

Key Principles for Community Co-design

Co-design is the practice of community engagement that challenges conventional power dynamics by meaningfully involving community participants in partnership or collaboration with public bodies. It is becoming an increasingly common approach taken by public authorities. This reflects the growing desire to give more agency and influence over project outcomes to the communities they represent.

When carried out with care and consideration, co-design allows a diversity of knowledge and experience, both professional and lived, to shape a project from its fundamentals. Through this process, community ownership is grown and sustained. When done well, co-design can achieve outcomes beyond the scope of traditional methods of engagement. Although it must be acknowledged that not every project can be co-designed, it should be the benchmark to which all commissioning authorities aspire.

The following principles can help guide your thinking if you are considering starting a co-design process:

- 1. Build institutional support:** understand the resources you have and how they will give your project and ambitions parameters and constraints. Make sure that there is will from the traditional decision makers to take a different approach (if there is not, co-design may not be the right process for your project).
- 2. Be inclusive:** involve a diverse range of community members who have varying perspectives, experiences, and expertise. Look at what barriers to participation people who you most want to reach may have, and find solutions to overcome them.
- 3. Devolve power:** ensure that community members feel like they are able to take ownership of the design process, and are supported to make decisions.
- 4. Prioritise collaboration:** create an environment where community members work together, in a non-hierarchical way, with designers, planners, and other stakeholders towards a common goal. Be aware of power dynamics and seek to challenge the 'status quo'.
- 5. Be transparent:** build trust by being transparent about the design and decision making process and ensure that community members feel heard and valued. Be clear what decisions have already been made and why.
- 6. Embrace learning:** encourage a culture of mutual learning where community members and professional stakeholders can share and learn.
- 7. Allow iteration:** allow for multiple iterations and refinements to the design to ensure it can reflect community feedback and priorities.



8. **Mandate accessibility:** make access to the design process and all associated materials are accessible to all, providing additional resources where needed.
9. **Evaluate as you go:** conduct regular evaluation to understand the success and value of the co-design process.
10. **Co-define success:** work with your co-design group to define what success will look like and built a community centred evaluation outcome framework, that continues after your project concludes.



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Co-design in Action – Thamesmead Case Study

Thamesmead is a town in South-East London, straddling the London Borough of Bexley and Royal Borough of Greenwich. It is the same size as central London but has a population of just 47,000 people.

Peabody is leading a major regeneration and placemaking programme across the town, with a mission to grow, improve and look after Thamesmead for the long term. Their work aims to bring about thousands of homes and jobs; much improved green and blue spaces; new leisure, cultural and commercial facilities and activities; and better connections with central London.

Having taken ownership of 65% of the land in Thamesmead, Peabody is now a custodian of much of Thamesmead's remarkable landscape. They are now responsible for some 240 hectares of parks and green space, 7km of canals, five lakes, 5km of river frontage and 53,000 trees, and are working with residents and partners to transform shared spaces into welcoming, accessible, and greener places to be enjoyed by people now and for years to come.

The £3.9 million South Thamesmead Garden Estate programme illustrates Peabody's approach to placemaking and place-keeping. Having started in 2018, this five-year initiative is transforming more than three hectares of

under-used green spaces in this south east London neighbourhood.

The programme is supported by the Mayor of London and Groundwork London, and is contributing to the CLEVER Cities research project (part-funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme) which looks at how nature-based solutions can help address the effects of the climate crisis, increase biodiversity, and help tackle social and economic inequalities.

The programme has been designed by muf architecture/art, in association with the self-titled Community Design Collective (CDC)—a group of local residents who were recruited and trained to work on the programme part-time on the London Living Wage. The CDC has been involved in all aspects of the design process: investing more than 1,500 hours in design conversations, site visits and client meetings between 2018 and 2023.

The programme is being delivered in two phases across South Thamesmead and will deliver a raft of improvements shaped by the lived experiences of those in the CDC. The first phase, which completed in 2021, has seen the creation of an edible garden for local people; planting of wildflower meadows; and high-quality planting, lighting and play equipment and seating across two large housing estates.



Image by Ewan-M from Wikimedia Commons

The second phase, which began in 2023 and will complete in 2024, will include the transformation more than three hectares of land into a reinvigorated, better connected landscape, which will include refurbished pathways and new seating to improve accessibility; picturesque planting and new trees (including fruit trees); social and cooking areas; an outdoor classroom; rain gardens; new and upgraded play areas; and new lighting. As the second phase is delivered during, the CDC will continue to meet and learn about the progress being made.

Even as the South Thamesmead Garden Estate has shown clearly that local people are agents of change, Young Foundation, a partner of CLEVER Cities, is looking at how best to measure the social impact of the work in Thamesmead. This spans from developing a monitoring and evaluation plan based on a theory of change outcome-based framework, to working with community members to help define the success criteria. This evaluation work will not conclude at the project's end, and Peabody has committed to post-occupancy monitoring for up to five years.

Like any co-creation work, this programme presented both opportunities and challenges,

as Peabody has moved away from more traditional approaches to decision-making to new ways of engaging and collaborating with communities. While this approach is more resource intensive, Peabody maintain that the rewards of working in this way are significant: residents have benefited from opportunities to learn new skills, build relationships, and create sustainable places, while colleagues across the organisation have strengthened their skills, deepened their understanding of community engagement and enabled change to happen.

Thanks to the work of CLEVER Cities, and the CDC on the South Thamesmead Garden Estate, Peabody has created a governance structure which ensures community members are integrated into decision-making as they co-design other spaces in the future. It is a governance model that is now being used for another project, Pathways to the Thames, which began in 2022 and will see the co-creation of welcoming, accessible green routes connecting Thamesmead and its residents to the nearby river. Already, a community working group has been formed as a bridge between Peabody and the wider community and will soon be undertaking an ecological study of the area to explore opportunities to improve biodiversity and accessibility.



Image by Nur Andi Ravsanjani Gusma
from Pexels

“Our plans for the South Thamesmead Garden Estate are both ambitious and exciting. It’s fantastic to breathe life into so many green spaces and see people enjoy them. We’re now following the progress on the final part of the programme which will benefit so many people in the community, whether they’re passing by, coming out to play or learn, or meeting with friends and neighbours.”

John Hogan

Community Design Collective (CDC) member

“The South Thamesmead Garden Estate aims to welcome everyone from the community. By bringing local people into decision-making and discussion, and by listening and learning, we are creating a revitalised landscape for people right on their doorstep. We’ve learned so much through this programme which we’ll now be applying to other projects throughout the town.”

Phil Askew

Director of Landscaping and Placemaking