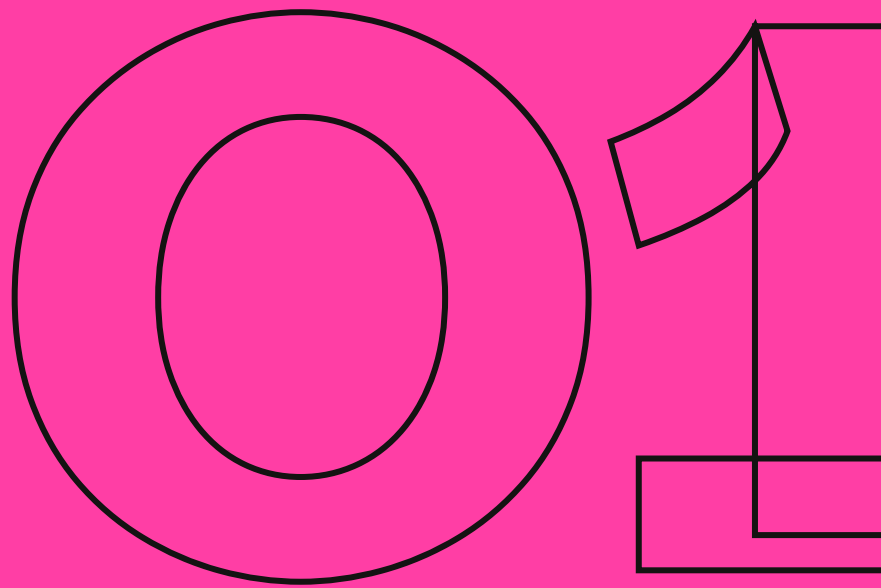




Co-design:

more than asking

people what they think

A practical discussion guide to sharing influence, designing with people and knowing when you are really co-designing.

Consultation can be useful. Co-design can be useful. The trouble starts when we call one the other.

Co-design is about influence, not sticky notes.

Co-design means working alongside people affected by an issue to understand it, shape what needs to change, develop possibilities and test what happens next.

People are not invited in to decorate a decision. They have meaningful influence over how the decision is made.

There is no single perfect recipe. Different projects need different levels of participation. Sometimes an organisation genuinely needs to inform people. Sometimes consultation is the right tool. Sometimes people should lead.

The important thing is being honest about where influence sits.

Consultation

“Here is something we are considering. What do you think?” Useful when there is still genuine room to respond, but the basic frame may already exist.

Co-design

“Let’s understand the challenge and shape the response together.” People affected have influence before the important choices have hardened.

THE QUICKEST TEST

If participants disagree with your original idea, can the project meaningfully change direction? If not, it probably is not co-design.

Not everything needs to be co-designed

ProjectChange uses this simple spectrum to help teams be more precise about what they are asking people to do.

APPROACH	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Inform	“We need you to know what is happening and why.” There is little or no influence over the decision.
Consult	“We have a proposal or question. Tell us what you think before we decide.”
Involve	“Stay with us through the process. Help us understand what is working and what is not.”
Co-design	“Work alongside us to define the challenge, develop options and influence what gets built.”
Community-led	“The people affected hold the agenda and decision-making power; our role is to enable, resource or support.”

Higher participation is not automatically better.

Co-design takes time, relationships and real room to change things. Calling a short feedback session “co-design” does not make it more ethical. It mostly makes the biscuits work harder.

DISCUSS

Which approach best describes your last “co-design” project? Would participants describe it the same way?

Discover. Define. Develop. Deliver. Together.

The Design Council's Double Diamond is useful because it reminds us that good design opens up before it narrows down. Co-design adds an important question at every stage: **who gets to shape this?**

1

Discover

Understand people's lives, the system around them and the actual problem. Do not start by testing the solution you already want.

2

Define

Make sense of what you have learned together. Agree what challenge matters and what success should mean.

3

Develop

Create more than one possibility. Prototype, challenge assumptions and let different kinds of expertise collide usefully.

4

Deliver

Test what is real, not just what looks good in a workshop. Keep participants connected to decisions, changes and learning.

And then?

Co-design is rarely a straight line. New evidence may send you backwards. Testing may reveal a different problem. Iteration is not failure; it is the process doing its job.

Seven questions that reveal whether influence is real

1. Who set the question?

Could participants challenge the brief itself, or only answer it?

3. Who gets paid?

Whose time counts as professional expertise, and whose is expected for free?

5. Who is missing?

Who cannot access the process because of timing, format, confidence, language, money or previous harm?

2. What is genuinely undecided?

Be specific about the decisions people can influence.

4. Who can say no?

Can participants reject an idea without being treated as difficult or unhelpful?

6. Who makes the final call?

Co-design does not require pretending everyone has identical authority. It does require honesty about where authority sits.

7. Can people see what changed?

If participants never hear what happened to their contribution, the process ends with extraction rather than accountability.

The workshop is the visible bit. The conditions matter more.

The point of co-design is not agreement. It is better understanding, better choices and shared influence over what gets made.

-
- ✓ **Clarity:** people know the purpose, boundaries and decisions in play.
-
- ✓ **Access:** timing, format, language, technology, travel and support do not quietly decide who can participate.
-
- ✓ **Payment:** lived experience and community expertise are valued fairly.
-
- ✓ **Relationships:** enough time exists to build trust, not simply harvest answers.
-
- ✓ **Multiple ways to contribute:** speaking in a room is not treated as the only valid form of participation.
-
- ✓ **Iteration:** ideas can be tried, criticised and changed without anyone losing face.
-
- ✓ **Decision transparency:** everyone knows what they can influence and what sits elsewhere.
-
- ✓ **Feedback:** people hear what happened, including when their suggestion was not taken forward and why.
-

A 15-minute co-design health check

Choose one project that you currently call co-design. Mark each statement yes, partly or not yet. The point is the conversation, not the score.

STATEMENT	YES	PARTLY	NOT YET
People affected were involved before the solution was decided.	☐	☐	☐
They can influence the problem definition, not only comment on options.	☐	☐	☐
We are clear about what is fixed and what is genuinely open.	☐	☐	☐
Participation is accessible and appropriately paid or resourced.	☐	☐	☐
We have more than one route for people to contribute.	☐	☐	☐
Participants stay connected to testing, decisions and what happens next.	☐	☐	☐
We can point to at least one decision that could change because of their involvement.	☐	☐	☐

THEN ASK

What is the smallest change we could make now to give people more meaningful influence?

Good co-design is visible in the decisions, not the photographs.

A wall of Post-its can be part of co-design. It can also be a wall of Post-its.

Need help designing the process?

ProjectChange works with organisations on co-design, participation, facilitation and turning lived experience into practical change. We can help build the process, facilitate it with you, or challenge what you already have.

projectchange.scot/work-with-us →

USEFUL SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Design Council, The Double Diamond: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver. designcouncil.org.uk/resources/the-double-diamond

Design Council, Framework for Innovation, including people-centred design, collaboration and iteration. designcouncil.org.uk/resources/framework-for-innovation

Scottish Government, National Care Service and co-design, describing working alongside people who use and deliver services. gov.scot

This is a ProjectChange discussion guide, not a universal accreditation standard. The right participation method depends on the decision, the people affected and the power genuinely available.