



Co-Designing the Future of Disability Services with First Voice Leadership

A white paper by Karis Disability Services & Davis Pier Consulting

Executive Summary

Across Canada and internationally, the developmental services sector is shifting toward more person-directed, community-based models that prioritize self-direction, inclusion, and individualized supports.

Karis *Everybody Engages* was an engagement process designed to ensure that the voices and experiences of people most directly impacted guide the organization's strategic direction. [Karis Disability Services](#) partnered with [Davis Pier Consulting](#) to design and deliver this inclusive co-design process that engaged people with disabilities, families, employees, and leaders across Ontario and Saskatchewan.

Through in-person workshops, virtual sessions, and varied ways to participate, Karis co-designed its 2026-2029 strategic priorities with the people most impacted by its work.

“

When we get to help make the plan, it feels like it belongs to us, too.

–Self-advocate participant

Why Co-Design Matters



It shifts power from organizations designing for people to designing with people.



It produces better outcomes because strategies are grounded in lived experience.



It builds trust by demonstrating that all voices—especially first voices—matter.

Setting the Stage

Karis Disability Services is a Christian faith-based organization supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Ontario and Saskatchewan, empowering them to live full and meaningful lives in their communities. As the sector evolves, Karis recognized the need for a new approach to strategic planning—one grounded in lived experience and shaped collaboratively alongside the people it serves.

Karis Everybody Engages was designed to:

- create intentional space for first voice perspectives to inform strategic direction.
- build an organization-wide culture of shared learning and collective vision-setting.
- strengthen relationships between people with disabilities, families, and employees.

And it was designed in the context of significant sector change and challenges, including:

- strained funding for both people and Karis
- long waitlists for support
- limited housing and employment options
- workforce shortages
- growing expectations from government and communities for inclusive, person-directed models

Government initiatives such as [Ontario's Journey to Belonging](#), [Saskatchewan's People Before Systems](#), and [Nova Scotia's Human Rights Remedy](#) reinforce the urgency of co-designing services that truly reflect what people value.

“

Co-design is about asking people: what we think, what we know, and what matters most in our lives.

—Self-advocate



Designing With, Not For

We created a process where everyone could contribute meaningfully, no matter how they preferred to participate.

Before launching the main engagement activities, we invested time in pre-engagement with people supported, families, and employees. These early conversations and relationship-building steps helped us understand accessibility needs, set the right tone, and shape an approach that felt welcoming and inclusive from the start. Pre-engagement was critical in building trust and ensuring that our methods reflected what participants told us would make it easier for them to be involved.

Over ten months, we offered a range of engagement opportunities:

- **10 in-person interactive sessions** in Ontario and Saskatchewan, bringing together people supported, families, and employees.
- **1 take home reflection activities** to help participants think about their goals and priorities at their own pace.
- **3 webinars with everybody** to expand reach and increase awareness about co-design.
- **3 surveys** in plain language and visual formats to make participation accessible for people with diverse communication needs.
- **26 virtual sessions** with key groups to dive deeper into specific topics or emerging themes.

Inclusive Co-Design in Practice

- **First voice leads.** People with disabilities, co-facilitated, and set priorities.
- **Multiple ways to participate.** Conversation, drawing, voting, storytelling
- **Accessible for all.** Plain language materials, visuals, and accommodations.
- **Safe, respectful spaces.** Co-created ground rules and open dialogue.
- **Listen, reflect, adapt.** Feedback loops built into every stage.

“

To me, Co-design is about what's important to me, how I feel and to make sure my voice is heard. It means that I have the chance to participate and engage.

–Self advocate
co-host



Accessibility adaptations made for participants – large print agendas, visual voting tools, sensory friendly spaces, captioning for videos

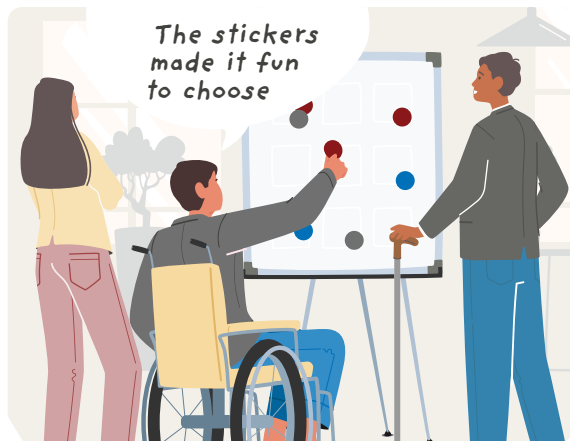
Visual Storyboard: Our Journey Together



We started by listening.



We shared our stories and dreams.



We voted, drew, and built ideas together.



We challenged assumptions.



We chose what matters most.



We shaped a new direction for Karis.

What We Recommend for the Sector



Lead with First Voice

Embed self-advocates in leadership roles and decision-making from the start.



Invest in Accessibility

Budget for accommodations, participation supports, and accessible communication.



Make Co-Design Continuous

Treat co-design as part of regular planning cycles, not a one-time event.



Co-Design as a Way of Working

Co-design is most powerful when it becomes an everyday way of working:

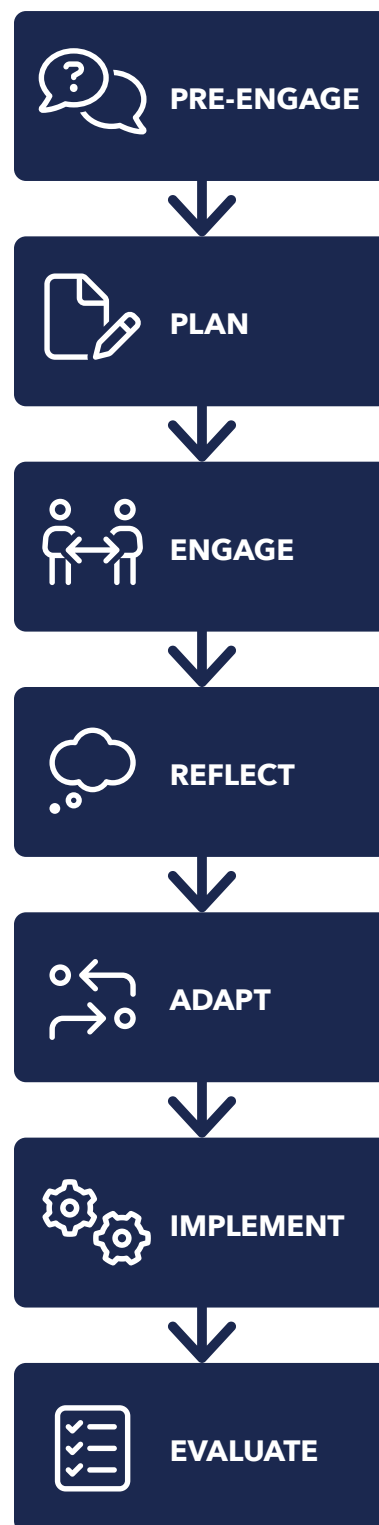
1. **Pre-Engage.** Build trust, relationships, and understanding before formal engagement begins. Listen early to accessibility needs and priorities to shape the process in an inclusive way.
2. **Plan.** Set goals shaped by first voice priorities.
3. **Engage.** Bring people together through intentional, inclusive, and accessible participation.
4. **Reflect.** Listen with empathy, review feedback, and find themes.
5. **Adapt.** Adjust based on what we've learned.
6. **Implement.** Put decisions into action with people with disabilities at the table.
7. **Evaluate.** Review outcomes together and decide what's next.

First Voice at the Centre of Co-Design

Through our Karis *Everybody Engages* process, people with disabilities told us the five essentials that make co-design work:

1. **Time to connect and share.** Space for flexible conversation at your own pace.
2. **Information for everyone.** Share in plain language, with visuals and varied formats.
3. **Support to speak up.** Ensure the presence of trusted allies, tailored accommodations, and opportunities to build confidence.
4. **Respect for all ideas.** Every voice counts and differences are valued.
5. **A clear, visible plan.** Present goals in a way that is easy to see, follow, and measure.

We have developed a practical toolkit to help practitioners embed first voice leadership at every stage of policy, program, and service design. Download the toolkit [here](#).



What We've Learned Together

The Karis *Everybody Engages* process demonstrated that co-design is not an add-on—it's the foundation for meaningful change in disability services. By centering first voice leadership, Karis has built a strategic plan that reflects the hopes, needs, and strengths of the people it serves.

DAVIS PIER

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.



Karis Disability Services (formerly Christian Horizons) is a non-profit, developmental services organization. We help people with disabilities accomplish their goals and thrive in communities where their God-given gifts are valued and celebrated.

We work in Ontario and Saskatchewan, and globally in six countries.

In Canada, we provide a variety of services, mostly to adults with disabilities and their families. Some of these services include group and independent living, accessible family camps, advocacy, employment and volunteer training, respite, and leisure programs.

Outside of Canada, we partner with organizations in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Nicaragua, and Uganda working with local leaders and organizations to provide accessible education and accessible community development.



Authors:

Naima Samuel
Manager of Strategic Initiatives
Karis Disability Services

Eugene Versteeg
Senior Vice President
Karis Disability Services

Élisabeth Houle
Principal
Davis Pier Consulting