



Promoting fairness, inclusion and equity through co-production

IMAS was founded to tackle the lack of opportunities for disabled people to be equal members in their community sports clubs.

IMAS promotes the Mixed Ability model which enables disabled people to take part in mainstream sport without being separated or classified. Alongside practical sports provision, IMAS delivers accessible training with local coaches, clubs, national governing bodies and health and social care professionals. This training is co-produced and co-delivered by the IMAS Trainers who share their lived experience of disability.

Co-production is an approach to different groups working together in “equal partnership for equal benefits”¹. Co-production leads to more equitable outcomes, particularly through the inclusion of groups typically excluded from decision making². It involves, for example, respecting, valuing and blending different types of knowledge, dismantling power imbalances and making sure ideas and outcomes are relevant to those that are affected^{1,2,3}. Co-production started in health and social contexts but is now being embraced across many areas including sport.

This research summary outlines how co-production is embedded in IMAS’ work and the impacts it has. The key findings are:

- Co-production has been meaningfully embedded within the IMAS ethos since its foundation and has evolved to become interwoven across the organisation’s activities.
- At the core of this is the IMAS Trainers’ Group, and the activities it carries out, which informs and is informed by the core co-production values of IMAS: as an engine for growth, progress and change; through building social connections and relationships; empowering and building autonomy; and challenging power hierarchies.
- IMAS’ way of working leads to an environment which is safe and welcoming, where support needs are asserted and met, skills and confidence developed and members feel respected, included and represented.
- This creates positive feedback loops where co-production produces environments and behaviours conducive to facilitating further co-production.
- As with all IMAS’ work this leads to profound impacts beyond the organisation including shifting perceptions around disability and social difference more broadly, and promotion of fairness, inclusion and equity.

Co-production in IMAS

Research around co-production highlights some key aspects, which are critical to it being meaningful and not tokenistic. These align well with the four key co-production values that are evident and embedded in IMAS' work.

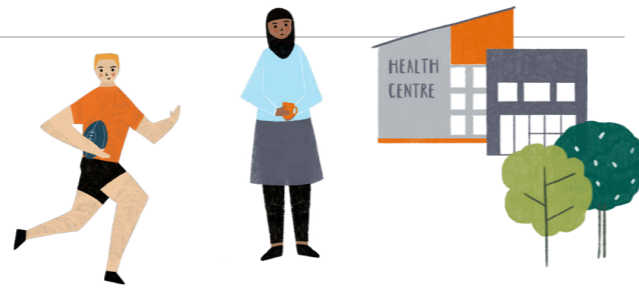
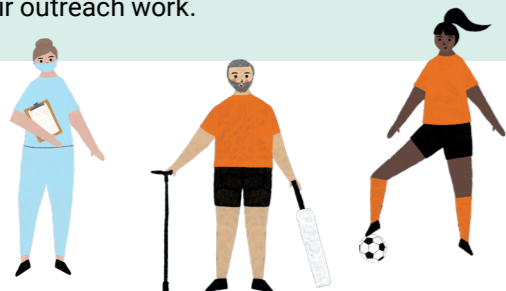
Growth, progress and change



Co-production should be implemented as continually evolving process². In line with this, IMAS functions as an "engine for change", constantly evolving to better implement and promote social justice.

IMAS continually reflects on its internal structure and language used. For example, the 'Inclusion in Sports Class' was renamed as the 'IMAS Trainers' Group' to reflect the Trainers' positions as experts in their own experience and sharers of that knowledge. Mark and Martino moved from an instructive 'educator' role to 'facilitator' roles, providing structure for the Group.

IMAS also strives for progress and change externally. A key aim of engagement with other groups is to push for change, to challenge perceptions about social differences and disability, and improve social cohesion to create more inclusive, fair, and equitable spaces. The IMAS Trainers expressed sentiments about "changing the world" being an important factor of their outreach work.



Social connections and relationship-building



A core feature of successful co-production involves the building and maintenance of social networks and relationships³. In line with this, IMAS builds community networks with external organisations, and fosters social connections within the group.

IMAS has developed a robust and expansive network across the disability, education, healthcare and sports sectors to which they are able to spread awareness of co-production values. Trainers describe building social networks through delivering presentations, talks and training, hosting placements, and by representing IMAS at discussion panels and fairs. These outreach events allow Trainers to gain new perspectives and understandings from the people they meet, whilst IMAS plays a similar role of expanding understandings for the groups they work with.

IMAS Trainer Dan recalled that, at a recent SEND panel, he was able to provide support to others that are facing similar obstacles he faced when he was younger. He didn't have this type of support and was told he "wouldn't get anywhere". Dan hopes his stories can help others to aspire to more than what they are told they can do.

Within the Trainers' Group, social connections promote co-production and other positive effects. For example, Ella explained that before getting involved with IMAS, she didn't speak to anyone outside her family, whilst Paul described the Trainers Group itself as feeling "like a family". Developing these social bonds promotes trust and respect, which are important in co-production processes like communal decision-making and reciprocity³.

Empowering and building autonomy



Successful co-production should strive for social justice by empowering individuals and groups traditionally excluded from shaping agendas^{1,2}. IMAS empowers people by ensuring information and discussion is accessible. This builds Trainers' autonomy, independence, and skillsets and creates spaces of mutual respect.

The emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity enables Trainers to be equally involved in decision-making regardless of support needs, thus promoting more meaningful, equitable, and empowering co-production. Dan described how the Group ensures that everything is understood by accommodating for those with different communication support needs, including accessible formats, British Sign Language, easy-reading, and rephrasing wording to aid understanding.



Challenging power hierarchies



Meaningful co-production takes a radical egalitarian approach which aims to disrupt power hierarchies⁴. IMAS brings together different forms of knowledge and adopts communal decision-making processes to challenge top-down power structures. Trainers highlight that a fundamental feature of the IMAS co-production structure is that they have a say in decision-making; everyone is heard, and their opinions are valued equally.

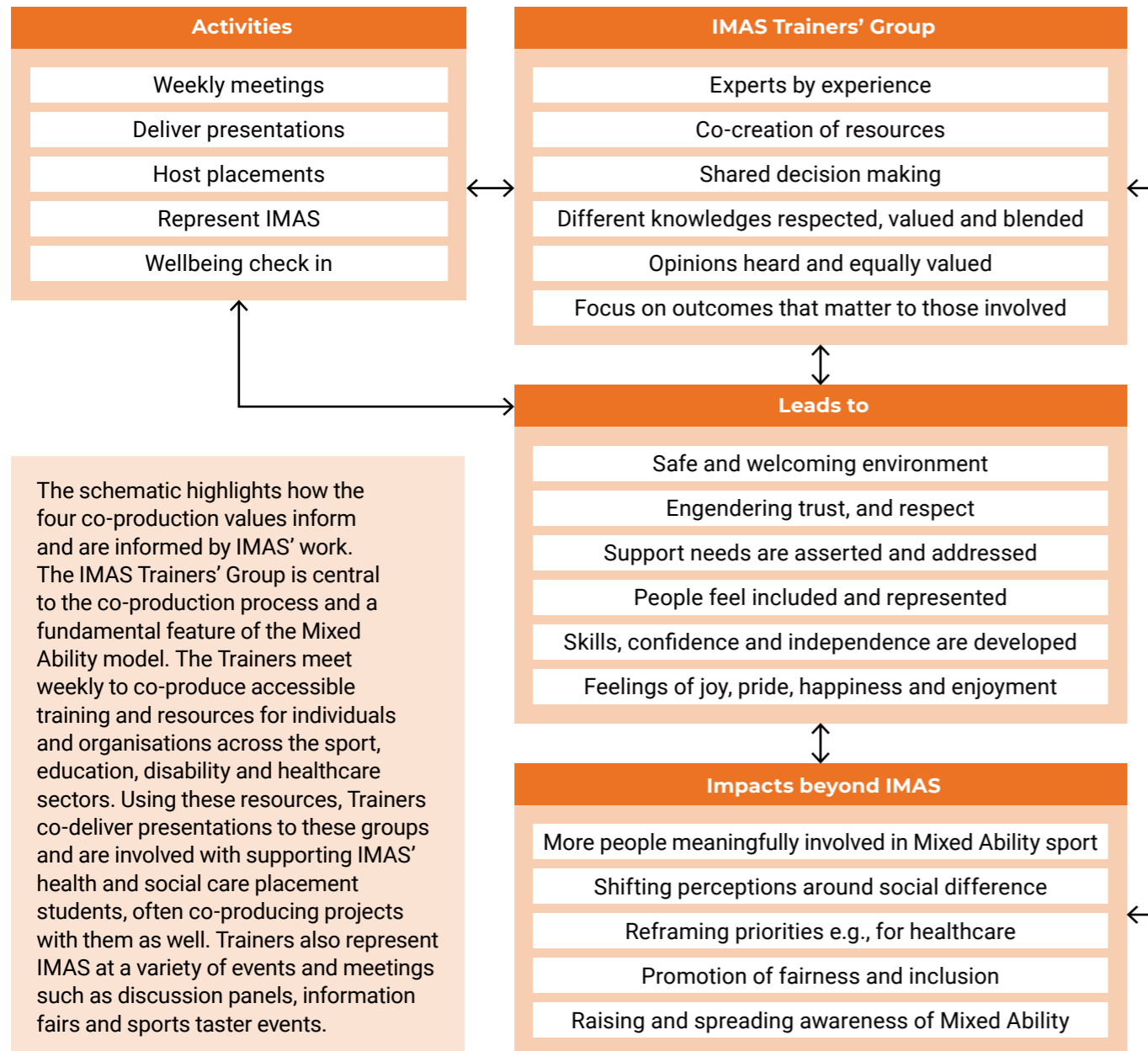
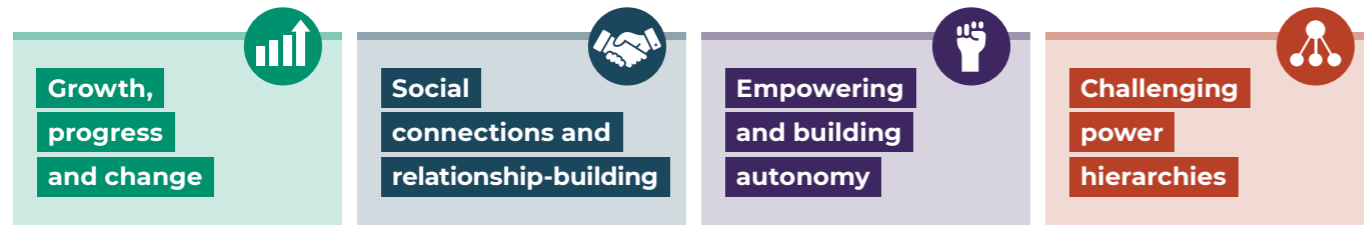
The Trainer presentations are a significant tool for 'flipping' power dynamics, particularly within healthcare contexts. IMAS directly enacts change in these contexts by providing placement opportunities for healthcare students and delivering presentations to healthcare practitioners. When delivering a presentation, Trainers are understood as experts in their own experiences, with healthcare practitioners being there to learn. IMAS Trainer Jack asserts that they can demonstrate the type of support they need by sharing their experiences with healthcare practitioners, social workers and sports clubs. In this way, the Trainers challenge traditional knowledge hierarchies and bring together different forms of lived experience, knowledge and understanding:

“ It's important for social workers and health staff to hear that, actually, you really need to hear what people are saying about their lives and not make your own judgement on that, and take it that what they're telling you is real and true. You don't know better because you've had a textbook on it. ”

Bradford Community Learning Disability Team

IMAS also considers the way in which power hierarchies function within the organisation, and how this might cause inequities or work against co-production. Having identified a gap in Trainers' representation in governance within the organisation, IMAS is currently considering ways in which it can increase disabled representation in this area without being tokenistic.

What does this mean for IMAS' work practically?



Co-production is firmly embedded in the Group. Decision making is shared, and different knowledges are blended. The Trainers bring their lived experience of disability to the resources and all input and contributions are respected, valued and heard equally so that the focus is on outcomes that are really relevant to those involved. By amplifying the Trainers' voices, IMAS creates positive change by shifting perceptions about social differences and promoting fairness and inclusion.

The IMAS Trainers explained that this makes them feel valued, included, and represented. It has enabled them to build confidence in asserting their voice and opinions, and also supported development of self-confidence. They expressed greater confidence in going places and doing things alone, even in areas where they have previously been made to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Trainers felt included and represented by the work they do, and many expressed feelings of joy, pride, happiness and enjoyment from being able to get involved in sports they had previously been excluded from or hadn't thought to try. This positively impacts their motivation and ability to contribute to the Group, creating a positive feedback loop.



an output of co-production – having been developed collaboratively as a response to consultation during the COVID pandemic – and also as a valuable tool for promoting further co-production by fostering trust, respect, and support amongst the group. This again forms a positive feedback loop to Trainers feeling they can contribute and assert their needs.

This way of working also creates a welcoming atmosphere for new voices and ideas, as observed by a physiotherapy placement student:

“ [IMAS has] helped me a lot with my confidence, because in everyday life I don't have that confidence... it's made me understand that I can do these things.”

Dan, IMAS Trainer

A 'wellbeing check-in' is embedded into the weekly meetings to provide a safe and inclusive space for Trainers to discuss issues bothering them and share experiences that might provide helpful support to others facing similar obstacles. This aspect of the Group in particular, makes the environment feel safe and welcoming, and engenders trust and respect amongst the Trainers. The check-ins operate as both

“ I have come to see this organisation as a place of comfort and acceptance, where my voice is heard and where I felt like I could express my opinions in a safe place without fear of judgement.”

Physiotherapy placement student

As with all of IMAS work, this combination of activities and values has profound impacts beyond the organization for those they are working with. The organization is shifting perceptions around disability and social difference more broadly, reframing priorities through amplifying the voices of experts by experience, raising awareness of the Mixed Ability model and promoting fairness and inclusion for a more equitable society.



Mixed Ability began when people who were previously excluded from making everyday decisions about their lives, decided to challenge discriminating assumptions about what they could do.

The IMAS Trainers' Group includes experts with lived experience of disability, who meet every week to share their experiences, and co-produce and co-deliver training, a crucial part of the IMAS work.

Mixed Ability goes beyond co-production, employing the voices, experiences and skills of our participants to co-deliver training, challenge power hierarchies, and remove the barriers to participation in sport and society.



Nathan Webb promoting the expansion of Mixed Ability sport in Manchester with GM Mayor Andy Burnham.

“ We recognise that co-production involves us, and we want to get involved and make changes in things that affect us. ”



mixedabilitysports.org/co-production-and-systemic-change

Sign our Mixed Ability Manifesto



MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING



Mixed Ability recognises the right of everyone to participate in community sports without being separated, classified or labelled.

EQUAL PARTICIPATION



Mixed Ability is a social movement within sports, actively promoting inclusion and equality through a sense of belonging and membership to a group, team or club.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS



In breaking down these barriers Mixed Ability Sport creates opportunities for marginalised communities to challenge the established status quo and affirm their right to equal participation.

RULES AND REGULATIONS



Mixed Ability Sports follows the same rules and regulations of mainstream sports without adaptations, and only minor adjustments to take into account individual participant needs.

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS



Sport has the power to transform lives making us healthier and happier, and yet there are people excluded or segregated because of stigma, prejudice or personal perceptions of their capability.

INCLUSION AND EQUALITY



Too often sport is seen as the prerogative of elite athletes or established majorities. Grassroots sport can also be responsible for excluding minorities allowing access only to charitable or segregated activities.



Conclusion

Co-production has been meaningfully embedded within the IMAS ethos since its foundation and has evolved to become interwoven across the organisation.

The way the IMAS Trainers' Group functions, and the activities it carries out, are informed by the core co-production values of IMAS as an engine for growth, progress and change, building social connections and relationships, empowering and building autonomy, and challenging power hierarchies.

This leads to an environment which is safe and welcoming, where support needs are asserted and met, skills and confidence developed and members feeling respected, included and represented. This creates a positive feedback loop where co-production produces environments and behaviours conducive to facilitating further co-production. As with all IMAS' work this leads to profound impacts beyond the organisation including shifting perceptions around disability and social difference more broadly, and promotion of fairness, inclusion and equity.

Methods

This resource was developed and co-produced by Nifty Sustainability with IMAS and the IMAS Trainers Group. Research was carried out by Sophie Marley. An initial focus group was carried out during the weekly Trainers' meeting and subsequent interviews were conducted with IMAS Directors, Mark and Martino, and with IMAS Trainers Obaid, Michael, Tom, Dan, Ella, Jack and Sam. IMAS Trainers are referred to by name throughout, and all participants were informed of the research process and purpose and agreed to be interviewed, observed and named. Secondary data was also analysed, including Trainer profiles and blog posts, and student placement journals.



niftysustainability.org.uk [@NiftySust](https://twitter.com/NiftySust)

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2. Smith, B., Williams, O., Bone, L. and the Moving Social Work Co-production Collective. 2022. Co-production: A resource to guide co-producing research in the sport, exercise, and health sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. 15(2), pp.159-187.
3. Leeds Social Sciences Institute. 2022. Co-production Research Toolkit. [online]. Available from: lssi.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/65/2022/12/UoL-LSSI-Co-production-Toolkit-Accessible-1.pdf
4. O'Reilly, M., Wiltshire, G., Kiyimba, N. and Harrington, D. 2023. "Is Everybody Comfortable?" Thinking Through Co-design Approaches to Better Support Girls' Physical Activity in Schools. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. 15(2), pp. 248-263.

