

Co-design in Practice

**Applying co-design in
everyday work**



About this Resource

Co-design is a powerful approach that centers the voices and lived experiences of the people most impacted by the decisions we make. When done well, it leads to stronger relationships, deeper understanding, and better, more inclusive outcomes.

At Karis Disability Services, co-design reflects our commitment to walking alongside people, listening well, and shaping work, decisions, plans, and outcomes together, rather than for others.

While co-design is something many of us value, it can sometimes feel unclear how to apply it. It may be mistaken for consultation, seen as something separate from regular work, or feel difficult to use in a way that is meaningful and appropriate. Often, the challenge isn't understanding why co-design matters, but knowing what it looks like in decisions, projects, and ways of working.

This guide is designed to support that understanding in a clear and practical way. It begins by exploring the heart of co-design—why it matters and why it is so important to our work. It then outlines the value of co-design in strengthening relationships and

shaping better outcomes. Finally, the guide offers practical ways to embed co-design into our work, using familiar scenarios to show what co-design looks like in action.

This resource reflects our current understanding of co-design and is intended to evolve as our learning and practice deepen over time. The resource is intended to support employees at Karis and across the developmental services sector in understanding when and how co-design shows up in practice. Through this resource, we hope you'll see that co-design can be applied in some way to your work. Most importantly, we hope you'll see that while co-design often requires more time and intention, it is always worthwhile.

While this resource is grounded in the context, language, and ways of working at Karis Disability Services, the principles and approaches to co-design are transferable within and beyond the disability services sector. Readers may interpret and apply the content in ways that align with their own organizational context, structures, and terminology.

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What is Co-design?

Co-Design is an approach to designing *with*, not *for* people. It happens when we work together with people with lived experience to shape decisions, outcomes, and approaches. In this resource, first voice refers to people with lived experience of the decisions, systems, or work being discussed. This includes people using services, families, employees, and community partners, each as first voice within their own context.

At the heart of co-design are these guiding principles:

Elevating Lived Experience People with lived experience are directly involved in shaping decisions that affect them. Their perspectives shape priorities, choices, and outcomes.

Building Relationships Co-design depends on trust-based, respectful relationships that support honest dialogue and shared understanding throughout the process.

Sharing Power Decisions are made together. People involved in co-design have real influence over how work is shaped and carried forward.

Enabling Contribution People are supported to participate fully in decision-making, with attention to access, time, and the supports they need.

Being Transparent Decision-making roles, expectations, and limits are transparent. Everyone understands what can be influenced and how decisions are made.

Learning and Adapting Co-design decisions evolve over time. Ongoing feedback informs adjustments to decisions, processes, and outcomes.

Co-design can be applied across different types of work, including service design, digital solutions, organizational planning, and day to day activities. Each context may involve specific steps, but the core pathway of co-design remains the same.

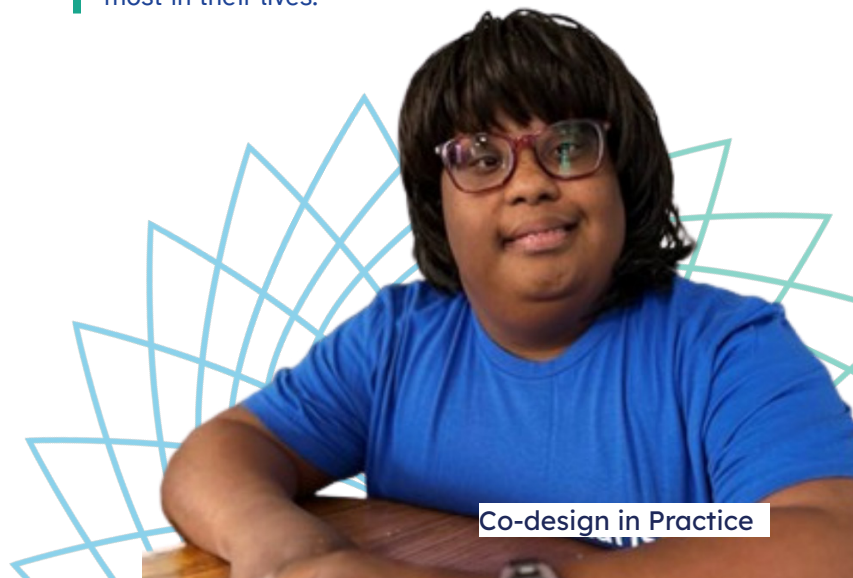
While co-design can be applied to many types of work, it is not always the right approach. This includes work constrained by legislation, policy, or compliance requirements, where timelines do not allow for meaningful engagement, or where decisions have already been made with limited opportunity to influence outcomes. Some work is also highly technical or specialized and requires specific

expertise to carry out. In these cases, co-design is not about asking others to do technical work, but about ensuring their perspectives help shape the purpose, direction, and outcomes where appropriate. When co-design is not appropriate or may need to be adapted to fit the context, being clear about what can and cannot be influenced helps set expectations and supports meaningful participation where opportunities exist.

Being intentional about where co-design is used, who you are co-designing with, and how the work is approached is essential.

Co-design is a journey, not a one-time activity. It develops over time and across spaces, and it works best when we come alongside people to build trust, communicate openly, and learn together.

For Patricia Morgan, co-design means not doing things for people but doing things *with* people. Patricia believes co-design is about asking people with developmental disabilities about what they think, what they know, and what matters most in their lives.



Co-design in Practice

The Value of Co-design

Co-design may require more time and intention, but it is often the most worthwhile approach. Here are some reasons you should consider using co-design in your work.



Co-design reflects core values

Co-design reflects core values that are commonly shared across organizations. At Karis, co-design aligns closely with our core values by helping us:

- Value people by involving them in decisions that impact them
- Foster belonging by working relationally and sharing power
- Serve others by providing supports that enable participation
- Celebrate gifts through meaningful participation



Co-design builds trust

Co-design helps build trust by:

- Sharing power in decisions that affect people's lives
- Showing that lived experience is listened to and acted on
- Strengthening relationships through openness, respect, and shared ownership



Co-design can be used almost anywhere

Co-design can support many types of work by helping:

- Adjust timelines, tools, and approaches to support collaboration
- Respond to new information and feedback as it emerges
- Bring together multiple perspectives to address complex challenges



Co-design leads to better, more inclusive solutions

When we design with people rather than for them, we are more likely to:

- Understand what really matters early on
- Learn from lived experience and different viewpoints
- Develop solutions that are practical, relevant, and grounded in real needs

The value of co-design is not only found in what we create together, but in the trust, understanding, and shared commitment that grows as people work together to shape what matters most.

For Lorie Downie, co-design means being included in conversations that affect Lorie, having a chance to share ideas, and feeling like her voice actually makes a difference.



Co-design in Practice

How Co-design Develops Core Competencies

Co-design does more than improve the work we do. Over time, it shapes how you think, lead, and make decisions in complex environments, strengthening core competencies that are essential for effective and responsive work in the developmental services sector.

Advocacy: Co-design strengthens advocacy by centering lived experience in decision-making and ensuring people influence issues that affect their lives. It shifts advocacy from speaking on behalf of others to creating space for people to speak and decide for themselves.

Building Relationships: Co-design builds trust-based relationships through intentional collaboration and shared understanding. Ongoing dialogue and learning help deepen respect and create more meaningful partnerships over time.

Inclusive Leadership: Co-design strengthens inclusive leadership by encouraging shared power, humility, and collaboration. Leadership becomes less about control and more about creating conditions where different perspectives shape decisions and outcomes.

Problem Solving and Decision-Making: Co-design strengthens problem solving by bringing lived experience into the early stages of understanding challenges. This supports clearer problem definition and decisions that are practical and responsive to real needs.

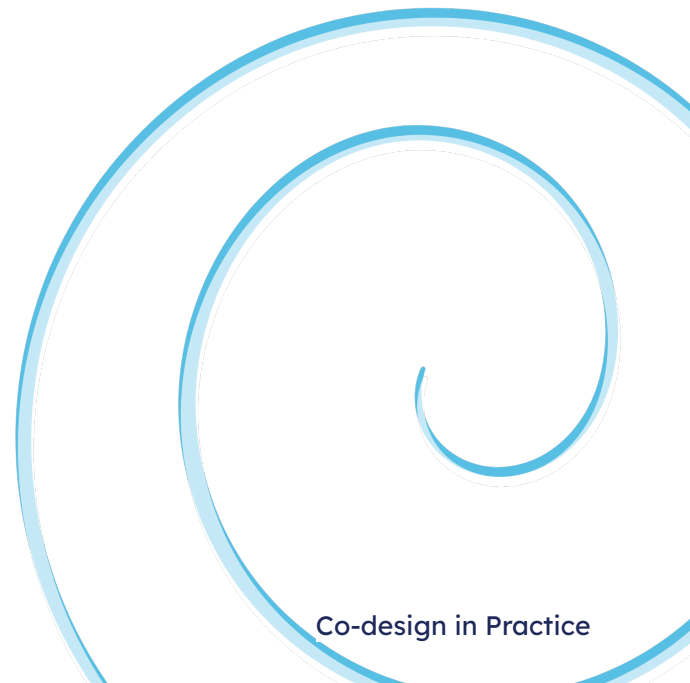
Valuing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion:

Co-design reinforces equity, diversity, and inclusion by responding to difference rather than treating everyone the same. By removing barriers and adapting processes, it creates more equitable conditions that foster belonging.

Strategic Thinking: Co-design strengthens strategic thinking by grounding planning and priorities in lived experience and system realities. It supports clearer understanding of trade-offs and improves alignment between strategy and execution.

Championing Change and Innovation: Co-design builds capacity for change by involving people directly in shaping what will change and how it will happen. This shared ownership supports more adaptive and sustainable change over time.

Co-design can be used with many different groups, including people we serve, families, employees and teams, and partners. It is about building together toward shared outcomes.



Co-design Pathway

Co-design can begin at different stages of a process. It may be used early to help define the problem and understand what matters most, or later to shape solutions and decisions. Being clear about where you are starting helps guide how the pathway is applied.

Step 1: Confirm Co-Design

- Decide whether the work should be co-designed through shared decision-making
- Define what is being co-designed (process, system, service, plan, event, resource, way of working)
- Identify who needs to be involved in shaping and deciding together
- Confirm the commitment required to do this work with integrity

Step 2: Prepare to Co-Design

- Plan together how people will meet, communicate, and work
- Build in supports, accommodations, and appropriate pace
- Establish shared expectations and ways of working
- Shape the process so people can participate in ways that feel meaningful and natural to them

Step 3: Build Together

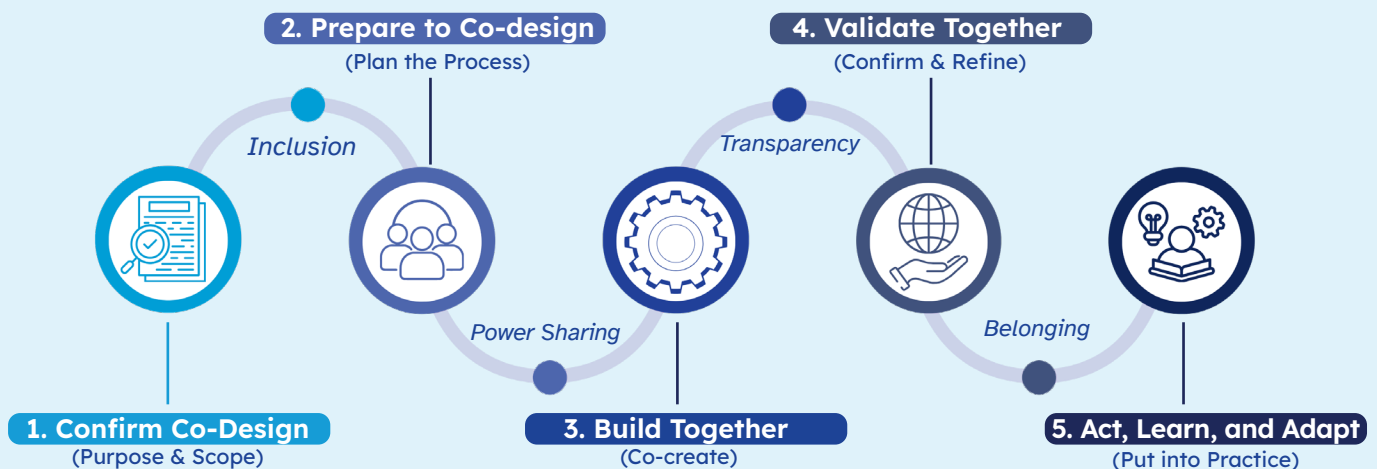
- Bring people together through a mix of engagement approaches, including sessions, workshops, working groups, one-to-one conversations, and small group discussions
- Shape priorities, options, and direction together
- Make choices and trade-offs together as part of the co-creation
- Continue shaping as understanding deepens

Step 4: Validate Together

- Share back what was co-created and how it has been understood
- Check for accuracy, gaps, and what may be missing
- Refine based on shared feedback and learning
- Confirm what is ready to move forward

Step 5: Act, Learn, and Adapt

- Put what was co-created into action
- Support adoption and remove barriers as they arise
- Reflect together on what happened and what was learned
- Adapt, improve, or expand based on shared learning



Co-design is strongest when people can see themselves reflected in what's being created and where it's going.

Co-design in Action

What does co-design look like in your work?

Co-design is a versatile approach that can be applied to almost any challenge or opportunity. At its core, it is about elevating the voices of people with lived experience by doing things *with*, not *for*, others.

In practice, co-design is not always done with a single group. Many pieces of work involve multiple groups at the same time, for example, people supported, families, employees, and community or faith partners. Effective co-design requires being intentional about who needs to be involved, how, and when, and ensuring each group has what they need to participate meaningfully.

Not all ideas from co-design may be implemented due to constraints such as timing, resources, or organizational requirements. Clearly communicating what was heard, what can be acted on, and what cannot—and why—helps maintain trust and close the feedback loop.

Co-design can look different depending on your role and the work you are involved in. For some, this may include leading or facilitating co-design processes as part of their responsibilities. For others, it may

involve contributing perspectives, participating in discussions, or supporting how engagement is approached. For example, this could include shaping what is most meaningful for a person supported, how team meetings are structured, what a service model should look like, or how a tool or resource is designed. The level and type of involvement will vary, but there is always a role in helping ensure people's voices are meaningfully included.

The following scenarios are designed to make co-design more concrete by showing how it might be applied in familiar situations across your everyday work. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they are intended to spark your imagination and support you in thinking about how co-design could be used in your own context.



Co-designing with People Using Services

Co-design works best when there is **time and support up front** for people to understand the work, decide how they want to be involved, and prepare in ways that work for them. This means a **slower pace**, clear explanations, and opportunities to ask questions, with support from people they trust. Participation is stronger when there are **different ways to engage** (such as speaking, drawing, writing, or taking photos), along with access to quiet space and opportunities to share one-on-one if needed. Co-design spaces are most effective when they feel welcoming and comfortable, allow people to work alongside friends, offer food, breaks, space to move, less crowding, and include opportunities to **co-present**. Recognizing or **compensating** people for the time they give also matters.

Co-designing with people using services will look different depending on communication styles and support needs. While self-advocates may share their perspectives directly, it is important not to rely solely on those who are able to communicate their needs in this way. **Co-design should aim to include a broader and more diverse range of perspectives wherever possible**, including engaging different people across pieces of work rather than relying on the same voices each time. This may include working with families, support staff, or Substitute Decision-Makers to help understand and reflect a person's experiences, preferences, and best interests.

Scenario 1: Creating a New Resource

Helen is part of the Operational Leadership team, and is creating a two-page best practice resource to help Karis employees communicate with people supported. Early on, Helen is confident that this work requires co-design, even though some content will reflect findings from a previous research project.

Before drafting further, Helen attends a local Our Voices Matter meeting to explain the purpose of the resource and listen for guidance on how best to involve the group. She learns that meaningful input will require a slower pace, preparation in advance, and dedicated working sessions held outside regular meetings. Together, they agree on three sessions and on sharing simplified, accessible materials ahead of time so everyone can review and come prepared.

The first session focuses on understanding the resource and confirming where input will be most helpful. The next two sessions are used to build the resource together, including re-ordering recommendations based on what matters most to people supported and drafting a short introduction

about why communication is important from their perspective. A final session is used to review the revised version and confirm that it reflects the group's input accurately.

Once finalized, the resource is shared across the organization. Members of Our Voices Matter use the resource in conversations with their support staff and encourage it to be used in day-to-day communication. The group is listed as co-contributors and sees their role not only in shaping the resource, but in helping bring it to life in practice.

Scenario 2: Shaping a New Service Model

Maria's team is considering a new housing model that would need to be piloted and may continue beyond the initial pilot phase. Because the model would directly impact people using services, Maria knows this work requires co-design. She is clear from the start that this is not a consultation or a one-time co-design session, but an ongoing effort that will span at least a year.

Maria puts out a call in the community inviting people using services to be involved in shaping the work. Three people respond and are hired to participate in co-design, recognizing that their involvement requires time, effort, and ongoing contribution. Maria works with other teams at Karis to set up payment, scheduling, and administrative processes so participation is clear and accessible from the beginning.

At the outset, Maria meets one-on-one with each person to understand their availability, preferences, and how they want to participate. She is careful to ensure meeting schedules and expectations are clearly understood and builds this work into her overall workflow. Reminders are sent in advance, and one in-person session is planned to visit the

housing location, with transportation and support arranged as needed.

After a few meetings, Maria learns that longer sessions make it harder to stay engaged. Based on this learning, she adapts the approach by holding shorter, more frequent meetings with clear agendas. As the work continues, Maria regularly shares back what she is hearing to confirm it reflects what people intended to communicate. Together, they agree on what success should look like and on changes to test as part of the pilot. As the pilot unfolds, the service model continues to be refined through this shared learning. People using services can see how their input is shaping decisions over time, with the understanding that the work may continue to evolve beyond the pilot period.



Co-designing with Families of People Supported

Co-design with families works best when engagement is planned around **work, caregiving, and travel realities**. Evening and weekend sessions, virtual options, and shorter meetings help make participation more accessible, especially where families are spread across communities. Clear communication, frequent reminders, and ongoing follow-ups through local staff and leaders help families stay engaged and informed. Ongoing **personal connections** and relationship-building

between staff and families help demonstrate a genuine interest in families and their loved ones, strengthening partnership in how supports are shaped and delivered. Events and shared spaces that allow **families to connect with one another**, share stories, and participate together also create valuable opportunities for learning, trust, and mutual support.

Scenario 3: Shaping Transition Supports

Jordan is looking to improve how transitions between services are planned and communicated with families. Because these transitions directly affect both people using services and their families, Jordan confirms early that this work needs to be shaped by people using services and their families, not designed by staff alone.

Jordan reaches out to families through existing Community Advisory Networks and district family contact lists, working with local staff and leaders to invite participation. Recognizing that many families are balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities, engagement sessions are scheduled in the evenings and on weekends, with virtual options available to reduce travel barriers. Clear information is shared in advance, and reminders are sent to support participation.

Jordan is consistently present throughout the process, taking time to build relationships with families and listen carefully to their experiences. These ongoing connections help demonstrate a genuine interest in families and strengthen partnership between staff and families in shaping how supports are planned with their loved ones. Sessions are designed to include both smaller conversations with families and group discussions that bring together people using services, families, and staff to collectively shape transition supports. This allows families and people

using services to talk through what is working, what is challenging, and what needs to change. Families contribute their unique knowledge of their loved ones, helping shape planning and supports while ensuring people using services remain at the center of decisions that affect their lives.

Time is also set aside through related events for families to connect with one another, share stories, and participate together. As ideas are tested, Jordan shares back what has been heard and how family input is shaping decisions about transition supports and communication practices. Families can see their perspectives reflected as changes are introduced and carried forward in practice.



Co-designing with Teams

Co-design with teams works best when engagement happens within existing team meetings, or working sessions, so teams can contribute in ways that fit their day-to-day work. Sessions need to be structured as **safe spaces** to speak freely, where staff can share ideas and concerns without worrying about saying the wrong thing. **Leadership presence** matters here. Leaders showing up with a posture of listening and learning can help **build trust**, demonstrate commitment to co-design, and support morale. At the same time, the impact of leadership presence can vary depending on context. In some situations—particularly in earlier stages of exploring ideas or sensitive topics—staff-only or different engagement approaches may better support open and candid participation.

Because work moves quickly, people can lose track of what input was shared or how it was used. Trust grows when **input is synthesized in real time**, shared back in clear themes, and validated quickly so people can confirm that what was heard is accurate. Following up to show what changed, what did not, and why, reinforces that input is shaping the work. Opportunities to co-present and co-facilitate sessions, hear stories, and connect with other employees strengthen ownership and engagement. Keeping sessions **simple, focused, and engaging**, and clearly explaining why the work matters and how it connects to people's roles, supports meaningful contribution and sustained involvement.

Scenario 4: Onboarding a New Team Member

Michael is welcoming a new person to his team to support an ongoing strategic project. To supplement the organizational onboarding process, Michael focuses on introducing the new team member to the team and the specific work they will be responsible for, helping them feel connected from the start.

Michael brings this to an existing team meeting and invites his two direct reports to help shape the onboarding approach. Together, they identify what the new team member needs to understand about the project, why those pieces are important, and how different roles contribute to the work. The team agrees to share onboarding responsibilities, with each person taking the lead on introducing the new team member to the parts of the work they know best.

Team members welcome the new colleague through shared working sessions, conversations, and stories from their own experience. This creates space for relationship-building, questions, and learning that brings formal orientation materials to life. Michael

stays connected throughout the onboarding period, checking in with both the new team member and the team to understand what is working and what may need adjustment.

By shaping the onboarding experience together, the team builds shared ownership and confidence, and the new team member feels supported and meaningfully connected to the work and the people involved. The team can see their input reflected in how the onboarding experience is shaped and carried forward in practice.

Co-designing with other Groups

Co-design with other groups, such as church partners, community organizations, and government partners, requires an **intentional** approach. Sometimes this means working with multiple groups rather than a single group.

Beginning with **separate engagements** helps understand each group's context, priorities, and participation needs, including pacing, scheduling

realities, or **preferred ways to share input**. These considerations can then be intentionally brought into **collective engagement**, where different ways to participate within shared settings support meaningful contribution. Clear communication about purpose, constraints, and decision-making helps build trust and ensures contributions are reflected in the work.

Scenario 5: Navigating Project Changes

Collin is responsible for delivering a learning series on grassroots advocacy that was shaped with staff, people with lived experience, and a partner organization. Partway through the year, he learns that funding has changed and the original plan of three full-day, in-person sessions is no longer feasible.

Collin first meets separately with each group to clearly explain the constraint and understand priorities. He then brings the groups together to review shared priorities and work through trade-offs. Together, they decide to shorten the series from three days to two, prioritize catered lunches over printed materials, and introduce a

small registration fee. The final plan reflects shared decisions and keeps the learning series meaningful and well-attended, despite the changes. The groups can see their input reflected in the decisions made and how the learning series is adapted and carried forward in practice.



Closing the Loop

Co-design often involves constraints, and not all ideas may be able to move forward due to timing, resources, or organizational requirements. How these decisions are shared back is an important part of the process.

- In these situations, it is important to:
- Clearly communicate what was heard
 - Share what can be acted on and what cannot
 - Explain the reasons for decisions in a transparent and respectful way
 - Follow up so people can see how their input shaped the work

Closing the loop helps people understand how their input was considered and how it influenced the work. This helps people feel heard, respected, and meaningfully included, even when not all ideas can move forward.

Practical Guidance

When sharing back decisions, it is helpful to structure communication in a clear and consistent way. Here are practical ways to structure how decisions are shared back:

What to Communicate	Example Wording
Clearly communicate what was heard	“Here’s what we heard from you...”
Share what can be acted on and what cannot	“Here’s what we’re moving forward...” “These are areas we’re not able to move forward at this time...”
Explain the reasons for decisions in a transparent and respectful way	“This is due to timing, capacity, or how this work needs to align with other priorities...”
Follow up so people can see how their input shaped the work	“Your input helped shape <i>[name specific change or direction]</i> , and we will continue to build on this...”

The way decisions are shared back can be just as important as the decisions themselves. Where possible, taking time to connect directly—whether in person or virtually—to share this information helps make the process more personal, supports dialogue, and allows space for questions and clarification.

Co-design is more than a process for achieving an outcome. It is also an outcome in itself, creating opportunities for people to contribute their gifts, build relationships, and grow together in ways that foster belonging.

For Linda Lafontaine, co-design is not just a concept; it is how Linda takes part in, contributes, and grows. Linda believes co-design helps people see that their lived experience matters.



Co-design in Practice

Co-design in Practice - Placemat

When Co-design Fits

- Direct impact on people
- Lived experience shapes outcomes
- Openness to shared decision-making
- Time and capacity for engagement

When Co-design May Not Fit or Needs Adapting

- Constrained by policy or compliance
- Limited time for meaningful engagement
- Decisions already made
- Specialized work (co-design shapes outcomes; execution is managed by experts)

Guiding Principles

Elevating Lived Experience

Building Relationships

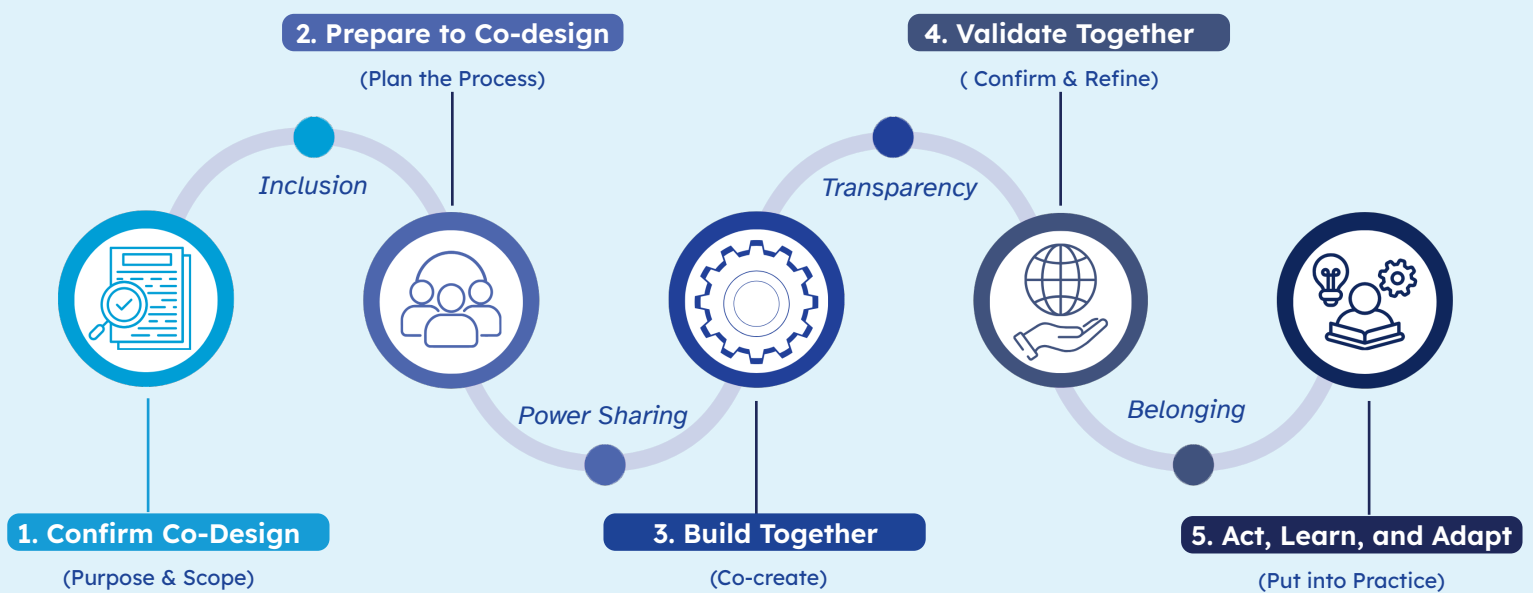
Sharing Power

Enabling Contribution

Being Transparent

Learning & Adapting

For Genie Lupton, co-design is about taking part in designing her life to help her grow. Genie believes we are all a very important part of co-designing our future together.



Co-design is strongest when people can see themselves reflected in what's being created and where it's going.

Closing the Loop

Share what was heard, what will move forward, what will not, and why—and follow up so people can see how their input shaped the outcome.

Thank you for taking the time to read this resource. As you consider applying the principles of co-design in your own work, remember that while co-design isn't always easy, **it's incredibly worthwhile.**

Acknowledgments

This resource was developed by the **Strategic Initiatives** department at Karis Disability Services and co-authored by Naima Samuel, Abi Peters, David Nickerson, Eugene Versteeg, and Christian Otte.

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- Quality, Research, and Practice Initiatives department at Karis Disability Services.
- Workplace Learning department at Karis Disability Services.
- Marketing and Communications department at Karis Disability Services.
- Davis Pier Consulting.
- Participatory Advocacy Research Network (PARN).

Resources that Informed Our Approach

- Co-Designing the Future of Disability Services with First Voice Leadership (2026), Karis Disability Services & Davis Pier Consulting.
- Photovoice Co-Research Project Report (2025), Karis Disability Services, Canada.
- Co-Design Toolkit (2025), Davis Pier Consulting, Canada.
- Luca and the 7 Steps of Leadership (2024), Pamela Cushing & Jennifer Shields, Canada.
- Research Report: Service User Participation Proposal (2021), Participatory Action Research Project.
- An introduction to Co-Design (2012). Centre for Social Impact, Australia.

If you have any questions about this resource, please email strategy@karis.org.

Karis Disability Services

As a non-profit, developmental services organization, Karis Disability Services supports people with disabilities to accomplish their goals and thrive in communities where their God-given gifts are valued and celebrated.

Our Core Values



Valuing
People



Fostering
Belonging



Serving
Others



Celebrating
Gifts



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26 Pepler Street,
Waterloo, ON
N2J 3C4

1-866-362-6810
info@karis.org



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