

Who is this guide for?

- Senior decision-makers
- Policy staff
- Delivery staff

When should I use this guidance?

Design stage and ongoing delivery.

Involving service users in programme and activity design adds value by improving understanding of user needs and context. It can support representation from a broad range of characteristics and ensure approaches are effective in devolved nations and areas.

However, meaningful engagement can be hard, as co-design and co-production often demand significant time from individuals. Engagement can also be challenging depending on the scale and stage of a programme, and what is feasible within allocated budgets.

Evidence from No One Left Behind (NOLB) Fife and Step Forward Tees Valley show how different approaches to involvement can improve programme design and delivery.

TIP: Consider whether co-design will have a clear impact on service design and delivery.

When service users give their time and insight, their input should be meaningful and lead to service improvements. Co-design is most effective when the service model is flexible enough to act on feedback, ensuring service user contributions directly influence how services are shaped and delivered.

NOLB Fife's contracting model gave voluntary sector providers flexibility in how they delivered support to meet complex client needs. Providers could also adapt delivery in response to service-user feedback, enabling tailored and holistic interventions.

TIP: Consider whether co-design and co-production are appropriate, meaningful, and proportionate.

It may not be possible to involve service users at every stage of design, as this depends on the programme's scale, nature, timing, and resources. **Effective programmes should focus involvement where it will add most value, and bring together the views from different characteristics and devolved nations and areas, so it is not tokenistic.**

Service users can be involved in:

- **Commissioning and design:** NOLB Fife included people with lived experience of unemployment services in commissioning. Service users took part across the selection panel, bidding process, and service design and delivery.
- **Programme outreach and service-user engagement:** Step Forward Tees Valley created six delivery Ambassador roles. Ambassadors supported marketing, engaged potential participants at events, assisted delivery staff, and helped with evaluation through participant engagement.
- **Ongoing evaluation and feedback:** Regular feedback supports service improvement. Evaluation activities give service users a way to share their experiences and preferences and shape the process.



TIP: Consider how barriers to community and service-user engagement can be removed.

Service users may have limited time for co-design activities. Some may also lack confidence to volunteer or apply for these roles. Removing these barriers is essential to ensure participation is inclusive and meaningful. **Valuing their time, building confidence, and recognising their contributions helps people feel supported and can improve the quality of engagement.**

Programmes can reduce barriers and support engagement by:

- **Providing payment:** Pay service users for activities that inform programme design and delivery. This includes co-design, engagement and delivery support, and evaluation activities.
- **Training provision:** Offer training so service users can contribute with confidence. NOLB Fife found that the bidding selection process was difficult for some people with lived experience. More support and training were recommended for technical tasks, such as identifying strong or weak bids.
- **Offering role-recognition:** Step Forward Tees Valley Ambassadors built skills and confidence through the role, and some moved into new jobs. Certification, clearly defined skills for CVs, and references can help support future entry into work.



TIP: Create safe and inclusive participatory environments.

Service users involved in co-design may face high levels of disadvantage, have complex support needs, or feel hesitant due to previous negative experiences. **Creating a safe and inclusive environment helps people feel comfortable sharing their views, ensuring a wider range of perspectives is heard and improving the quality and relevance of programme design.**

Programmes can support participation in co-design by:

- Working with relevant local and Third Sector organisations to ensure they include a broad range of participants, and do not exclude any relevant groups.
- Recruiting participants from different backgrounds, abilities, ages, cultures, and lived experiences.
- Designing co-design activities to be accessible based on cultural, physical, language, or cognitive barriers.
- Offering facilitated discussions with neutral professionals to remove hierarchy and ensure all voices are heard.



These top tips are based on evaluation evidence identified through a [Rapid Evidence Assessment \(REA\)](#) on what enables effective design, delivery and evaluation of local work and health programmes.

The top tips in this guide have been given a confidence rating of indicative - moderate. This means that the evidence these top tips are based on is suggestive and cannot be directly linked to outcomes. It also means that the evidence comes from at least one study which has been rated as moderate using the [Youth Endowment Fund Evidence Quality Assessment tool](#).