Principles of Co-design

Co-design is increasingly being used by both government and the community sector to describe a range of activities and processes used in the design of services and products that involve people who use or are affected by that service or product. However there is a lack of consistency in how it is used and what it means in practice.

If co-design is to be effective there needs to be agreement on what it is and how it works. This paper presents the community sector's perspective on what we have identified as the key elements of co-design. Its purpose is to support:

- NSW Government agencies using co-design processes in their work with the community sector and their clients
- the community sector using co-design to inform and improve the services they deliver.

What is it?

Co-design is a process not an event. It is also known as generative design, co-creation, participatory design or co-operative design. Co-production may also be used but it is more about the delivery rather than the design aspects of the process.

Co-design originally referred to a process involving customers and users of products or services in their development. It combines generative or exploratory research, which helps to define the problem that requires a solution, with developmental design.

The community services sector has adapted co-design to combine lived experience and professional expertise to identify and create an outcome or product. It builds on engagement processes such as social democracy and community development where all critical stakeholders, from experts to end users, are encouraged to participate and are respected as equal partners sharing expertise in the design of services and products.
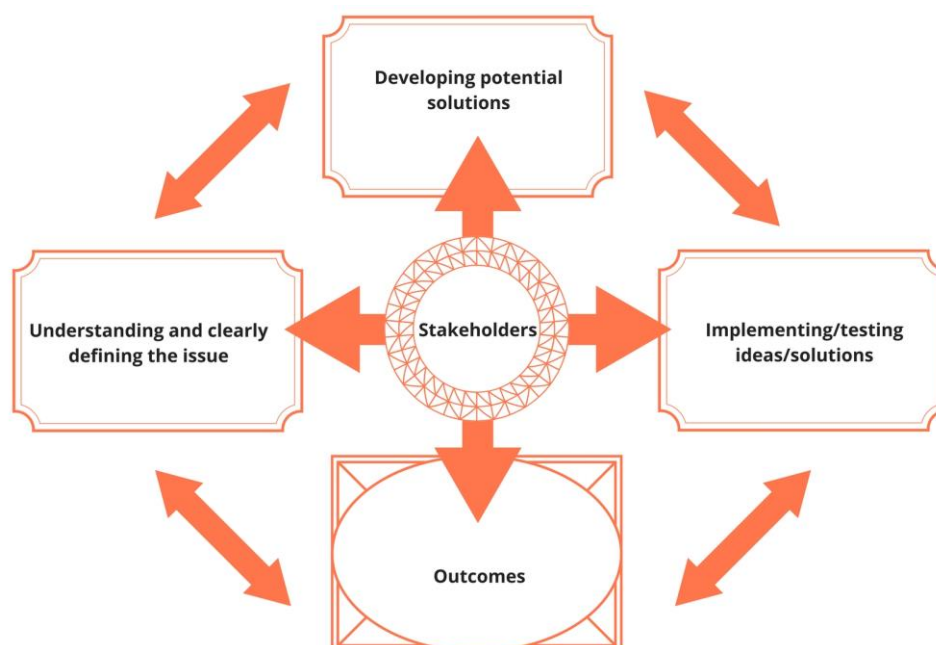
When and how is it used?

Co-design can be used to create, redevelop and evaluate a product, service or system. It can be applied to anything from an app to improve people's accessibility, to major community service reform processes. It is not the answer for everything but can be effective when responding to complex issues.

It is not a linear process and cannot be rushed. There are no step-by-step procedures or checklists. The process is as variable as the problems it aims to address, reflecting the issues and the needs of the people it involves. It requires a commitment to create change.

Co-design starts with aspirations, identifying the shared values or common good rather than agendas and solutions. Ideally it includes three phases: understanding and clearly defining the issue; developing potential solutions and testing these ideas. The process is cyclical rather than sequential and may require reassessing or change at any point in the process.

Partners can move between the different phases or work in them at the same time as they participate in a series of conversations and activities that generate new, shared meanings drawn from expert knowledge and lived experience. The process aims to change the mindsets and behaviour of the partners, encouraging and supporting innovative processes and solutions as they work to identify the "sweet spot" where change can evolve.

It invites partners to enter situations where what people say, how the process is structured and what outcomes are possible and appropriate are unlikely to be predetermined. The process targets new ways of understanding the issue, and then jointly develops and tests solutions to understand what works.

Evaluation of the outcomes is an essential part of the process. It shapes the way the process is structured and resourced, ensuring it is reflective and adaptive as much as it is generative.

It is more than a consultation process. Everyone is sees as an expert in their domain and as such has something to offer in the design of products and solutions.

Who participates?

Co-design involves the people who are likely to be impacted by or will benefit from the process and/or the outcome, either directly or indirectly. It can include clients, their carers, community members, researchers, consultants, and staff from funding bodies (both government and non-government), peak bodies, potential or actual service providers, etc.

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Inclusive – The process includes representatives from critical stakeholder groups who are involved in the co-design project from framing the issue to developing and testing solutions. It utilises feedback, advice and decisions from people with lived or work experience, and the knowledge, experience and skills of experts in the field.

Respectful – All participants are seen as experts and their input is valued and has equal standing. Strategies are used to remove potential or perceived inequality. Partners manage their own and others' feelings in the interest of the process. Co-design requires everyone to negotiate personal and practical understandings at the expense of differences.

Participative – The process itself is open, empathetic and responsive. Co-design uses a series of conversations and activities where dialogue and engagement generate new, shared meanings based on expert knowledge and lived experience. Major themes can be extracted and used as the basis for co-designed solutions. All participants are responsible for the effectiveness of the process.

Iterative – Ideas and solutions are continually tested and evaluated with the participants. Changes and adaptations are a natural part of the process, trialling possibilities and insights as they emerge, taking risks and allowing for failure. This process is also used to fine-tune potential outcomes or solutions as it reaches fruition and can later be used to evaluate its effectiveness.

Outcomes focused – The process can be used to create, redesign or evaluate services, systems or products. It is designed to achieve an outcome or series of outcomes, where the potential solutions can be rapidly tested, effectiveness measured and where the spreading or scaling of these solutions can be developed with stakeholders and in context.

The Co-Design Principles came out of the Fair Deal Forum in November 2016 with input from the participants and Dr Ingrid Burkett (The Australian Centre for Social Innovation).