

# Making Co-Design Accessible

Tools and Resources from the Communication for Safe Care Project

---

South Western Sydney and Western NSW  
Local Health Districts



In partnership with



South Western Sydney  
Local Health District

Western NSW Local Health District



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgement of Country

South Western Sydney and Western NSW Local Health District acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

---

## Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

The Communication for Safe Care project acknowledges the lived experience of those with communication support needs, their carers, friends, family, and support people. We value their contributions and thank them for the time and expertise they have provided to this project.

---

## Project Partners

The Communication for Safe Care project is a multiagency project partnership across South Western Sydney Local Health District, Western NSW Local Health District, and the University of Sydney. We acknowledge the contributions of all project team members, researchers, and students who have been involved in the project.

The project is funded by an Information, Linkages, and Capacity Building Grant from the NDIS. We thank Dr Katherine Kelly, Prof Sue McAllister, and Ms. Lisa Maxey for their contributions to the initial grant application, which laid the foundation for this project.

---

## Project Contributors

We acknowledge the vital contributions of our consumers, healthcare professionals, and partners. Their unique insights and lived experiences have not only shaped our project but have ensured that our solutions remain responsive, inclusive, and impactful. Their commitment and collaboration have been the cornerstone of our success.



# Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction .....	4
Understanding communication support needs.....	5
Planning for accessible co-design.....	8
Tools and resources for accessible engagement.....	11
Flexibility .....	15
Case Study: Communication for Safe Care Project.....	19
Appendix: Accessible Co-Design Resources.....	21

# Introduction

Co-design is a collaborative approach to problem-solving that brings together diverse stakeholders — including those with lived experience — to develop solutions that are inclusive, innovative, and effective. However, for co-design to truly succeed, it **must be accessible to all participants**, including people with communication support needs.

This guide aims to provide practical strategies and insights on making co-design processes accessible and inclusive, with a particular focus on supporting people with communication needs. It is informed by the experiences and learnings from the *Communication for Safe Care* project, a collaborative initiative aimed at improving healthcare safety and quality by prioritising effective communication.

In the *Communication for Safe Care* project, we worked closely with individuals who have a range of communication support needs, including people with speech and language impairments, non-verbal communication styles, or cognitive challenges. Their input was invaluable in shaping outcomes and ensuring the project reflected real-world needs.



## Why does accessibility in co-design matter?

At its core, co-design is about empowering everyone to contribute their perspectives and ideas, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. When accessibility barriers are removed, it not only enriches the process but also ensures that the solutions created are equitable and reflective of the community's diverse needs.

This guide is designed for facilitators, project managers, and teams embarking on co-design initiatives. It provides step-by-step guidance, tools, and real-world examples to help you plan and implement accessible co-design practices. Whether you're working in acute or community services, this resource will help you build inclusive environments where everyone can participate fully.

By adopting these strategies, you can ensure that co-design becomes a powerful tool for positive change, creating outcomes that are not only innovative but also equitable and sustainable. Let's build a more inclusive future together.

# Understanding communication support needs

Creating an accessible and inclusive co-design process requires an understanding of the diverse communication support needs of participants. These needs arise from various conditions, disabilities, or life circumstances and may be temporary or long-term.

## What are communication support needs?

Communication support needs encompass a broad range of challenges, including but not limited to:

Communication challenges can include:

### Speech or language disorders

Aphasia, stuttering, or impairments from stroke.

### Cognitive disabilities

Intellectual disabilities, dementia, or brain injuries affecting comprehension.

### Sensory disabilities

Hearing or vision impairments that impact communication.

### Non-verbal communication

Use of gestures, sign language, or assistive technologies.

### Cultural and linguistic diversity

Participants whose primary language differs from the co-design process.

## Why is accessibility critical in co-design?

Traditional engagement methods may exclude people with communication support needs, limiting diverse input. Prioritising accessibility:

- Ensures all voices are heard.
- Fosters a collaborative and inclusive environment.
- Leads to solutions that reflect the needs of the entire community.

## Recognising and responding to barriers

Participants may face:

### Physical barriers

Inaccessible venues or materials.

### Cognitive barriers

Complex language or fast-paced discussions.

### Social barriers

Intimidation or lack of confidence in contributing.

To address these challenges:

### Listen and learn

Understand participants' preferred communication methods.

### Individualise support

Tailor accommodations to specific needs.

### Create a safe space

Ensure participants feel valued and respected.

## Learning modules

Intellectual Disability:  
Just include me (9 e-learning modules)

Let's Talk Disability  
(Course Code: 67951622)

Introduction to  
disability and  
accessibility (Course  
Code: 338035490)

Learn about teach-back  
(Course Code: 409377612)



## The benefits of inclusive communication

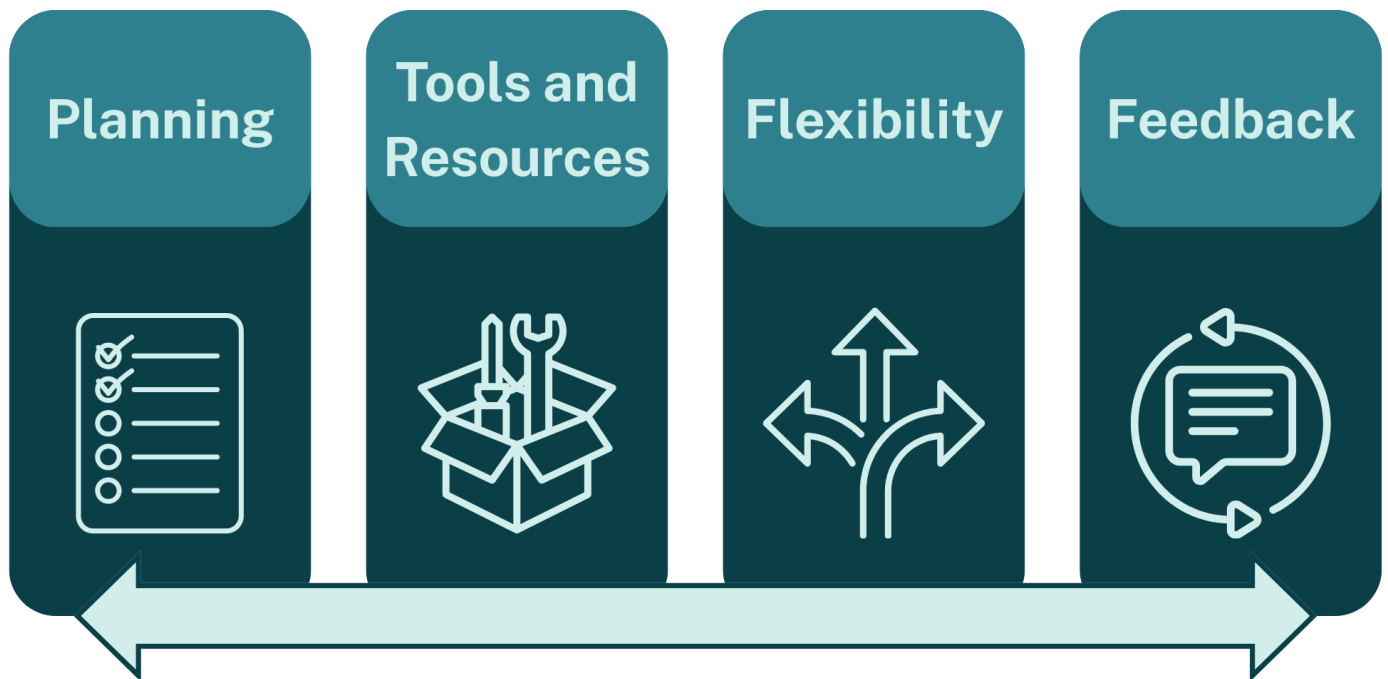
Addressing communication support needs enhances co-design by:

- Enabling full participation and deeper insights.
- Respecting lived experiences.
- Leading to more innovative and effective solutions.

By embedding inclusive communication, we create a co-design process that is not just accessible but transformative.

The next sections of this guide will outline practical steps for implementing accessible co-design practices.

# Principles of accessible co-design



# Planning for accessible co-design

Effective co-design requires thoughtful planning to ensure inclusivity, particularly for participants with communication support needs. This section outlines key strategies to foster an accessible process.

## Identifying key stakeholders

Inclusive co-design begins by involving:

### People with lived experience

Ensuring their voices shape outcomes.

### Caregivers and supporters

Aiding communication where needed.

### Subject matter experts

Accessibility specialists, speech pathologists, and others who can guide best practices.

### Diverse perspectives

Representation across age, culture, and disability types.

## TIP

Use plain-language invitations, visuals, or videos to make recruitment more accessible

## Resources for planning

- [Accessible Co-Design Checklist](#)
- [Environmental Accessibility Checklist](#)
- [Access Check Template](#)
- [NSW Health Accessible Communications Policy](#)
- [Accessibility and Inclusivity Toolkit | Digital NSW](#)



## Accessibility checklist

Ensure all aspects of co-design are accessible:

### Venue and environment

Wheelchair access, adequate lighting, quiet spaces.

### Communication supports

Plain-language materials, assistive tech, interpreters.

### Timing and pacing

Extra processing time, scheduled breaks.

### Facilitation style

Trained facilitators who adapt to individual needs.

### Access checks

Conducted in advance to understand and accommodate individual requirements.

### TIP

Offer multiple response methods (phone, email, form) for access checks and share findings with the team.

## Training for inclusive co-design

Equip facilitators and participants with:

### Communication techniques

Active listening, plain language, checking for understanding.

### Recognising bias

Addressing unconscious biases that may exclude participants.

### Flexibility and adaptability

Adjusting approaches based on participant needs.

### Respect and empathy

Creating a safe, welcoming space for contribution.

### TIP

Develop training materials with input from people with communication support needs.

## Anticipating challenges

Be prepared by:

- Allowing flexibility in timelines and activities.
- Engaging disability support organisations for guidance.
- Seeking ongoing feedback to refine the approach.

### Accessible co-design planning checklist

#### Identify stakeholders

- People with lived experience
- Caregivers and support people
- Subject matter experts
- Diverse representation

#### Accessibility

- Complete [Accessible Co-Design Checklist](#)
- Complete [Access Check](#)
- Offer inclusive communication training for facilitators

#### Anticipate challenges

- Allow enough time for breaks
- Engage disability support organisations for guidance if needed
- Set up process for feedback

# Tools and resources for accessible engagement

Effectively engaging participants with communication support needs requires using the right tools and techniques to ensure everyone can contribute in a meaningful way.

## Communication tools and supports

Providing a range of communication supports helps participants express their thoughts in ways that suit their abilities and preferences.

### Assistive technologies

- **Speech-to-text software** helps participants who are non-verbal or prefer to type their responses.
- **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices** should be accommodated, with extra time provided for participants to respond.
- **Screen readers** should be supported by ensuring digital materials are in accessible formats (e.g., tagged PDFs and WCAG-compliant websites).

### Live captioning and subtitles

- Provide live captioning during discussions to support participants with hearing impairments.
- Ensure pre-recorded content includes subtitles to enhance accessibility.

### Visual supports

- Use **infographics, diagrams, and flowcharts** to simplify complex information.
- Provide **storyboards or picture-based guides** to help participants follow discussions and activities.

## Accessibility Resources

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG): [WCAG 2 Overview | Web Accessibility Initiative \(WAI\) | W3C](#)

Colour Contrast Checker: [Colour Contrast Checker](#)



## Interactive engagement techniques

Engagement techniques should allow participants to contribute in ways that align with their communication needs and preferences.

### Round robin discussions

- Ensure each participant has a turn to contribute, preventing dominant voices from taking over.
- Offer flexibility for those using communication devices, allowing them to type responses in advance or indicate their preferences.

### Small group breakouts

- Divide larger groups into smaller, structured discussions where participants may feel more comfortable contributing.
- Provide guiding questions or worksheets to help keep discussions on track.

### Written and visual contributions

- Allow participants to contribute using written responses, sticky notes, whiteboards, or drawings.
- This approach is particularly useful for those who may not feel comfortable speaking in a group setting.

### Interactive tools and applications

- Use digital collaboration platforms like **Miro, FigJam, or Padlet** to facilitate idea-sharing.
- Polling apps like **Mentimeter or Slido** allow participants to give input anonymously or in real time, ensuring broader engagement.

### Interactive Tools and Applications

- [Miro Board](#)
- [FigJam](#)
- [Padlet](#)
- [Mentimeter](#)
- [Slido](#)

## Facilitator strategies

Facilitators play a key role in creating an inclusive and supportive environment.

### Active listening and patience

- Maintain eye contact, acknowledge contributions, and allow extra processing time for participants to respond.
- Avoid interrupting and give participants space to communicate at their own pace.

### Clear and simple language

- Use **plain language** and avoid jargon. Break down instructions into manageable steps to improve understanding.
- Be prepared to **rephrase or clarify information** based on participant needs.

### Supportive body language

- Use open and welcoming gestures to create a safe space for communication.
- Be mindful of personal space and adjust interactions based on individual comfort levels.

## Feedback and inclusivity

Ensuring ongoing engagement means regularly checking in with participants and reinforcing that all contributions are valued.

### Acknowledging contributions

- Regularly affirm input by thanking participants and reinforcing the value of their perspectives.
- Recognise all types of contributions – whether verbal, written, or visual – to create a culture of inclusion.

### Regular check-ins

- Conduct brief check-ins during and after sessions to ensure accessibility needs are being met.
- Offer multiple ways for participants to provide feedback, such as **anonymous surveys, one-on-one conversations, or online forms**.

### Encouraging participation in decision-making

- Involve participants in shaping the structure of meetings, discussion topics, and priority-setting.
- When participants feel ownership over the process, they are more engaged and motivated to contribute.

By using a combination of tools, techniques, and strategies, facilitators can create a dynamic, inclusive environment that encourages all participants to engage meaningfully.

## Tools and Resources

### Accessibility

- [Accessible Documentation Quick Guide](#)
- [Participant Profile](#)
- [Easy Read Welcome Pack Example](#)
- [Welcome Pack Example](#)
- [Journey Map Template](#)
- [Stop, Pause, Go Template](#)

### Brainstorming Techniques

- [Power of Three](#)
- [Six Thinking Hats](#)

# Flexibility

Flexibility in co-design means being responsive to the diverse needs of participants, adapting methods and timelines, and creating space for meaningful engagement in a variety of ways. This includes flexible communication formats, adaptable facilitation, and openness to change based on feedback.

## Adapting to individual needs

Being flexible means recognising and accommodating different ways of participating. Facilitators should:

### Offer multiple ways to contribute

Speech, writing, visual input, assistive technology.

### Allow extra time

For processing, communication, and participation.

### Adjust materials

Provide accessible versions (e.g. easy-read, large print, visual guides).

## Encouraging positive group dynamics

Creating a balanced and inclusive group dynamic helps ensure all voices are heard. Strategies include:

### Using inclusive language

Avoid assumptions about participants' abilities or experiences.

### Celebrating diversity

Acknowledge and appreciate different perspectives, reinforcing their importance in the co-design process.

### Facilitating fair participation

Prevent any single voice from dominating while ensuring quieter participants have opportunities to contribute, using techniques like **round-robin discussions**.

## TIP

### Adapting on the go

**Check in regularly:** Ask participants if the pace, format, or environment is working for them.

**Provide options:** Let people choose how they contribute – speaking, writing, drawing, or using assistive technology.

**Don't rush:** Build in extra time for responses and decision-making. Silence is not disengagement.

## Flexible formats and scheduling

Adapt logistics and formats to suit participants:

### Flexible session times

Consider time of day, length of session, and breaks.

### Hybrid or remote options

Enable participation via phone, video call, or pre-recorded input.

### Adjust pace

Be willing to slow down or revisit topics if needed.

## Supporting autonomy and choice

Let participants lead their own engagement:

### Choose how to participate

Let people decide how and when to contribute.

### Optional participation in activities

Respect different energy levels and comfort zones.

### Support self-advocacy

Encourage participants to share what works for them.

## Responding to feedback

Flexibility also means adjusting your approach based on feedback:

### In-session check-ins

Pause to see how participants are going.

### Feedback-informed changes

Be ready to modify tools, facilitation styles, or group structures.

### Responsive planning

Build in time and resources for change, rather than sticking rigidly to a fixed agenda.

Flexibility in co-design means adapting methods, timelines, and communication approaches to meet the diverse needs of participants. By offering choice, allowing extra time, and being responsive to feedback, facilitators create a more inclusive and supportive experience.

## TIP

### Supportive tools

**Flexible participation menu:**  
a visual guide that shows all the ways a participant can contribute.

**Accessibility checklist**

# Gathering feedback

Collecting and evaluating feedback is essential to understanding the effectiveness of your co-design process and identifying areas for improvement. Ongoing feedback ensures that engagement remains responsive to participants' needs.

## Collecting feedback throughout the process

Gathering feedback at multiple stages — not just at the end — allows facilitators to make real-time adjustments.

### Regular check-ins

Periodically assess participants' comfort and accessibility needs through informal discussions, short surveys, or polls.

### Anonymous feedback options

Offer online surveys or comment boxes to encourage honest responses without fear of judgment.

### Inclusive feedback formats

Provide multiple ways to give feedback (verbal, written, or visual) to accommodate different communication preferences.

## Evaluating accessibility measures

Once feedback is collected, assess how well accessibility strategies were implemented:

### Participant satisfaction

Were participants able to fully engage? Did they feel their input was valued?

Example question: *“Did you feel that your communication needs were met?”*

### Identifying barriers

Look for recurring challenges, such as difficulty accessing materials or participating in discussions.

### Impact on participation

Review engagement data (e.g., participation levels, diversity of responses, use of different communication tools) to measure effectiveness.

## Measuring long-term impact

Beyond immediate feedback, assessing long-term outcomes helps determine if accessibility efforts were sustainable.

### Post-engagement surveys

Follow up with participants to evaluate their overall experience and identify further improvements.

Example question: *“What would have made your participation easier or more comfortable?”*

### Tracking outcomes

Assess whether the co-design process led to meaningful changes, particularly in addressing accessibility needs.

## Reporting and acting on feedback

Transparency in responding to feedback strengthens trust and reinforces collaboration.

### Action plans

Use feedback to refine future engagement strategies, such as improving accessibility tools.

### Transparent reporting

Share a summary of findings and planned improvements with participants to demonstrate their input has influenced change.

By actively gathering and acting on feedback, facilitators can continuously improve the co-design process, making it more inclusive, effective, and impactful for all participants.

### TIP

Want to learn more?

[Communication for Safe Care Model for Service Improvement](#)

[Best Practice for Accessible Communication in Healthcare](#)

# Case Study: Communication for Safe Care Project

In the *Communication for Safe Care* project, accessibility and inclusion were prioritised from the outset. The team implemented proactive strategies to ensure all participants—regardless of their communication support needs—could contribute meaningfully.

## Step 1: Conducting access checks

Before workshops were scheduled, access checks were carried out via phone calls and online forms, offering multiple ways for participants to share their needs. These checks helped identify:

- A participant who preferred plain-language materials to aid comprehension.
- A participant who needed visual aids rather than text-based information.
- A caregiver who would accompany a participant with complex communication needs.

### KEY INSIGHT

Access checks provided critical information, allowing adjustments to be made before the sessions, rather than reacting to barriers on the day.

## Step 2: Implementing accessibility measures

Using insights from access checks, the team tailored the co-design process:

### Venue selection

Chose spaces with wheelchair access, quiet breakout areas, and good lighting to support sensory needs.

### Materials preparation

Created plain-language resources, provided agendas in advance, and used infographics to support comprehension.

### Communication supports

Arranged live captioning for participants with hearing impairments and an Auslan interpreter for a participant requiring sign language support.

### Flexible participation options

Allowed contributions via writing, voice recordings, and one-on-one discussions for those uncomfortable with group settings.

### KEY INSIGHT

Thoughtful adjustments ensured that participants were set up for success before the sessions even began.

## Step 3: Training facilitators and participants

To create an inclusive environment, facilitators and healthcare workers received training on:

### Inclusive communication

Strategies like using open-ended questions, plain language, and checking for understanding.

### Encouraging participation

Allowing extra response time and using structured turn-taking methods.

### Recognising bias

Addressing unconscious biases to foster an environment of mutual respect.

#### KEY INSIGHT

Training empowered facilitators to be flexible and responsive to participant needs.

## Step 4: Adapting facilitation techniques in real time

During one workshop, the team used various engagement methods:

- Participants had **colour-coded cards** to indicate when they wanted to contribute or needed more time.
- Sessions included **frequent breaks** and access to a quiet space.
- Discussions were structured to ensure all voices were heard, including using a **round-robin format** where each participant had an opportunity to contribute.

#### KEY INSIGHT

By offering multiple ways to engage, participants felt more comfortable and included.

## Outcomes and participant feedback

The impact of these strategies was clear in participant feedback:

- “This is the first time I’ve felt like my input truly mattered in a group like this.”
- “Everything about this process was designed to make it easy for me to contribute.”

The success of this approach demonstrated that accessibility planning leads to more effective, inclusive, and meaningful co-design experiences.

By embedding accessibility from the start, the *Communication for Safe Care* project ensured that all participants — regardless of their communication abilities — could engage fully and shape the project’s outcomes.

# Appendix: Accessible Co-Design Resources

Link	Description
<a href="#">Access Check Template</a>	Checklist to review access needs of co-design participants
<a href="#">Accessibility Checklist</a>	Checklist to review the accessibility of the environment and resources
<a href="#">Accessible Co-Design Checklist</a>	Quick guide to ensuring co-design process is accessible
<a href="#">Accessible Documentation Quick Guide</a>	Quick guide to developing accessible written documentation
<a href="#">Easy Read Welcome Pack Example</a>	Example of a co-design welcome pack in Easy Read format
<a href="#">Journey Map</a>	Template to develop patient journey maps for visual storytelling
<a href="#">Participant Profile</a>	Template to create participant profile to identify access needs
<a href="#">Participation Menu</a>	Tool to demonstrate participation options
<a href="#">Power of Three –Brainstorming</a>	Guide to brainstorming activity
<a href="#">Six Thinking Hats –Brainstorming</a>	Guide to brainstorming activity
<a href="#">Stop, Pause, Go Resource</a>	Resource to support participation in co-design
<a href="#">WNSW OH Welcome Pack Example</a>	Example of co-design welcome pack