



**Towards
Inclusive
Practice**

Including Everyone.

A project by:



Inclusion Australia

Communications to co-design: valuing different types of engagement



Introduction

The disability community has been clear for many decades, ‘nothing about us without us’.

This is a response to many years of decisions being made by government about people with disabilities and the systems they need without seeking their input.

There has been an increase in engagement with people with disabilities over the past decade, particularly relating to the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the Disability Royal Commission. However, there is still a long way to go.

In recent years, a promise to co-design has become a common response by organisations and governments to disability advocates.

Although this appears to be an appropriate solution, it raises new challenges in the relationship between government and the disability community, including:

- no clear and shared understanding of what co-design is or how to do it
- insufficient examples of successful co-design between government organisations and the disability community to draw and build on
- the disability community has been shut out of government decision making so long that many people have not had a chance to learn the required skills
- a commitment to codesign needs to be shared by all parties, yet there are many issues of power and trust between those in positions of authority and the disability community
- there are very few people with disabilities – and even fewer people with an intellectual disability – working in government who can advocate for, and encourage co-design by colleagues
- disability organisations are not sufficiently resourced to address these gaps.

In light of these challenges, this guide explores the range of engagement options that can be used to build inclusion and asks: **is co-design always the answer?**



Different forms of engagement

The ladder of participation is a model used in different disciplines and environments to describe the relationship in engagement between those in positions of power and a particular group of people.

Although models vary, the ladder of participation typically highlights different methods of engagement with people on each rung or 'step' of the ladder also representing increasing levels of empowerment for the group you are working with.

The ladder of participation model often changes depending on the people who are using it. You can find different models online for different environments, including education, citizen participation, and working with children or young people. Some organisations or government departments create their own models or use a specific pre-existing model to guide their work.

The diagram below offers a simple ladder model featuring different levels of engagement. It starts at the base with no engagement, with increasing levels of engagement and influence. At the top is 'user-led' engagement in which the cohort or group is both in charge and the focus of the project or engagement.

Engagement level Common features

User-led	Group is both in charge and the focus of the project or engagement.
Co-design (or co-production)	Government and target group work together as equals, sharing power and decision making authority.
Collaboration	Government leads but engages and works together with target group representatives on aspects of the project.
Consultation	Government leads work then seeks feedback, input and/or endorsement from target group representatives.
Communication	Government develops and provides information on specific issues relating to a target group.
No engagement	Government undertakes work on issues relating to a specific target group behind closed doors.

Power and the Ladder of Participation

The ladder of participation helps highlight different power dynamics between government and people with disability depending on the type of engagement.

This includes when the type of engagement does not seek or allow for an inclusive and empowering contribution from people with disabilities.



Engagement Power dynamic

User-led	People with disability and advocates lead engagement, make key decisions, and report findings to government.
Co-design (or co-production)	Power and decision making shared between people with disability and government
Collaboration	Government invites contributions from selected people with disability and advocates but retains power and decision making authority.
Consultation	Government leads, develops ideas, sets agenda and timeframes then seeks feedback and/or endorsement from selected people with disability and advocates.
Communication	Government controls what information is shared with who without allowing for input. Information often not accessible, further reducing power of disability community.
No engagement	Government controls all aspects of project. No input from disability community.

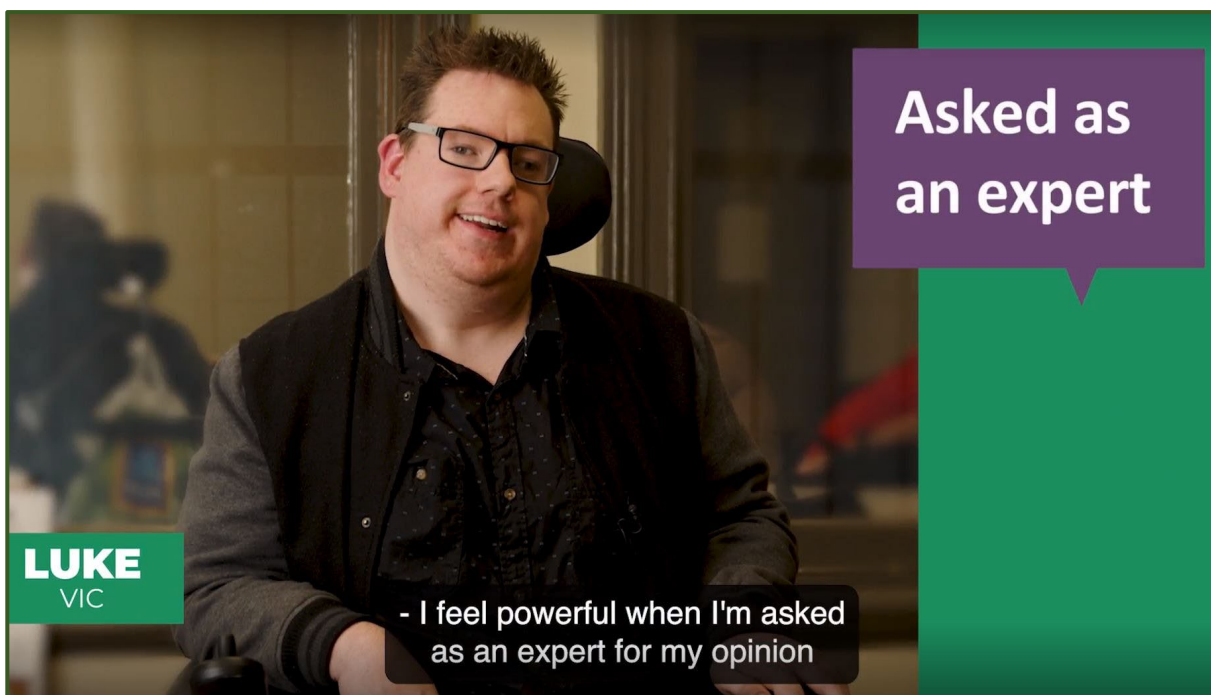
Movement on the ladder

Using the ladder of participation can help you think about ways to make your engagement more inclusive.

Each level can have its own value and purpose. However, this should not stop you from thinking about ways to be more inclusive and create more opportunities for people with an intellectual disability to have a stronger say and more decision making responsibility.

Use the ladder approach to think about:

- what is being offered and why (your purpose, timeframes, resources etc)
- opportunities for people to move 'up' or 'down' the ladder
- what supports you can provide to increase participation and involvement
- how your approach supports people with an intellectual disability to choose their involvement and how much they need to give. This includes time, energy and emotional labour on involvement.
- is this the only chance for involvement or will there be others
- incorporating participation from people with different communication styles



Tokenism

Some ladders of participation also acknowledge other levels which might be framed as tokenistic or manipulative involvement. Examples include:

- offering the illusion of consultation when decisions have already been made
- saying people with disability have endorsed something when they haven't had any meaningful involvement
- framing questions inaccessibly
- not sufficiently promoting the engagement opportunity
- imposing timeframes for feedback which cannot be met
- seeking input and/or endorsement from a limited and handpicked group of stakeholders and promoting this as representative of the whole sector.

Clearly such approaches are disempowering, break trust and should be avoided.

They can also be used to compare with your own methods to ensure you are being as inclusive as possible in the context of the engagement required.



Inclusion Advisors in the Towards Inclusive Practice project shared their experiences of disempowering engagement dynamics.

Find out more in our Power and Trust guide and videos. [link to be added]

Understanding the value of different engagement approaches

Given the above, it may be a surprise to hear anything other than co-design or user led approaches being advocated by those in the disability community.

However, depending on the issue, some engagement practices may not be appropriate. In some circumstances, engagement from higher up the ladder can be disempowering without the right supports.

Consider these examples from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case study: COVID-19 and the ladder of participation

Example 1 – Communication

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, very little was known about coronavirus or the risks that it presented to people with disability. The World Health Organisation (WHO) worked with governments around the world to provide clear and consistent information on emerging findings and general tips on good hygiene practice and social distancing. This quick communication was important because it helped people to have a sense of the problem and put safety plans into action.



Example 2 - Collaboration

As the higher risk for people with disability from COVID became clear, governments engaged with disability organisations to work together to make sure people were safe. This included working with disability representative organisations, peak bodies and others to better understand specific issues. Although government continued to lead, organisations were funded to seek feedback from their networks and develop more targeted information, resources and approaches for people with disabilities.

Seeking to codesign with people with an intellectual disability in the early days of the pandemic would not have been appropriate. A lack of reliable and accessible information, the pace of change, the impact of the lockdowns and the rapid move to online work would have likely placed people with an intellectual disability under unnecessary pressure and not set people up for success.

Opportunities for codesign about COVID have emerged in the months and years since. This followed work by disability organisations and government bodies to make sure that people were able to work safely and with support.

Tips on choosing the right engagement method

- Have a clear sense of who you want to work with and why. What are you trying to achieve through this engagement?
- Seek advice from Disability Representative Organisations and other experts. A quick conversation could help you in your planning and make for a more inclusive experience for those involved.
- Be clear on your expectations of people taking part. For example, when asking people for ideas and feedback, be clear about scope and say what is up for discussion and what is not. Do not ask for ideas if you will not use them. This is disempowering and will risk building distrust.



Always be alert to ways to increase inclusion of people with an intellectual disability. Use the tips in these guides to reflect on your practice and create opportunities to be more inclusive in all your engagement.