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Leading Co-Production: The Case of Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's Community Volunteer Scheme

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Introduction

This case study illustrates the shifting leadership and control in co-production of preventative services by a voluntary scheme in HFRS (Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Services). More specifically, it demonstrates how citizen co-producers can exercise some control and lead initiatives despite HFRS's rigid structure and its command and control culture.

The UK fire and rescue services have become a victim of their own success in achieving their core organizational goals, namely reducing fires. This success together with two other factors, namely, a vision of a fire service that is more closely integrated with other emergency services (e.g., ambulance, police, health and social care services), and the UK government's harsh austerity measures after the 2008 global financial crisis imposed an average budget reduction of 28% on the fire and rescue services between 2010 and 2015 (National Audit Office, 2014). The case of HFRS's pioneering CVS (Community Volunteer Scheme) illustrates leadership in co-production practice, as a long-term budgetary austerity turned a small complementary service into a core service provided and co-produced by volunteers.

How the Scheme is Organized

The CVS was launched in January 2008, initially in response to the then UK's Labour Government policy of promoting social inclusion, because volunteers were expected to enhance engagement with difficult to reach communities, especially concerning fire prevention initiatives. From 2010 onwards, the purpose of the scheme changed as a result of the austerity measures by the UK government that cut the budget for preventative services by 47.1% in real terms. This inadvertently created a strategic role for the scheme to deliver a core service. Volunteers receive extensive training to undertake home safety checks and other specialized training (Hertfordshire County Council.gov.uk). Currently the scheme has 105 regular volunteers who dedicate at least 6 hours of their time each month and deliver a wide range of preventative services such as home fire safety checks, arson patrols, attending school fairs, working alongside trading standards officers from the municipality and other specialized services (Hertfordshire County Council.gov.uk). In 2014/15 the CVS provided 31,000 hours of volunteer working time, providing a range of services of which home safety visits and street patrols feature most highly. Their work also interlinks with trading standards inspections, public events and educational campaigns, which means that the scheme has grown into a core service on which the HFRS heavily relies.

Leading Co-Production in Practice

The first challenge managers faced was how to set up a volunteering scheme on which they could not impose the control mechanisms used for regular employees of their hierarchical force. Eventually, they decided that it should be largely independent from the mainstream service with one officer (the scheme manager) providing the link between paid staff and volunteers. The lists of required jobs come down from the scheme manager, who collects them

from local fire stations from across the county, but how and when they are carried out is organized locally and facilitated by an experienced volunteer with no formal authority other than a nominal title. This structure effectively enabled some distribution of leadership within the co-production process. Both the scheme manager and volunteers perceived that the delivery process was controlled by fire service protocols, rules and structures, so when we asked the volunteers who was leading, they all named the scheme manager. Interestingly, the scheme manager said he could only exercise his positional power over the paid staff but relied heavily on soft skills, which he said were “basically the opposite of all I had learnt in leadership development courses”.

Volunteers also felt they just carried out orders because preventative services are pre-designed and controlled by detailed protocols, but in fact they took leading roles in some situations. The volunteers had joined the scheme “to give something back to the society”, but all were surprised by the scale and scope of the unexpected physical and mental health problems, isolation and other problems they came across. A volunteer told us: “No matter what you’re doing, your knowledge and your sensibility tell you there’s something else here. So you address that issue as well. . . . We do use our initiatives”. Some volunteers felt that they worked as “operating in a bubble”, a reflection of both their limited interactions with the mainstream service provided by paid staff and the inherent tension between a hierarchical structure where the professional retains control over the design and delivery of the service, and a semi self-organizing “light” structure which facilitated the sharing of leadership roles between regular and citizen co-producers. To deliver a core fire prevention service, volunteers would follow the rigid protocol designed by professionals but in the “light structured” part of their work when they entered people’s homes they would change the nature of the service significantly if they came across unexpected issues. In these unpredictable situations, volunteers take the lead using their own judgments and “making a difference”. This was the unpredictable, uncategorized dimension of a pre-designed core service that enabled volunteers to lead a particular part of the service process, which in practice required a flexible approach to leadership. However, both regular and citizen co-producers underplayed how leadership would shift between them depending on situations. Volunteers tended to downplay their considerable influence on the co-production process and put it down to their “spirit of limitless time”, which they felt the regular firefighters lacked. In practice, this meant that citizen-led co-production could provide a holistic approach which necessitated and put in effect a more distributed leadership. **Conclusion**

This case study highlights the dynamic nature of co-production where both regular and citizen co-producers take the lead, even if citizen co-producers do not acknowledge their leading roles. The CVS has effectively and successfully co-produced a core service and in the process both regular and citizen co-producers have taken leading roles and developed unique understating of the needs of their communities. Yet, despite its obvious potential benefits to a cash strapped public service provider, the scheme’s future remains uncertain and might even get closed down despite governments’ new integrated service policy, which would benefit highly from it.

References

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