Sustaining co-production through turbulent times: Insights from a longitudinal study

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1. Introduction

The degree of complexity facing Western welfare states has evolved dramatically in recent years, as states contend with ageing populations, mass migration, political instability and other rapidly changing societal problems. As a way to tackle these challenges, many social programs have latched onto the idea of co-production, or the involvement of volunteers and service users in delivering the services they would otherwise passively benefit from (Bovaird, 2007). Co-production is posited to improve empowerment, efficiency and outcomes, but our understanding of the long-term potential of co-production remains limited. Most co-production studies are undertaken as limited time case studies, and we therefore lack important evidence about whether these types of practices are maintained over time, and what factors may support or inhibit long-term sustainability of citizens/ service users in service delivery.

The issue of sustainability has only recently become a major focus of the co-production literature, with previous studies identifying factors that may enable or prevent programmes from maintaining these types of volunteer and service user involvement over the longer term (e.g. Jaspers and Steen,

Steen and Brandsen, McMullin, 2023). McMullin (2023) argued that co-production can be sustainable if there is an appropriate balance between structure, resources, skills and mutual commitment. However, these frameworks are relatively underdeveloped, with limited elaboration of the service and organizational conditions that can support sustainable co-production. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 created a web of unprecedented conditions that significantly shaped the context in which social service organizations operated. We thus have a need to understand the interlinkages between organizational resilience, program sustainability, and co-production sustainability.

In this paper, I address this lacuna through the analysis of a case study of a program to support parents and toddlers delivered by a third sector organization in the UK, through longitudinal data over the course of nine years, from program inception through to four years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. I bring together the literatures on (1) social service program sustainability and (2) organizational resilience to provide a more in-depth and nuanced view of when, how and why this program was able to sustain and adapt their approaches to co-production over the long term, despite challenging circumstances. In the next section, I review the extant literature on co-production, program sustainability and resilience in order to develop an analytical framework to consider the case study. This is followed by a brief outline of the research design and methods of the current study. The paper continues by conducting a longitudinal analysis of the case study through the concurrent lenses of organizational, program and co-production sustainability. Finally, I present a discussion of the findings and implications of the research.

2.1 Co-production of public services

Co-production has become one of the most prominent notions in recent public administration studies, but the explosion of interest has led to a proliferation of definitions rather than helping to

crystallize around a single conceptualization. I define co-production as the collaboration between paid professionals (in either the public or third sector) and citizens/ service users in designing (making decisions about) as well as delivering/ implementing public services (McMullin, 2022; Bovaird, 2007). From this perspective, the focus is on collaborations at the individual level between staff members and those who benefit from public services. This is in contrast to some perspectives which concentrate on organizational collaborations, e.g. between public and non-profit organizations, which I relate instead to the terms co-management or co-governance (Pestoff, 2012). Furthermore, the focus on collaboration entails a necessary interaction between staff and 'laypeople' (as opposed to some definitions of co-production which link actions undertaken independently by public sector staff and citizens). The involvement in 'doing' things together is one of the key aspects that distinguishes co-production from other forms of citizen participation such as public deliberation (Nabatchi et al., 2017).

Based on work from Elinor Ostrom in the 1970s and 1980s, the premise of co-production is that public services can be made more efficient and effective if citizens/ service users are more directly involved in the process (Parks et al., 1981). As the concept returned to popularity in the early 2000s, others have also argued that citizen involvement in public service delivery also increases democratic accountability and empowerment (Pestoff, 2006). However, assessing the actual impacts or outcomes of co-production has been challenging because of the often qualitative and relationship-based improvements that co-production stimulates, which are difficult to measure. One of the challenges in understanding the possible benefits of co-production is that many studies are undertaken as cross-sectional case studies, often focusing on pilot studies, so we lack longitudinal evidence of whether co-production can lead to long-term systems change and benefits

for enduring social services. It is for this reason that the sustainability of co-production practices is of particular relevance.

2.2 Sustainability

The concept of sustainability (or related concepts of durability, routinization and institutionalization) has become increasingly important in research on social services, but the concept is contested. Sustainability can be understood generally as "something continuing without failing" (van Meerkerk et al., 2018, 653). This could be interpreted in multiple ways, including the capacity to maintain activities at their current level, or deliver continued benefits, or alternatively the ability to adapt and improve over time (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). To understand the sustainability of co-production, I approach it from a multi-level perspective, with co-production as (1) a practice, (2) situated within the context of a program or service, (3) which is nested within an organizational context. Following this logic, I present a review of the literature on sustainability as it relates to co-production and social service programs, resilience, and the factors identified as contributing to these.

2.2.1 Sustainability of co-production

Sustainability of co-production can be conceived in different ways – as the continuation of co-productive approaches (e.g. long-term engagement of volunteers and/or service users), or the lasting *impact* or *outcomes* of these co-production practices. For the purposes of this paper, I focus primarily on the former approach, drawing the attention to the practices of co-production between service users and professionals, and how these can be maintained. Conceived in this way, we can see co-production not as a service/project in itself, but as a method that characterizes the delivery of services. As such, a service or program might engage service users in co-production at some points in the program's history/ development and not at others. For instance, a program could be

initiated through traditional approaches (where professionals take full responsibility for design and delivery), with co-production later introduced as an innovation or new way of working. (This trajectory is more or less the narrative of the co-production literature). Likewise, a program could be developed with an approach of involving users in service delivery, but over time, these approaches to involvement could fall by the wayside.

For co-production practices to be sustainable, they need to extend beyond short-term or ad hoc activities (Mortensen et al., forthcoming) and involve 'regular, long-term relationships" (Bovaird, 2007, p. 847). Several studies have suggested conditions that might support this type of sustainability. These include a focus on collective action and a focus on supportive structural variables (Pestoff, 2014; Ostrom, 2009), a supportive legislative framework, sufficient financial resources and a focus on capacity-building (Steen and Brandsen, 2020), and a balance between problem-solving and capacity-building both now and for the future (Jaspers and Steen, 2019). Incorporating these elements together, we can conceive of a framework that includes the structure or design of co-production activities, resources (both time and financial), skills to effectively engage in co-production long-term, and a mutual commitment from both professionals and citizen co-producers (McMullin, 2023).

2.2.2 Program sustainability

Considering the sustainability of co-production *practices* is inadequate without considering whether the service or program which takes this approach of co-production is itself sustainable. Indeed, some of the previous studies of co-production sustainability identify contingent factors that relate both to the service delivery level of co-production as well as the program level. For instance, McMullin's (2023) framework inclusion of 'structure' could be perceived both to relate to the design of the program as well as the practices and approaches of service delivery, which

involve citizens. Likewise, the emphasis on sufficient resources to engage in co-production cannot realistically be achieved without sufficient resources to run the program itself (either with or without service user participation in service delivery).

Numerous studies have considered social service program sustainability, which can be understood the degree to which a new program is maintained beyond a round of initial funding (Ceptureanu et al., 2018; Savaya et al., 2008; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). Studies in the evaluation and community health literatures have focused particularly on the implementation of health and social service interventions to explore how best to ensure that programs are effective, and are able to be maintained beyond initial rounds of funding/support.

Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) identify a range of factors that can contribute to supporting program sustainability, categorized around program design and implementation, factors in the organizational setting, and factors in the broader community environment. Program design and implementation factors include sufficient resources, training, effectiveness and type and duration of the project. In the organizational setting, the strength of the host organization and integration with existing programs are seen as important. Collaboration and integration with other local organizations and programs is also a factor, to ensure a local support and prevent duplication (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Human resources, including staff involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs, and ensuring that staff are sufficiently skilled to deliver a program, also contribute to an effective organizational setting for sustainable programs. Several studies also highlight the significance of leadership and the existence of a program champion who endorses and advocates for the program, ideally from a senior management position in the organization (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Savaya et al., 2008). Finally, in the broader community, program sustainability is impacted by the local socioeconomic environment and the

level of community participation (thus implicitly highlighting co-production as a factor that positively impacts sustainability). An understanding of the community, including community context, needs and resources, is also crucial (Mancini & Marek, 2004).

Another useful framework suggests that the sustainability of new innovations and programs is influenced by the context (both external political context and internal organizational culture and structure), the innovation itself and how adaptable and effective it is, processes around the innovation (such as monitoring and evaluation) and finally, the capacity to sustain, which relates to funding, human resources and interpersonal processes (Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). As Savaya et al. (2008) found in comparative case studies, program evaluations, effectiveness and having multiple sources of funding were not sufficient conditions for sustainability, while having program champions and integration between a program and other services in the organization did appear to be important. Flexibility is also required at the program level to adapt to changing circumstances: programs are more likely to be sustainable if they undergo modification over time as they learn what is successful or not (Savaya et al., 2008; Mancini & Marek, 2004).

2.2.3 Organizational sustainability and resilience

Considering co-production sustainability between 2016 and 2024, we cannot ignore the enormity of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic starting in 2020, which brings us to the notion of organizational resilience. Resilience relates to the ability of organizations and individuals to react positively to internal or external crises, or to bounce back from shocks (Pape et al., 2020). In other words, resilience is distinct from sustainability more generally as it relates more specifically to the ability to contend with disruptive events that threaten their survival and/or their capacities to continue to serve their target populations. Resilience is about going beyond survival, and drawing upon learning from challenging events to develop capabilities for the future (Vogus &

Sutcliffe, 2007). This can be seen as an organizational capacity that is absorptive (leading to persistence), adaptive (creating incremental adjustments), or transformative (leading to lasting innovation and change) (Béné et al., 2016).

This concept is therefore leveraged in order to consider continuation not just through typical periods, but also through the Covid-19 pandemic – a uniquely disruptive event that required extreme adaptations for programs to be able to continue during periods of lockdown when face-to-face contact was not permitted in most circumstances. Bringing in a resilience perspective improves our understanding of sustainability as a dynamic process that is fundamentally impacted by both organizational conditions and the external environment, including crises. Research on non-profit organizational resilience frequently focuses more on avoiding closure than on continuing to thrive and provide services during and after crises (Searing et al., 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, a proliferation of studies sought to understand how non-profits coped with the leadership, organizational and environmental challenges that ensued (Vito et al., 2023; Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024; McMullin & Raggo, 2020).

3. Research design and methods

This paper is based on the longitudinal analysis of a single case study of a parent and toddler support program administered by a third sector organization in the UK. The program, called Best Start Communities Count, was initiated in 2015 through a grant from the Big Lottery, with the aim of providing family activities and toddler groups to support isolated parents in several deprived neighbourhoods in the city of Sheffield. Despite the fact that the program was originally supported financially for only three years, as of 2024 the program was still in operation and had grown in terms of service offer and activities.

The research takes a longitudinal approach, through the collection of document and interview data at three points in time over the life course of the program. Interviews were undertaken with staff in early 2016 (less than a year after the establishment of the program), October 2019, and May 2024. Two key staff members (who have been employed by the program since its inception) were interviewed at all three points in time, while the 2019 interview was a group interview that included an additional two members of staff (both early years practitioners).

At each stage, interviewees were asked about their approach to service delivery, their involvement of parent volunteers in the program, and opportunities/ challenges of the program. The 2019 and 2024 interviews also focused on questions of change over time, including changes to the program structure, funding, practices of co-production and new/adapted service offers. Furthermore, the 2024 interviews involved extended discussions of adaptation and adjustment to the program through the length of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The possibility to interview the same staff members three times at regular intervals allowed me to access and assess their changing narratives, as well as their perceptions of similarities and differences over time. Before the 2024 interview, I shared an article I had published (McMullin, 2023) about the sustainability of the program's co-production practices based on the first two rounds of fieldwork, which enabled us to discuss the framework I had developed as well as further developments that occurred between 2019 and 2024. The 2024 fieldwork provided the additional aspect of being after the significant upheavals of the Covid-19 pandemic, which presented further challenges relating to these questions of sustainability and resilience. Through these interviews, it became clear that the previous framework developed to assess the sustainability of co-production lacked development and precision to be able to explain sustainability and resilience through turbulent times. In addition to interview transcripts, I analysed organizational documents including

annual reports, project plans and evaluation reports which provided contemporaneous data to triangulate with the ex post facto narratives from interviewees.

Analysis was undertaken using an iterative, abductive approach, whereby I engaged in several rounds of open and theoretical coding (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Open coding allowed me to identify key themes and concepts emerging from the research, while the stages of theoretical coding employed elements of the frameworks of program and co-production sustainability, as well as notions of resilience, as identified through the review of the literature. To identify elements pertaining to program sustainability, I undertook a first round of coding based on the 11 factors in the framework of Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998), with the addition of elements drawn from Savaya et al. (2008) and Mancini & Marek (2004): human resources/ staff involvement and integration, effective collaboration, understanding the community, and flexibility/ program responsiveness.

For co-production sustainability, I coded for structure (framework and design for co-production activities), skills and mutual commitment. This framework was developed in McMullin (2023) through a consideration of elements from the literature on co-production sustainability (Steen and Brandsen, 2020; Ostrom, 2009; Jaspers and Steen, 2019) and through an abductive analysis of Phase 1 and Phase 2 fieldwork. Finally, I examined the coded material, explored emerging themes and engaged in a comparative analysis of themes across the data from the three periods of fieldwork. Through this it became clear that the theme of structure in fact fit primarily within the analysis of *program* sustainability, while the analysis of skills offered no new findings since the 2019 fieldwork (discussed in McMullin, 2023).

4. Analysis

4.1 Program sustainability

4.1.1 Project design and implementation

Effectiveness

"Effectiveness" is a difficult concept to measure in relation to reducing the isolation of parents living in poverty and, as a result, improving outcomes for their children. Success of BSCC is assessed through monitoring and evaluation of the number of families that engage with their activities, as well as the number of parents who receive training to become volunteers. By these metrics, the program has indeed been effective, as staff members described organic growth of the program due to the continuously increasing number of families participating in toddler groups and activities.

> *R2 (2019): We're getting new families constantly.*
>
> *R4: In certain venues, we can be overrun sometimes and at the brink of turning people away, can't we?*
>
> *R1: Especially during the holidays. We regularly get 100.*

This narrative of success through growth in attendance at activities is echoed in recent annual reports, which highlight the increasing number of well attended activities, and successful volunteer training. Furthermore, the 2023 annual report includes an impact case study from a parent and volunteer:

> *"I had been struggling with isolation and was extremely lonely & low, playgroup gave me a chance to speak to other adults, get out of the house and have a little bit of normality back to our lives. Since then, I have returned to work 2 days a week, and attend 3 playgroups a week with my little girl. I did the volunteer training and now support other mums like me! Without the support of Marie and the other mums I don't think I would have had the confidence in myself to go back to work, so I am forever grateful to them. My little girl has come on in leaps & bounds in confidence and her speech."*

Financing, program duration and training

Programs are more likely to be sustainable if they have diverse sources of funding, and if program terms are longer than three years, which offers enough time to bed in and develop the mechanisms for longer term support. BSCC was initially conceived through the development of a bid for a 10-year, £50 million program application which was unsuccessful. Thanks to the program champions' intensive community development approaches, they were able to convince the Big Lottery to fund a smaller scale, 3-year program instead. A second round of Lottery funding was successfully applied for at the end of the first grant. As staff described in interviews in 2024, having had to stop running toddler groups for 18 months during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were able to convince their funder to allow them to apply for yet a third three-year grant. Aside from these larger Lottery grants, the program has increasingly diversified funding through grants from the local authority, health services, children's services, and an increasing involvement in grants for family services.

> *"It's taken a long, long time and a lot of arguing and a lot of lobbying to say, come on now. We are the most engaged project with the local authority in terms of early years, families with very young children. How are you going to help us? Because you said you would two years ago and we're still here. We are on the last run of Lottery. If something doesn't happen now, we're gone, because I can't find... We've been very successful with lots of small bids and I've written funding bids for a long, long time. But getting the big pots of money that fund the salaries and the ongoing revenue costs, they're like rocking horse droppings. They're really hard to get. And really oversubscribed." (R1 2024)*

With the main source of the program's financing due to end in 2025, interviewees described in 2024 the efforts they were going to in order to protect the program from closure, through creatively searching for small contracts to support their activities, as well as developing a funding bid for a foundation that focuses on children, families and reducing poverty. This bid would focus specifically on their volunteer training, to upgrade and expand the program. Training parents to become volunteers to facilitate the toddler groups has always been a key focus of the program, but this training has been relatively informal and unaccredited, but the program manager has ambitions

to support parent volunteers to become qualified, paid early years practitioners, if they want to. I discuss this aspect further in relation to sustainability of co-production.

Flexibility, adaptation, responsivity and resilience

Flexibility has been important an characteristic of BSCC that have enabled the program to adapt to changing circumstances over time. This factor also links with the notion of resilience: the program has managed to adapt and bounce back from the major disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, program adaptability and flexibility has been evidenced in minor ways - such as changing the choices of community buildings in which activities are held in order to attract the greatest participation possible, experimenting with different communication channels for different communities (for instance, some communities are active on social media while others are not), and bouncing back from failure (such as when a DJ failed to turn up for a children's disco).

This adaptive capacity became more important when the Covid-19 pandemic forced the program to cease delivering in-person parent and toddler groups. Rather than simply pausing the group provision, or attempting to translate activities to an online platform (as many similar services at the time did), BSCC staff found new ways to continue delivering family support activities during the pandemic. They started up WhatsApp groups in each of their target areas so that parents could offer each other peer support. Staff also redirected their efforts to creating and delivering craft packs to families. This offered the dual benefit of giving families creative activities to do with their children while stuck at home, and also allowed staff members to check in on vulnerable families. Staff described several instances where delivering craft packs led to them offering on-the-spot mental health support to families, or doing safeguarding checks. This type of support was outside the remit of the program, but staff felt it necessary during a period when social workers and other protective services were not making home visits.

4.4.2 Factors in the organizational setting

Organizational strength and integration with services

The organizational setting for BSCC has been an important component in enabling staff members to continue delivering the program and seeking out further funding. The program grant was initially held by a consortium of local third sector organizations called Sheffield Cubed, which primarily existed to bid for funding and sub-contract to member organizations, so delivering the BSCC program was outside of its normal remit.

> *"We never fit, really [with Sheffield Cubed]. We just fell out of the whole big Fulfilling Lives Better Start, the Big Lottery stuff. So when they decided they were going to close, they offered all the members to tender to deliver this project. So we are now part of Manor Castle Development Trust, which is a better home for us - it's a better fit. The organization has got a focus on early years as well." (R1 2019)*

The change in organizational leadership facilitated program sustainability in several ways. First, the new organizational setting helped the program to better connect with the community that it serves, by relocating staff from Sheffield city centre to the Manor neighbourhood where many of their activities were based. Second, this also enabled the program to better link up with other existing MCDT services, offering better integration with other services and activities for parents and families, preventing duplication and also allowing staff to better signpost service users to other relevant services.

Program champions, leadership and staff involvement

Leadership has been identified as a significant factor enabling program sustainability and co-production. BSCC has benefited from a lack of staff turnover over the entire almost 10 years of its existence (two of the staff members interviewed at all three points of fieldwork have been employed by the program since its inception). The commitment of staff members has been evidenced in the amount of time they spend on the program (most staff work part-time but

frequently put in more hours than they are compensated for) and their dedication to continuing the program, despite the challenges of short-term contracts.

> *"If your heart's not in it, go out that door. I don't want them. I know it sounds… not controlling. But Sarah and I were here from day 1. And it's our baby. I'm very precious about it. I would lay my life down. Sarah would lay her life down. For any of our families. The other staff, to a certain extent, would. But there's that little bit of hold back. But it's not the same as it is for Sarah and I. So I get quite protective of the families and the project of, if your heart's not in it and you've not got the right attitude." (R2 2024).*

Having program leaders who feel so strongly about the long-term sustainability of the program is both a strength and drawback – this has certainly been instrumental in supporting its development thus far; however, such a sentiment that BSCC is "our baby" would make sustainability particularly difficult if these champions were to leave the program. However, the commitment of program leaders has also been recognized and appreciated by senior staff at the organization that owns the contract for BSCC, and its strong integration within the mission and ethos of this organization means there is widespread support for its continuation.

Having service delivery staff who are sufficiently skilled, committed and involved in the program is also key to sustainability. Beyond the program champions, the early years practitioners who are responsible for co-facilitating toddler groups with parent volunteers have also contributed to ensuring that the program is both well received by parents and effective in achieving its aims.

> *"We've been consistent with activities, I think, as well. They know they're going to get decent activities. They're going to get lovely food. And they know us. They're comfortable with us." (R4 2019)*

> *"We even have parents, don't we, say, 'Well, who's going to be there? Will I know anybody? If you're not there, what will I do?' You will know somebody else there. I get that a lot, don't I? In Manor area. If I know I'm not going to be at a group, I say, 'But it will be [R2]. [R2] will be there.' Or [R4]." (R3, 2019)*

Staff are deeply involved in decisions about the program and are committed to maintaining its mission and values. They are also instrumental in building relationships and trust with parents, which links to the elements of effectiveness and community participation.

4.4.3 Factors in the broader community environment

In the broader context, socioeconomic and political considerations, an understanding of the community, and sufficient community participation are proposed to be important contributors to program sustainability. The role of community participation implies that co-production is itself a contributor to program sustainability, which will be considered in the following section. In relation to the former – for BSCC, the socioeconomic and political context have in fact been relatively unfavourable for the program's sustainability. As interviewees described at all three points, the neighbourhoods in which they work are classified as some of the most deprived in the area, with neighbourhoods that have historically had much needed service provision withdrawn through public sector austerity.

> *"The local authority have been watching with keen interest of what happens with this programme. There are children's centres all around the city, as there are elsewhere. Children's centres are reducing. We had 36. We've now got 17 and it's likely it will be reduced again to seven. So each children's centre has a stakeholder forum, which is supposed to be made up of – well is, it is made up of the wider sort of public sector infrastructure, such as health visiting, midwifery schools, and members of the community. But they don't work. No one comes to them. They've not necessarily succeeded in their community engagement at all. So we now have three areas, our community partnerships are taking on the role of the children's centre stakeholder group as well." (R1 2016)*

The turbulence of the British political environment in recent decades and the lack of sustained public policy and financial support for social programs put programs such as BSCC at significant risk of closure after initial grant terms. Nevertheless, the program has persisted despite these challenges, due in large part to the strength of factors related to program design and organizational setting discussed in the previous section.

4.2 Sustainability of co-production

Co-production sustainability necessitates a program that is sustained, so that staff and service users/ volunteers have consistency of programming and activities to contribute to, but a sustainable program that engages in co-production does not necessarily translate to sustainable co-production. There is a further need for mutual commitment between stakeholders (McMullin, 2023; Steen and Brandsen, 2020), as well as flexibility and adaptability of co-production practices to changing circumstances.

4.2.1 Mutual commitment

Mutual commitment is demonstrated not solely through continued participation of the same participants, but also in recognizing the natural turnover of participants and including efforts to recruit new co-producers. One of the keys to the longevity of the BSCC program and continued involvement of parent co-producers can be directly linked to the commitment of professionals to ensure that the program maintains its ethos and practices of parent volunteering. The consistency of program leadership has been key in not only ensuring the program continues but also in fostering a continued vision of parent volunteering.

Maintaining continuity of parent volunteers has been less simple, not because of a lack of commitment to or interest in the program, but often because of the program has been successful in its aims of reducing isolation and improving parents' confidence. This was a point of both pride and concern expressed by interviewees in both 2019 and 2024:

> *"Because of the training, we lost a few to higher education, jobs. But we've always had the flow of them coming, coming back. I've got now, we've finished a cohort just before Easter, and we've got people going, 'When are you doing it next?' And I'm like, just hang fire. […] And every time monitoring went in [for a contract], it was... They wanted to know the retention. It's like, we've still got this many. This is how many we've... I mean, I can't think how, over the project, over the project it must be a couple of hundred if not more." (R2 2024)*

One of the new developments regarding co-production in the most recent fieldwork was that the program had strategically deployed some of its funding to be able to hire two new members of staff, who were recruited from amongst the parent volunteers.

> *"What we decided to do was put the advert just to our volunteers first, before we went out to open recruitment. Lottery agreed - because I know Lottery can get very funny about that. But I said, 'Look, we've got all these volunteers. We need to give them the first opportunity and priority to get one of these posts. If we don't recruit, for whatever reason, or they don't apply, then we'll go out. But I am determined that we are going to our volunteers.'" (R1 2024)*

This approach shows the degree to which co-production is put forward by staff members: the benefit of parents as experts by experience is valued in their role as volunteers, as well as through developing these volunteers to become paid members of staff. Staff explained that engaging parent volunteers has had multiple motivations – to deliver activities more cost efficiently, to benefit from parents' opinions and expertise, and most importantly to increase parents' skills and confidence to help them improve their own lives. Hiring some of these volunteers into paid work becomes an extension of that co-production philosophy.

4.2.2 Adaptation

Sustaining co-production has meant being flexible to the needs and limitations of parent volunteers and adapting accordingly. The original design of the program was centred around up-skilling parent volunteers to co-facilitate toddler groups, with the intention that these groups would eventually be self-sustaining without professional input. As staff described in 2019, this plan of parent-only group facilitation turned out to be unrealistic, as staff quickly learned that the parent volunteers needed much more support than anticipated. Rather than abandoning the plan of co-production wholesale, the program worked with parents to determine which activities and responsibilities were within their comfort level – for instance, parents continued co-facilitating

toddler groups, but staff maintained responsibilities for bank accounts, keys to community buildings, and other administrative details.

One of the ways that approaches to co-production have been adapted has been in the governance of the program. From the outset, BSCC has involved parents in the governance of community partnerships that make strategic decisions about program spending and activities in their neighbourhoods. The purpose of these partnerships has been in part for parents to make decisions about small neighbourhood budgets to run activities (such as events and health promotion activities). This approach to co-production has continued, however, the structure of the community partnerships was changed between 2019 and 2024, as program staff felt that parents' voices were being diminished by the professionals involved in the community partnerships, so the structure was changed to include parents only.

> *R2 (2024): We've just changed them to parent panels, parent partnerships. One of the things that they do is they also can fundraise but they can inform... It's a little bridge between us and the local authority and helping the local authority to inform what they do.*
>
> *R1: They still tell us what it is they want and what they don't want. They can be very vocal. We still follow that principle. We're still led by what families want.*

As the section on program sustainability discussed, the continuation of BSCC through the Covid-19 pandemic meant that through 2020 and most of 2021, the program could not operate in the same modes as it had been from 2015. Flexibility and adaptation has related both to program factors, as well as adaptation to approaches of volunteer involvement in service delivery. As it was necessary to cease the delivery of parent and toddler groups, during lockdown, sustaining co-production activities was simply not tenable during this time. Volunteer involvement thus shifted during towards moderating the WhatsApp groups that had been established in the absence of in-person activities. This had the benefits of relieving some of the pressure on staff members and ensuring that someone could keep tabs on vulnerable and isolated parents.

"There would be like 300 messages in one day, because a conversation starts... Well, you can't... And you have to moderate it, because if someone was really in trouble and putting it on there and someone wasn't keeping an eye on it, we'd have missed something. So the volunteers were helping to moderate the WhatsApp groups, as well as [R2] and [R3] and [R4]. [...] But the volunteers were really good at that. And they flagged anything - 'Bit worried about so-and-so, you might want to just follow up.'" (R1 2024)

Both the shift from a plan to transition to parent-only delivery to continuing to provide significant support to parent volunteers (in the first year of the program), and the move away from a reliance on parent volunteers almost entirely during the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate the ability of the program to adapt co-production approaches to internal needs and the external environment. This meant that co-production practices were in fact temporarily halted in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, but the resumption of volunteer activities was made a priority to restart as soon as it was safe to do so.

The program was able to reinstate co-production approaches post pandemic lockdowns because of the multiple intersecting program sustainability factors that have made parent volunteering a cornerstone of the program – namely, the commitment of staff, the supportive organizational environment, and the strength of links in and understanding of the community in which the program operates. One way that the program adapted was in stopping home delivery of fruit and vegetables packs in favour of pick-up points, in order to encourage families to slowly become more comfortable leaving their homes after long, stressful periods of isolation. Likewise, the parent and toddler groups were slowly reintroduced, though the long period without volunteer activities meant that many volunteers were no longer interested in being involved (due to children ageing out of the program, getting into work or other personal reasons).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the identification of enablers of program sustainability, we might not predict that BSCC would be successfully sustained over the longer term, which would have therefore thwarted longer term co-production efforts. In many ways the program is an anomaly - the political and socioeconomic context are not favourable towards the long-term continuation of community programs, and it has managed against the odds to twice renew its three-year primary funding source. Indeed, another program that was included in the first two stages of fieldwork on the sustainability of co-production has ceased to exist. The question therefore remains, how can we understand the continued sustainability of co-production practices within this program and organizational setting?

Three of the most significant factors appear to be the continuity of leadership of program champions, the involvement and commitment of all staff to the program, and the flexibility and adaptability of approaches. As noted in McMullin (2023), sustainable co-production requires mutual commitment between staff and citizen co-producers in order to continue. For BSCC, the dedication of staff members to ensuring the program continues delivering benefits to the local community through an approach of parent involvement has meant that co-production continues to be a fixture. It is difficult to know if this would necessarily have been the case had their been turnover of staff, particularly the program champions, over the past nine years. It is possible that the program design (based around co-production) was strong enough that other staff would necessarily have continued the approach of parent involvement, but the commitment of staff towards this end cannot be understated.

In terms of flexibility, while BSCC has made community engagement and the co-delivery of toddler groups between paid staff and parent volunteers a cornerstone of the program (elements

which corroborate the argument that community participation enables program sustainability), there has also been an openness to adapting or temporarily abandoning co-production approaches when necessary. The initial design of the program, based around an idea to begin by co-facilitating toddler groups between paid staff and parent volunteers until they could be self-sustaining *without* staff involvement, was quickly discovered to be undesirable and unrealistic. Through trial and error, it was discovered which tasks that parent volunteers felt able, willing and interested in undertaking (co-facilitating toddler groups, and taking part in community partnerships) and which they did not (budget management, much of the administrative work, and higher risk tasks such as being responsible for keys and money).

Flexibility also allowed the program to engage in adaptive resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, during which traditional co-production activities (parent co-facilitation) were ceased during lockdown, but volunteers continued to support the program by acting as moderators on parent WhatsApp groups to ensure that families were staying safe. This meant that post-pandemic, the program was able to leverage the relationships, links and goodwill it had maintained through Covid to restart toddler groups (though this did take some time and patience).

Bringing in an analysis of program sustainability and resilience creates a more comprehensive framework for considering co-production sustainability: while previous studies identified the need for skills, resources, and a structure that can facilitate co-production over the longer term, it was less clear what this meant in practice in the context of a long-term social service. Furthermore, the resilience perspective enables us to better understand the adaptation of program delivery and the co-production approaches that characterize these (or not) are able to withstand crises and environmental shocks (or not). There is a crucial need for future studies that consider the sustainability of co-production in a range of service settings.

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