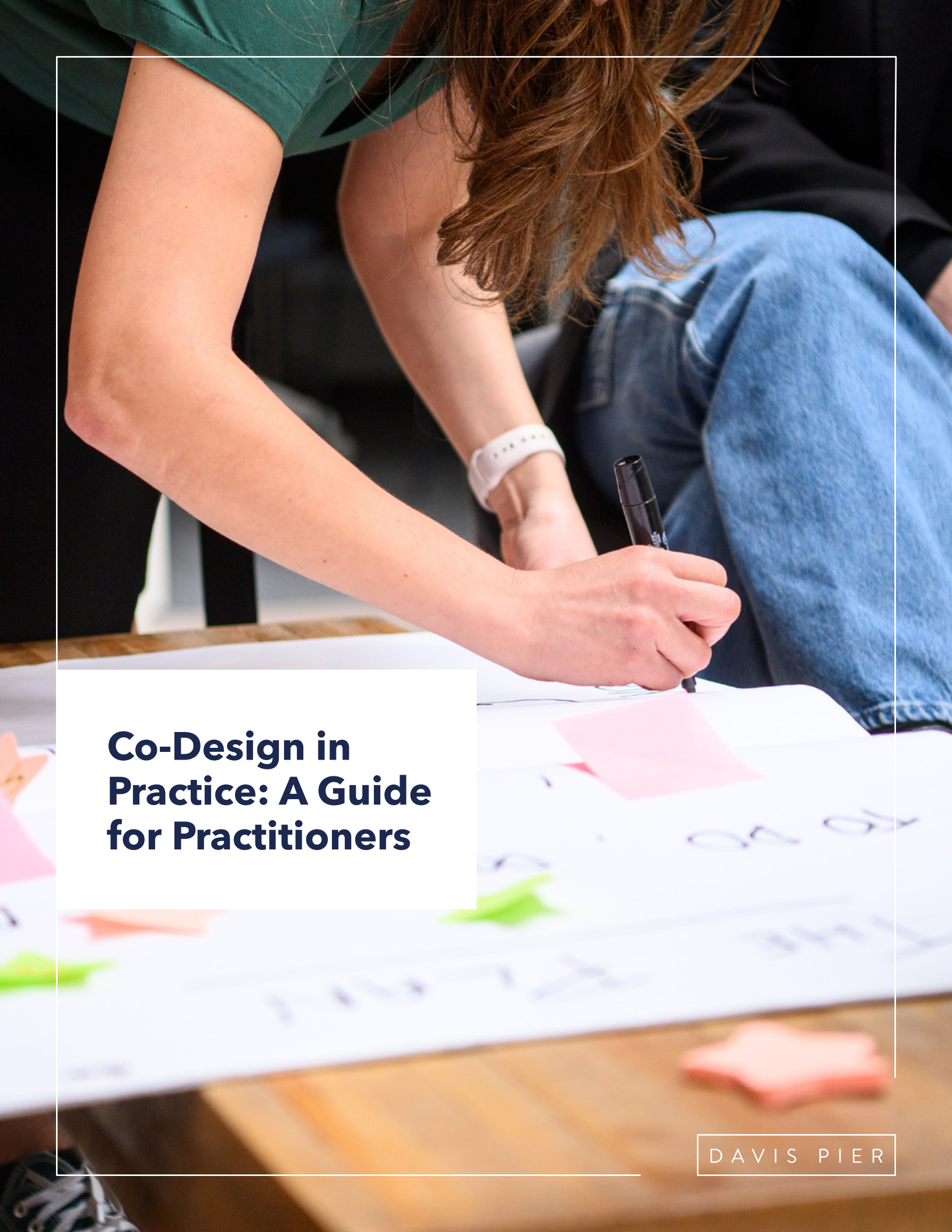




Co-Design in Practice: A Guide for Practitioners

DAVIS PIER

About the Toolkit

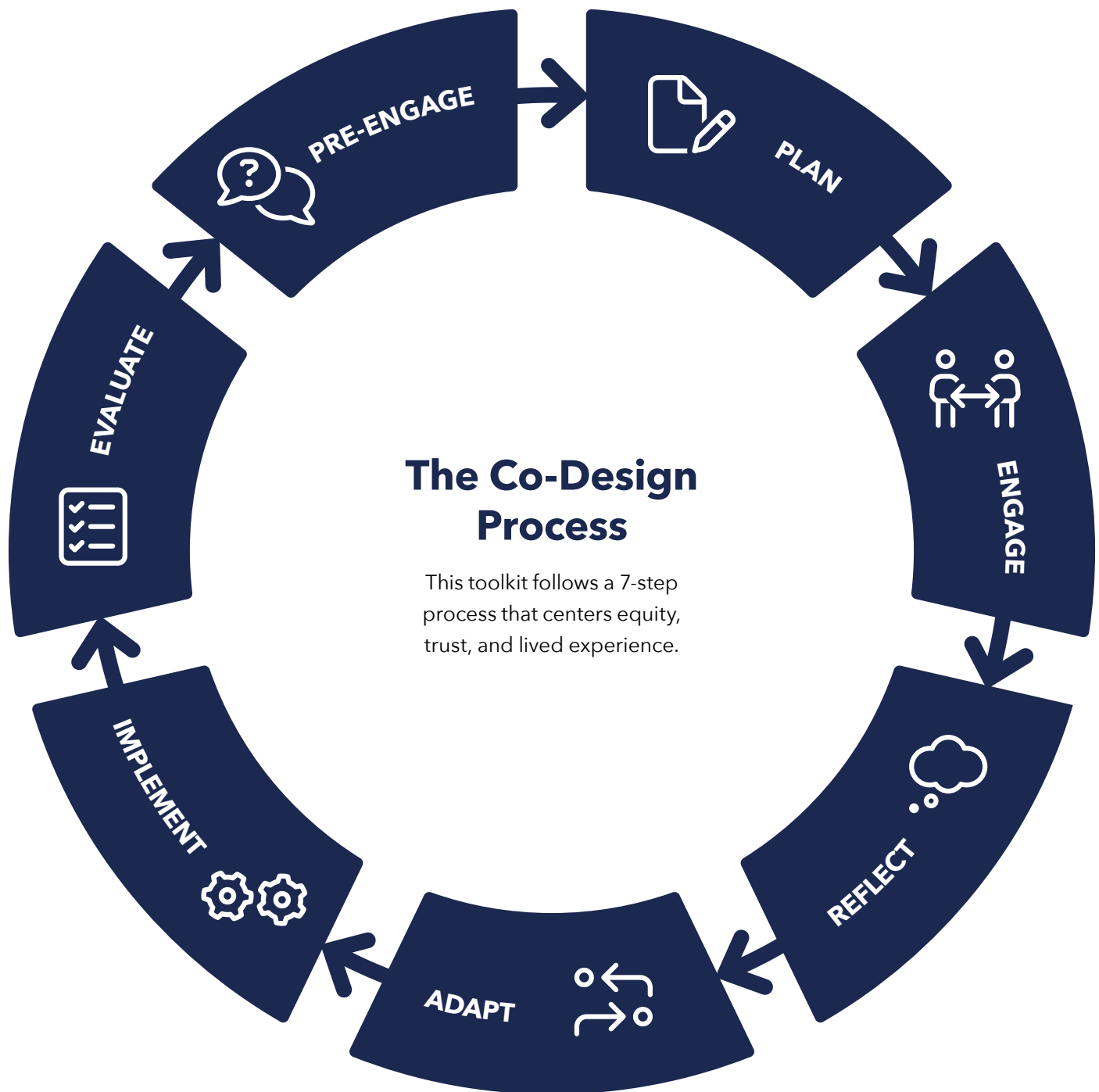
The best community services are built with the people who use them—not for them. This toolkit helps practitioners embed lived experience, or “first voice”, at every step of program design and decision-making. It is particularly helpful for working with people who:

- live with disabilities,
- experience homelessness or housing insecurity,
- have survived domestic or gender-based violence,
- belong to equity-seeking or marginalized groups, and/or
- have been excluded from shaping the systems that affect them.

This toolkit can also be used when co-creating with any group. Each co-design process is unique and should be tailored to your specific audience and context.

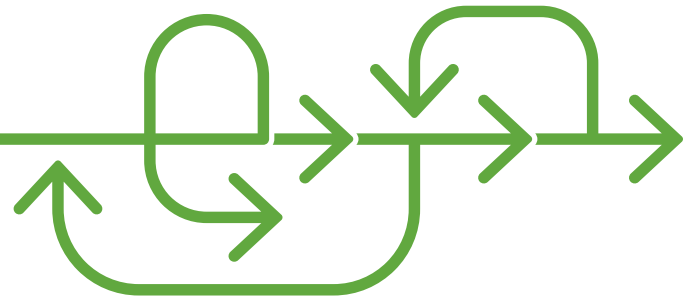
**This toolkit
provides practical
approaches and
adaptable tools.**





The Co-Design Journey

Co-design isn't a linear process—it is a cycle of trust, creativity, and learning. Here's a 7-step path you can follow, with tools, tips, and space to bring it to life.



1. Pre-Engage: Start with Trust

Co-design begins before the first workshop.

What this step is about:

- Building relationships so people feel safe to show up.
- Understanding accessibility, support, and cultural needs upfront.
- Setting the tone: allowing people to feel that this is their space, and their voice matters.

In the future, people can choose how to manage their supports. What would help you with **planning your support**?

WHAT DO YOU WANT HELP WITH?
Circle as many as you like below

I want help...

...understanding what I need	...scheduling supports
...finding support options	...paying for supports
...hiring the right support workers	

What else? : _____

IF YOU'D LIKE, TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT WOULD HELP YOU PLAN YOUR SUPPORTS
Write or draw your answer below

Methods you can use:

1:1 Listening Chats. Informal conversations with participants and knowledge-holders or traditional knowledge keepers to ask: What will make this process comfortable for you?

Accessibility Check-In. Ask participants about their access needs and work to determine and provide the necessary supports, including interpretation, assistive technology, sensory tools, transportation, and child care.

Welcome Packages. Share plain-language info about the process (visual timeline, how participants will be compensated for their time, who they should contact if they need support or have questions).

Inviting Support. Ask if participants want to bring a trusted friend, advocate, or support person.



2. Plan: Set the Stage Together

Co-design works best when everyone agrees on the “why” and “how.”

What this step is about:

- Getting clear on what is meant by “co-design”.
- Ensuring goals are clear and shared.
- Deciding how people want to work together.
- Creating safety, clarity, and shared expectations.



Methods you can use:

Co-Design Meaning Circle. Ask participants, “What does working together mean to you?” and “What would true collaboration look like here?” Combine participants’ words and visuals into a plain-language poster that defines what co-design means for this group. Display it as a living reference throughout the project.

Goal-Setting Circle. Participants name what outcomes matter most to them. The facilitator can turn these into plain-language goals.

Expectation Mapping. Ask “What will make this process work for you?” and “What should we avoid?” Document this together on a flip chart or poster board.

Process Roadmap. Co-create a simple timeline of steps everyone can see and understand. Draw it on a wall or board for continued reference throughout the process.

Informed Consent. Provide participants with information in a clear and understandable manner so they can make an informed decision about whether and how to participate, as well as how they can withdraw their consent if desired.

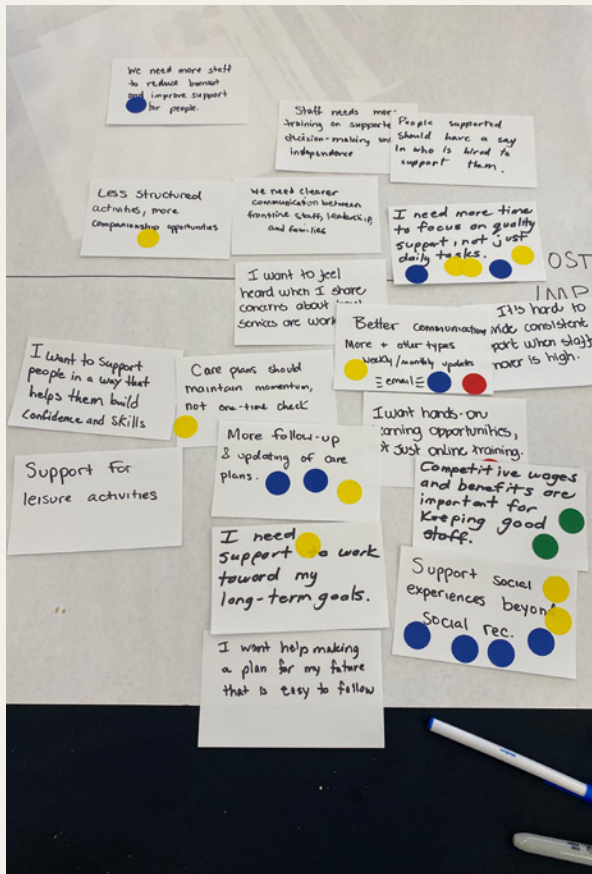


3. Engage: Open the Circle

This is the heart of co-design—listening, sharing, and generating ideas together

What this step is about:

- Treating first voice participants as experts.
- Offering safe spaces for participants to share their knowledge and ideas in creative, participatory ways.
- Making sure there are a variety of ways to contribute.
- Building collective ownership of the process.



Methods you can use:

Storytelling Circles. People can share experiences based on prompts such as “a time I felt supported was...” or “a barrier I faced was...”

Journey Mapping. Participants sketch or describe their “day in the life” or “service navigation experience.” Document the key steps and pain points of the journey.

PhotoVoice / Creative Expression. Invite people to bring photos, objects, or drawings that show their lived reality.

Participatory Voting. Use dots, emojis, stickers, or coloured cards to prioritize what matters most the participants.

Interactive Feedback Wall. Post questions or themes on a wall or poster board. Participants add sticky notes, symbols, or drawings to share their perspectives. The wall grows throughout the session, becoming a visible record of collective input.



4. Reflect: Create Meaning Together

Make space to share back and validate shared understanding.

What this step is about:

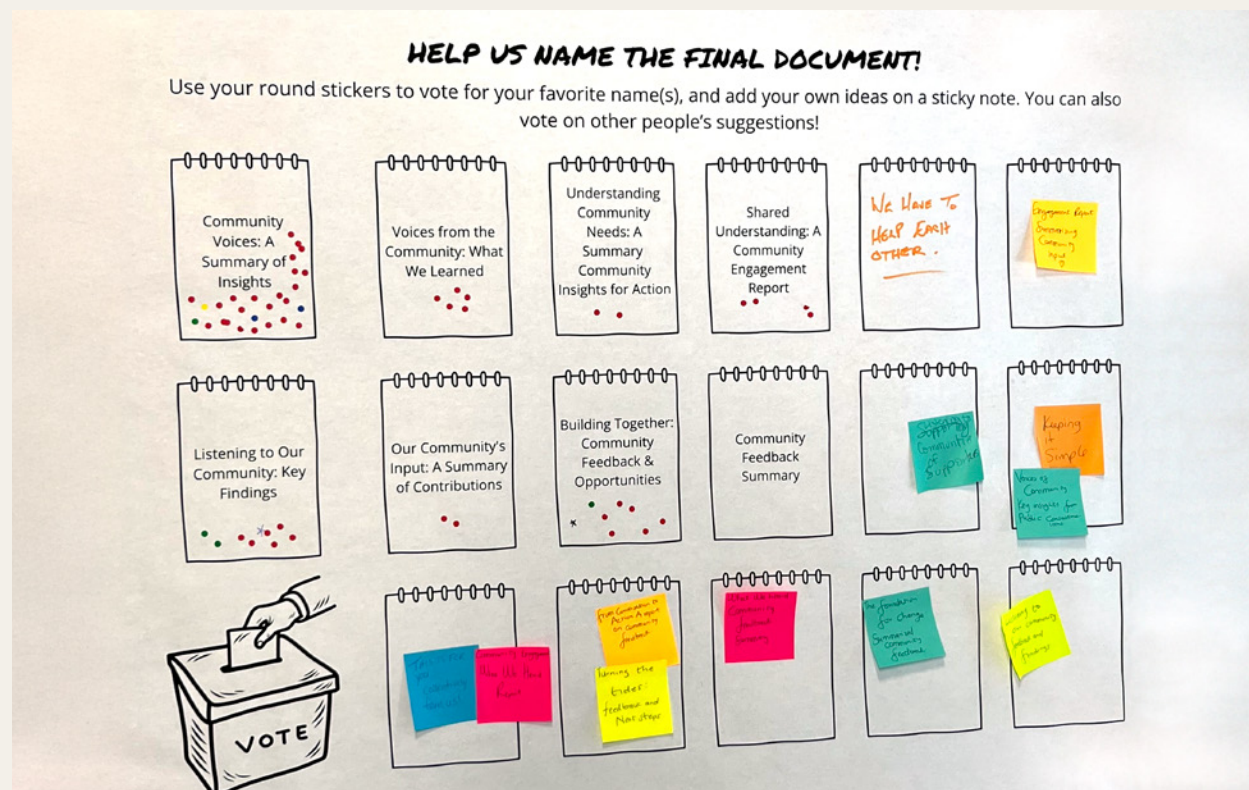
- Checking that what was shared is captured well.
- Helping participants to understand how their ideas fit into the plan and how their input will be used.
- Building trust by showing you've really listened.

What methods you can use:

Interactive Feedback Wall. Summarize contributions on a wall or poster board with a focus on reflecting what was heard and what it means. Invite participants to confirm, add, or correct this content.

Theme-Building Activity. Group sticky notes into clusters with participants. Label the themes together.

Validation Rounds. Ask small groups to react with probing questions like: "Does this reflect your experience?" or "What is missing?"





5. Adapt: Stay Flexible

Support shared decision-making and show people how their voices are shaping the process in real-time.

Remember that shared decision making is different from giving recommendations.

What this step is about:

- Making changes to solutions or the process based on input.
- Proving that co-design is responsive, not static.

What methods you can use:

Stop / Start / Continue. Participants share ideas about what should stop, start, or continue in the process.

Prototype Sprint. Take feedback, revise quickly, and re-test a “version 2” the same day or week.

Accessible Summaries. Share back short updates that covers what you heard, with a focus on highlighting what has changed.





6. Implement: Make it Real

This is where ideas leave the poster boards and pages and start to live in practice.

What this step is about:

- Turning co-created ideas into actions.
- Keeping lived experience at the table during roll-out.
- Reflecting participant input clearly in the actions and next steps.

What methods you can use:

Pilot Projects. Test a solution on a small scale with the participants who contributed as co-evaluators.

Usability Testing. Invite people with lived experience to use your product independently or with support from a moderator.

Co-Facilitated Training. Invite people with lived experience to help deliver orientation and/or training for staff.

Progress Dashboards. Create visual trackers that demonstrate commitments, actions, progress, and status updates. These can be digital and/or physical, but mixed media options are always recommended.



7. Evaluate: Report Back & Celebrate

Wrap up well—evaluation is part of building long-term trust.

What this step is about:

- Measuring results with participants, not just for them.
- Showing accountability and celebrating contributions.
- Setting the stage for the next cycle.

What methods you can use:

Co-Led Panels. Panels of people with lived experience review evaluation outcomes and make recommendations.

Photovoice or Storytelling Showcase. Participants capture changes through photos or stories and share them back.

Tip Sheet: Accessibility

Co-design is only meaningful if everyone can take part fully and fairly. Here are some things to be mindful of that should be built into every engagement:

Time & Compensation

- Pay people for their expertise with honouraria, stipends, or gift cards.
- Cover costs of participation including transportation, childcare, meals, and technology/data.

Trauma-Informed Practice

- Always ask permission before sensitive discussions and provide an opportunity for participants to opt out.
- Provide options for private or anonymous input.
- Offer peer support or trusted allies to sit in for support.

Multiple Ways to Engage

- Offer choices for how people contribute such as speaking, drawing, writing, or using symbols/objects.
- Use plain language materials alongside more detailed documents.
- Provide alternatives for people who can't join in person.

Accessibility & Inclusion

- Use interpreters, captioning, or translation where needed.
- Offer sensory-friendly spaces (quiet rooms, breaks, etc.)
- Ensure materials are visually accessible (large print, high-contrast, visual symbols, etc.)



DAVIS PIER

Big Ideas. Bigger Impact.

Davis Pier Consulting is a Canadian social impact firm known for leading large-scale transformation and implementation in the social services, healthcare, and public sectors. We leverage human-centred and participatory approaches to design, deliver, and improve social services programs.

Our teams act as translators across government, service providers, and community—bringing people together to co-create stronger solutions and generate positive outcomes for people.

Davis Pier is actively supporting transformation efforts in the disability support sector to enable provincial systems to design and deliver services that improve choice, inclusion, and opportunities for people living with disabilities.

Davis Pier has extensive experience in co-design and community engagement methods and can support you in designing tailored, flexible, and interactive approaches to engaging people, building trust in community, and delivering meaningful solutions.

If you're interested in learning more about these services or need assistance with designing your approach, [click here](#) to reach out and our team will be in touch.