and community journeys.

> **Note: We learn together about how to do research by doing it. Our findings suggest that the best way to embed learning about research and to avoid duplication of requests for monitoring data is to start learning about research by researching ourselves and our own organisations.**

This would:

- **require planning for early stages of the programme to involve young people inquiring into themselves using the draft monitoring criteria.**

- **enable young people to test out doing questionnaires, interviews, or creative methods for telling stories about themselves and their communities.**

Data from these activities should be the primary source of monitoring information, to minimize repetition, and be stored centrally.

Top tips: Facilitating not delivering:

The commissioning body should simply enable things to happen, rather than directing activities themselves. Commissioners should seek to facilitate opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas from young people to inform the commissioning process, systems, and methodology.

3. Assess, Prioritise, Appoint and Understand (Doing)

Through the intergenerational advisory board, and programme team (and any additional national organisations providing capacity):

- Review applications to ensure that there is evidence of how they can deliver all planned activities, consequently, demonstrate the required skills, including research and monitoring, peer research support, doing social action and supporting youth social action, pastoral support, safeguarding, established and relevant networks and stakeholder engagement.
- Select applications to be funded.

Hold an initial event with appointed intergenerational delivery partnership teams to review, understand and agree:

- Changes in the provisional monitoring requirements based on details in the award
- How to try out the potential embedded monitoring activities
- Setting up a mechanism in which to review the implementation of the commissioning specification with partners allowing for minor adaptations

- How to adapt communication plans
- Potential support needs and opportunities for peer support between DPs

> **Note: Make sure all the monitoring and evaluation tools are ready and tested at the start of the programme, building in time for reviews and changes during the life of the research programme.**
>
> **Ensure that a bespoke one-to-one and group mentoring support is provided to build shared understanding and ownership of the Evaluation and Monitoring Framework.**

Top tips: Encouraging peer support networks

> Peer to peer delivery professional networks are often not valued enough and not encouraged. Co-produced commissioning seeks to build peer networks alongside central support for professionals.

4. Coinvestigate what is changing for whom and how (Reviewing)

In the early weeks of the programme, once PRs are recruited, in a PR group meeting try out proposed self-inquiry activities and agree (with central support and coordination if wanted):

- Things that it will be important to record and understand about the individual PAC journey ahead (i.e., monitoring criteria)
- A simple (ten item) measure that young people complete (potentially with their support person) as soon as they join the programme and when they leave.
- A range of creative ways in which young people can share their own stories of the journey of PAC. Coordinate these to meet the needs for public outputs and ongoing reflection.

Once peer researchers start identifying bespoke timelines for each group's research and social action activities, agree (with central support and coordination if wanted):

- Things that it will be important to record and understand about the shared PAC journey ahead (i.e., collective monitoring criteria)

- A simple demographic detail recording form and potentially a (five item) measure that are completed with participants and changemakers as soon as they consent to participate, and with changemakers when they leave.
- A chosen way in which intergenerational peer research collectives share their group stories of the journey of PAC.
- An online stakeholder survey.

Note: **It is imperative that only one organization is tasked to collect monitoring information and reporting, and that this is done through a relationship-based approach to avoid overwhelming and demotivating community-based organisations.**

Top tips: Building on people's capabilities

Everyone recognizes that each peer researcher and professional has abilities and people are supported to develop these. People are supported to use what they can do to benefit their community themselves and other people.

Provisional Monitoring Checklist

The intergenerational advisory group should have an instrumental role in reviewing monitoring and evaluation data and hear directly from the peer researchers on what's working well and what's working less well. These are some of the essential elements that we believe they should seek to put in place.

- ☐ Simplified and well explain KPIs, metrics or indicators that blend fixed and flexible metrics, co-produced with external funders, suppliers and young people.

  - Collect essential data only, which requires thinking about data that you will go on to use.

  - The fixed metrics should remain the same for the life of the project to avoid losing data.

  - A balance between performance and outcome/impact data

- o   Consideration of what best constitutes data (e.g., percentages actual numbers)

- o   Avoid age bands and use 'actual' ages to help report back to external funders

- o   All commissioned providers use an ID form to help track individual journeys in the research programme

- ☐ Clearly timed and communicated return dates, collection points that make sense and determine by the rhythm and flow of project activities

  - o   Built-in slippage time at the start and end of the research and social action programme for both the commissioned providers and the commissioning body data collector.

  - o   Link M&E to payment sequences

  - o   Provide a single central mechanism/ platform for individuals to share insights and information confidentially into the M&E reporting.

  - o   Close the communication loop on M&E information, so that insight is rapidly shared back and actioned

- ☐ Compulsory and top-up training on the M&E tools and processes provided to ensure a shared understanding of M&E requirements.

  - o   Suppliers have a named person at the outset of the commissioned work and throughout the programme who has the capability and responsibility to oversee monitoring and evaluation.

  - o   Clear understanding of the amount of time that will be needed by providers to competently undertake M&E activities.

  - o   Encourage providers to apply the same level of rigour to the monitoring and evaluation process as the peer research activities and use M&E information to reflect and inform their next steps.