

INCLUSIVE INVOLVEMENT IN COMMISSIONING:

Guidance for meaningful co-production with people with learning disabilities and autism.

TURNING POINT

LDE
Learning Disability England

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ARC England

CIPS Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply

BCE Bespoke Consultancy & Education Ltd

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, health and social care commissioners across England have successfully embedded involvement and co-production into many of their service monitoring and feedback processes.



However, this movement has been markedly less successful in another vital process that determines how services will support people: commissioning them in the first place.

This means that the voice of the people most impacted by service decisions are only present when a service already exists, limiting the scope of their influence and excluding them from crucial discussions that could affect their lives every day. These decisions are therefore more likely to miss what really matters when designing services, resulting in poorer outcomes, exacerbated inequalities, and more work in the long-term to try and rectify initial missteps.

This exclusion disproportionately impacts people with a learning disability, autistic people, and people with additional communication needs; groups who are often left out of commissioning decisions because these technical and legal processes are not designed to be accessible. Long documents, complex language, short timescales, formal meetings, and lack of support can all create barriers. Where people are involved, it can be tokenistic and not founded in the principles of co-production, preventing people from having a genuine say in decisions.

Inclusive involvement helps prevent this. It means supporting people to share their views in ways that work for them, listening to what they say, and making decisions that reflect their wishes. It means valuing lived experience as expertise alongside professional knowledge and using it to shape decisions from the start, not just asking for comments after choices have already been made. It means working alongside people with lived experience and involving them in the conversations that are important to them.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Throughout this guidance we use **involvement** as a broad term for the different ways people can participate in commissioning. This term recognises the decision-making power of commissioning processes where people with lived experience should influence decisions but are not ultimately responsible for the legal and financial choices made. However, any aspects of involvement that happen within the commissioning process - as outlined in this document - should be underpinned by the principles of co-production.

We use **co-production** to describe an approach to involvement that is based on sharing power, valuing lived experience, and working together as equal partners. Not all involvement will be co-production, but all involvement should seek to reflect co-production principles wherever possible.



WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guidance aims to help commissioners meaningfully and impactfully involve people with a learning disability and autistic people in their commissioning processes.

The people who helped shape this guide have lived experience themselves. They identified what would make the process clearer, simpler and easier to take part in, and their voices are reflected throughout the recommendations.

This guidance applies both when commissioning general and specialist services (e.g. services specifically for people with a learning disability or autistic people), recognising that people with a learning disability and autistic people should also have chance to influence the commissioning of wider services.

The focus of this guide is on competitive tenders. This is where many commissioners often face challenges incorporating the flexibility necessary to accommodate people's preferred communication styles and ways of working.

However, we recognise that commissioning is not only about contracts and tenders; it also includes support arranged through Direct Payments, Individual Service Funds (ISFs), and personal budgets.

While these are more commonly co-produced by nature of putting employment decisions into the hands of people using support, we hope that this guide provides some useful direction on the principles that should underpin every process regardless of commissioning style. Fundamentally, people must be involved in decisions about how their support is designed, delivered, and reviewed.

We also recognise that implementing these practices will likely increase commissioning accessibility for wider groups of individuals than people with a learning disability and autistic people. People with English as an additional language or with low literacy, for instance, would benefit from clear processes explained in simple language with support to participate in their preferred way. While the specific needs of these groups are beyond the scope of this guidance, we hope that the principles and prompts are useful to making processes truly and meaningfully representative for everyone.

We encourage commissioners to use this guide when planning and commissioning services, and to share our complementary 'Guide for People with Lived Experience' with the people they involve in their processes. This can be used during conversations to accessibly explain what commissioning is and how it can be done inclusively, helping people advocate for their own involvement in decisions that impact their lives.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS RESOURCE

In this document you'll find practical advice on how to involve people with lived experience throughout the commissioning cycle:

1

MARKET ENGAGEMENT

Understanding local needs and gaps in current provision

Go to page ➜



2

SPECIFICATION DESIGN

What services should look like, how they would best support people and meet needs

Go to page ➜



3

EVALUATION CRITERIA & TENDER DESIGN

Including choosing questions for evaluation panels and their score weighting

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GO-LIVE

What happens while the tender is out to market

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TENDER EVALUATION & SCORING

Assessing bids and presentations against the agreed specification and evaluation criteria

Go to page ➜

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CONTRACT AWARD

Deciding who wins the contract, feedback given, and next steps to continue involvement

Go to page ➜

This guidance demonstrates what good practice should look like on the ground. It can prompt considerations around ways to remove small but impactful access barriers, and provide a useable checklist to assess processes against. While this process as a whole is aspirational and will take some time to embed, we have included real-world examples from commissioning teams who are doing parts of these processes to a high standard, to ensure they're practical and realistic for other teams to recreate.

You will also find links to some additional resources you might find helpful to understand more about inclusive commissioning and working with people with a learning disability and autistic people.

ABOUT INVOLVEMENT IN COMMISSIONING

Commissioning teams spending public funds are required by law to involve people who use services, support networks, and local support leads in planning, designing, and making decisions about services.

This clear legal duty is set out in current legislation and available guidance including:

- Mental Health Act (2007)
- Health and Care Act (2022)
- Mental Capacity Act (2005 - amended 2019)
- Equality Act (2010)
- Core20PLUS5 health inequalities objectives
- Human Rights Act (1998)
- UNCRC and UNCRPD conventions
- NHS England's statutory guidance on working in partnership with people and communities
- Skills for Care's 'Commissioning services for people with a learning disability' framework.

Commissioners must also make involvement accessible to uphold the human rights and citizenship of everyone in their local communities, and to meaningfully understand and address the inequalities and barriers local people face.

To fulfil these obligations, commissioners should:

- Involve people early enough for their views to influence decisions
- Make reasonable adjustments so people can take part
- Ensure involvement is meaningful, not tokenistic.

If people are excluded because of communication needs, disability, or lack of support, involvement can therefore be considered unlawful and should be challenged – both internally if you are told to commission incorrectly and legally in the wider market if processes operate without integrity and transparency.

But while the law requires commissioners to involve people, most guidance around co-production lays out ethical values and principles but little-to-no guidance on how commissioners might go about doing it. This often leads to inconsistent, ad hoc practice, creating what many people with lived experience recognise as a "postcode lottery" of quality involvement, and places pressure on commissioning teams to possess frontline support skills they may not require in the rest of their day-to-day work.

This guide expands on NHS England's 'supporting people with a learning disability and autistic people to live happier, healthier, longer lives', giving practical guidance on how commissioners across all sectors can meet and exceed legal involvement requirements to design more effective services with the people they support.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN

Inclusive involvement leads to better decisions:

When people **are** properly involved:

✓ Services are designed around people's needs

✓ Problems are identified earlier

✓ Outcomes reflect what matters to people

✓ Resources are used more effectively

✓ Positive relationships between commissioners and local communities

✓ Transparent, high-integrity commissioning processes.

When people **aren't** properly involved:

✘ Services do not meet people's needs

✘ Increased complaints, incidents, and safeguarding concerns

✘ Poor outcomes and evaluation scores

✘ Wasted resources

✘ Loss of trust from people and communities

✘ Risk of legal challenge to commissioning decisions.

When involving people with a learning disability and autistic people, commissioners should reflect on how their usual ways of working may unintentionally make involvement harder.

Focus should be given to building flexibility into systems so people are involved in ways that are fair, accessible, and meaningful to create better services and better lives.

Prioritising flexibility will enable commissioning teams to meet the diverse and unique needs of people with lived experiences.



SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

Commissioning teams must consider practical requirements for involving people with lived experience from the moment they know that a commissioning process will take place. Inclusive involvement in commissioning cannot be rushed or squeezed in around other work.

RESOURCING



BUDGET

Your proposed budget should cover:

✓ **Reimbursing people with lived experience for their contributions** - this includes fair pay in line with the Social Change Agency's 'Pay for Involvement Playbook' rates* and covering their expenses and any additional support costs e.g. interpreters, Personal Assistant costs, etc. Clearly communicate potential impacts payment might have on welfare benefits and offer alternatives (e.g. vouchers or the choice to opt out).

✓ **Activity costs** e.g. room hire in accessible spaces, travel costs.

✓ **Staffing costs** e.g. for coordination, external facilitators, or training for in-house staff.

*While fair pay is the gold standard, we recognise that many commissioning teams face budgetary constraints that make this challenging. It's necessary to consider a full range of ways people can be recognised and rewarded for their contributions; organisational awards, public acknowledgements and commendations, or support to talk about their experience in CVs or application forms.

Many people with lived experience will take various benefits away from participating in these processes, e.g. feeling like part of something meaningful, or helping others who are in similar situations, and seeing the impact they've made on the process can be rewarding in itself.

However, people with lived experience are being asked to contribute to a process that experts by profession will be being paid for, so all effort should be made to offer a payment, and the process for claiming this should be simple and swift.

> ***When I joined [the advocacy group] People First I felt listened to. I was empowered to speak for other people not just for myself. I felt able to use my experience.***
>
> **- Lou,** self-advocate

TIME

Build sufficient time into your project plan for:

✓ Planning the work properly.

✓ Getting to know the people with lived experience who will be part of your process and building trust with them.

✓ Listening, learning, and making changes along the way.

✓ Making good decisions, not just meeting deadlines.

When working with a group of people with lived experience, processes will likely take longer than they would when working in a smaller team of experts by profession. Make sure there is enough time to support people's understanding and hear from everyone; meaningful involvement is a valid reason for extending commissioning timelines.

Timelines may also need to be flexible:

Co-production can sometimes feel difficult, messy, or projects can lose momentum if group members all require different times and adjustments to contribute.

You must therefore be well-prepared and equipped to be agile; start planning as far in advance as possible, get a clear idea of people's needs early, build in extra time wherever you can, and have contingency plans in place in case something changes.

CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Everyone involved needs to know:

✓ Who is leading the commissioning work.

✓ Who will listen to feedback, act on it, and report back about what was and wasn't taken on board.

✓ Who does what, and who makes decisions.

✓ How people with lived experience are involved and supported.

TRAINING AND EXPERTISE

Commissioning teams should check if they have the right skills to:

✓ Work in fair and inclusive ways.

✓ Communicate effectively with people with lived experience – particularly for staff who aren't ordinarily public-facing.

✓ Share power, listen properly, and help people take part.

✓ Explain commissioning processes in an accessible way.

✓ Mediate discussions sensitively, directly, and clearly, ensuring that everyone gets an equal chance to share.

If these skills are missing, teams should source training or extra support (e.g. mentoring or expert advice) early on, particularly from local advocacy groups who can help co-design and co-chair involvement activities.

Links to some useful training resources, including in alternative communication methods, are also cited towards the end of this guide.

WORKING WITH SUPPORTERS

Some people with a learning disability and autistic people require or prefer to have a supporter with them to help them process information and communicate. When involved in commissioning, people may face the unique challenge that their Support Worker cannot attend meetings because they have a conflict of interest e.g. they are employed by the current provider or another organisation who will be bidding.

In this instance, it shouldn't be assumed that people have family members who can support them.

Find out if they have a trusted person that knows them well or explore an external advocate.

Commissioning teams should also keep in mind that it is not uncommon for family members to disagree with the person with lived experience about what their support should look like.

They may convey their own views rather than represent the person they're supporting.

To prevent this, those leading the involvement activity should always brief supporters on their role beforehand to set ground rules and expectations.

Consider sharing any agendas and paperwork in advance for people to discuss with their supporter and decide how they want to communicate their views.

Involvement leads should take care to manage conversations in the room to mitigate this common challenge, seeking clarification and reminding participants of the purpose of the conversation if a supporter is venturing outside of their agreed role.





POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND GUIDANCE

Every commissioning team should have relevant organisational policies and processes in place to:

- Enable, rather than restrict, co-production – allowing for flexibility to respond to people's needs and preferences.
- Be clear about payment for involvement, risk, safeguarding, and confidentiality so everyone's on the same page.
- Be written in a way that's accessible to both staff and people with lived experience.
- Explain in clear detail the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in commissioning processes.

Where policies create barriers, these should be addressed before the process begins. Embedding co-production principles in these policies will create infrastructure to ensure long-term application, rather than relying on transient elements like team culture or individual personnel.



ONGOING LIVED EXPERIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Commissioning teams should not rely solely on ad hoc involvement in individual processes.

An ongoing lived experience group or network should be in place to:

- Provide continuity, learning, and organisational memory
- Reduce the burden on people repeatedly joining short-term processes
- Support strategic input beyond single commissioning cycles.

This infrastructure requires sustained resourcing, coordination, and support.

You can find people to be involved in this group via service providers, community groups, community leaders, advocacy organisations, user-led organisations, activity groups, and social media.

Once formed, the group should meet regularly to discuss current projects, trends, and provide guidance to the wider organisation. Promotion and recruitment should be ongoing, ensuring that this group is consistently representative of varied needs within the local community and to prevent the same few individuals becoming the singular voice of people with lived experience.

All opportunities to participate in commissioning processes should be communicated to this group, and new members encouraged to participate to avoid over-reliance on those who have more experience. This should more equally distribute the labour of designing and evaluating commissioning documents, while ensuring that the voices of as many people as possible are heard.

CO-PRODUCTION AS A CORE PRINCIPLE

All resourcing decisions must be co-produced with people with lived experience.

This includes:

- Designing roles, timelines, and support arrangements together
- Agreeing how involvement is valued, recognised, and remunerated
- Upholding the principle of “nothing about me without me” throughout.

Co-production is not an add on; it is a core feature of high-quality commissioning.



PRINCIPLES OF GOOD INVOLVEMENT IN COMMISSIONING

MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION

- The numbers of people with lived experience involved in a commissioning process should reflect:
  - The scale and complexity of the service being commissioned
  - The breadth and diversity of needs that people using the service will have.

  This means seeking:
  - a range of experiences
  - different support needs
  - different ages
  - different ethnic backgrounds
  - people with different communication styles
  - people with positive and negative experiences.

- Avoid repeatedly engaging the same small group of voices; widen participation to reduce overrepresentation and fatigue.

- Actively recognise and value different forms of experience, including informal caring, peer support, and community advocacy.

- For people unable to participate directly, involve people who know them well and can represent them or advocate for them (e.g. family members, advocates, long term supporters). Ensure their voice complements (not replaces) the person with lived experience.

- To involve people with more complex needs, be prepared to devote time into building trust, confidence, and skills that would enable them to participate. This might mean reaching people through already trusted organisations, running peer mentor activities, or simply setting aside time during focus groups to build relationships where they feel comfortable and confident enough to get involved.

SHARING POWER

- Ensure lived experience input is weighted appropriately
- Lived experience perspectives should inform both:
  - What is assessed
  - How success is defined
- Invite people with a learning disability or autistic people to chair or co-chair groups
- Share agenda-setting with any advocacy groups you consult or people with lived experience you've invited to co-chair
- Providing support, preparation, and payment for these roles
- Be clear about what people can change and what they cannot. People must know what they can influence and what is fixed to avoid tokenism, protect wellbeing, and support sustained involvement.

ACCESSIBILITY

- Commissioners must change how they work so people with a learning disability and autistic people can understand and be included, not merely be present.
- Ensure materials and processes do not unintentionally exclude participants. Take account of low literacy levels, digital exclusion, and language barriers, and consider producing bespoke materials and approaches to meet people's needs.
- Provide information in formats people can understand (e.g. Easy Read) and allow different ways of responding.
- Accessibility should be built into every stage, not added at the end.
- **One size fits nobody** - inclusive commissioning must be flexible and responsive to enable equal participation.

TRANSPARENCY

- Transparency is about trust, not paperwork - say clearly what is happening and why
- Use skilled, independent facilitation to reduce unconscious bias for or against incumbent providers
- Anonymise bids where feasible to minimise unconscious bias
- Source support for engagement outside of bidding organisations, e.g. external advocacy groups
- Clearly document your processes, explaining how people with lived experience have been involved. This will instil confidence that funding decisions are in the best interest of the people being supported and protect decisions from legal challenge on the basis of insufficient involvement.
- People who contribute lived experience must be told what decisions were made and how their input was used. Closing the feedback loop is essential for trust, accountability, and future engagement.

WHAT GOOD PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

1 MARKET ENGAGEMENT

Inclusive Involvement starts the moment you know that a service contract needs to be commissioned, whether because the previous contract is ending or because a new need has been identified.

In addition to consulting local service providers, this is a valuable opportunity to start engaging people with lived experience to identify local needs and what may be currently missing from your local community.

WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

Holding workshops or focus groups

- In-person wherever possible, separated into themed sessions if discussing multiple or wide-ranging topics, and involving people with relevant lived experience, their supporters, and any local advocacy groups.
- Consider the size of the group and space to ensure participants' comfort with the sensory aspects of the activity; NHS England provide detailed ideas about necessary considerations in their 'Making Meetings Accessible' guidance linked in our resources.
- Consider appropriate start times to make them accessible to people with caring responsibilities or jobs that might make it hard to attend. Employed people with a learning disability rarely get the chance to contribute to decisions but should be included for truly representative conversations.

> ***I was invited to an advisory group but the group was too crowded, the room was too small. It was anxiety-inducing. I couldn't move or get a seat, I was pressed too closely to strangers. I felt I stood out like a sore thumb.***
>
> **- Denise,** self-advocate

Linking with local advocacy groups early

- They can be a valuable resource in reaching people who have relevant interests or are affected by the service in question.
- They can also help support or co-facilitate discussions and review any materials beforehand to ensure that language and formatting is accessible.

Circulating information in suitable formats

- Don't assume that everyone will be able to access things online; send digital and physical copies where people have indicated that this is best for them.

Gathering everyone in the same room

- Have conversations with people with lived experience, supporters, professionals, service providers, and commissioners altogether. Hosting mixed groups can allow you to get a comprehensive understanding of current support available and unmet needs on a level playing field where everyone's voice counts equally.

> ***People need to be supported to dream – commissioners should encourage people to think about what they want not just what they've received in the past***
>
> **- Karen,** supporter and advocate

Giving adequate preparation time

- Provide several weeks' notice before an event and inform participants of what they will be asked to do.
- This will give your own team members time to understand the communication needs of everyone participating and tailor plans accordingly, enable people with lived experience to process information at their own speed, and give smaller advocacy organisations time to respond during periods of low capacity.

Providing options

- Ask open questions and give options about what services can look like, being honest about what is possible to achieve within the landscape and budget you're working with.
- Give people options on how they share their thoughts; some people may be comfortable sharing in the room, but some may benefit from being able to write their thoughts down later or fill in a survey.
- Not giving options risks not gaining everyone's insights.

Exploring future needs

- Recognise that the needs of people with different health, care, and communication needs will change throughout their lives.
- Conversations should therefore include considerations around what flexibilities need to be built into the service to meet both immediate and long-term needs.

Actively facilitating conversations

- Even at this stage, each activity should have a dedicated staff lead with facilitation expertise who ensures that all voices are heard equally.
- Directly inviting people to contribute and steering discussions away from tangents are integral parts of facilitating collaboration in a group. Getting this balance right may require additional attention when working with people with different communication styles and where people are accompanied by a supporter.
- The facilitator may consider allotting time for people to think before answering questions or inviting participants to write or draw their thoughts first if they would like to.
- This gives people time to process information, ensuring conversations aren't unequally weighted towards the loudest or fastest voice in the room.

Scheduling regular breaks

- This can give people time to process information or consider what they want to say, avoid overwhelm, and meet any physical needs they may have.
- This is also particularly important to ensure emotional wellbeing – it's important to acknowledge that conversations about personal topics like care needs and past experiences of being let down by services have much higher emotional stakes for people with lived experience than for the professionals in the room.
- Mediators should offer breaks wherever this would support people's wellbeing and remind participants to only share what they feel comfortable sharing.

2 SPECIFICATION DESIGN

Now, you'll most likely narrow down the number of people with lived experience supporting your commissioning process to a Lived Experience Collaboration Panel that will be involved for the rest of the process.

There should always be more than 1 person with lived experience involved to avoid tokenism.

A panel of at least 3 for re-tenders with small contract variation to reflect varying needs and facilitate majority voting.

For first-time tenders or when making larger scale changes, a panel of 8-10 people is suggested.

Before specification design begins, the following things will support people to feel comfortable and confident to meaningfully participate:

Explain the steps of the commissioning process

- Keep explanations as short as possible and chunk information down, e.g. 3 things at a time can be easier to digest.

Define the service and the language you'll be using

- Ensure people know what key phrases mean, what the aims of the service are, and who it will support.

Be clear about scope

- Be transparent about the budget limitations and realistic options that are on the table. Let people know up front who is responsible for making which decisions and that some suggestions might not end up in the final specification e.g. if the rest of the panel doesn't agree. This can help navigate the emotional experience of discussion, pushback, and compromise.

Ask people how they want their supporters to be involved

- Where someone needs a supporter to help them communicate, ask how they would like that person involved in conversations and decisions to ensure that their voice is prioritised.

WHEN DESIGNING YOUR SPECIFICATION

Specifications need to reflect the conversations that are had during market engagement. Currently, this is where involvement tends to stall; conversations happen but don't feed into the actual service design.

Ensuring there is a visible thread between the views expressed by people with lived experience and what's written in the service specification will build trust with those who contributed to those conversations, building capital for future involvement work.

It should also produce the best outcomes as services reflect the actual views and priorities of people who will use them.

People with lived experience's input should inform not just the service described in the specification, but also the format that will enable them to continue participating in the process moving forward.

Depending on the perspectives of the people you're working with, this might look like:

Keeping things short

- Consider keeping the specification to just the things bidders and evaluators need to know and separating the contract, invitation to tender, etc into appendices. This will be easier for people to revisit when evaluating later.

Using up-to-date, plain language

- Minimise jargon wherever possible, using the Accessible Information Standard to ensure all written and face-to-face communication is clear and understandable for everyone; and consult with people with lived experience to get language right around ability, conditions, and identities.

Recognising and including varied experiences

- The specification should reflect the needs of the panel you've assembled and those you consulted during Market Engagement.

3 EVALUATION CRITERIA & TENDER DESIGN

Once you have a clear description of what the service should do, you should involve your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel in setting bid evaluation criteria – and therefore in defining what 'good' looks like – ensuring that what matters to them informs every part of the bid process.

This can also be the most complicated part of the process to explain, so additional resource should be made available here to allow enough time and support to aid people's understanding.

Explain what good criteria is

- Breaking down a complex idea like this can be challenging but is necessary to ensure everyone understands. You may describe evaluation criteria as:
  - A way of explaining what good looks like
  - The things we agree are most important
  - What providers must show examples of
  - What evaluation is based on
  - Using examples during pre-bid training can be helpful to illustrate what this means:

EXAMPLE

Show two different paintings and ask people to say which is better.



Then give them a list of things that the artist was told to include. For the above, this could be:

1. The picture should show sunshine, and;

2. The picture should be easy to understand.

Now, ask the group to re-evaluate the pictures based on how successfully they meet these criteria.

This will help people who are new to this process understand that the decisions they are making should be based on a consistent set of requirements and desirables, not just subjective opinion.

Split criteria setting over multiple meetings

- Give people time to process and reflect with trusted people to understand what 'good' should look like, ask questions, and to separate what specifics they might be looking for across different questions.

Cross-reference evaluation criteria

- Check evaluation criteria against the specification and Market Engagement notes to ensure that the voices of people with lived experience are threaded throughout – ensuring their priorities are reflected in the criteria.

Make it clear what is already required

- There will be some criteria that will be required by law or organisational strategy so let people know what specific elements they can influence.

Select 2 or 3 questions with people with lived experience for them to evaluate and ensure these are weighted to count significantly towards the overall score.

- Do not relegate peer-reviewed questions to unweighted or minimally weighted questions, but this risks slipping into tokenistic involvement. As a general recommendation, weighting should be equal to or higher than the lowest weighted non-peer-reviewed question.

Conduct a "You Said, We Did" presentation

- Assuring the Lived Experience Collaboration Panel that their views shaped and influenced the final documentation. This should include "We Couldn't", explaining what ideas were not adopted and why.

This point in the commissioning process is also an opportunity where you can encourage or require bidders to co-produce their bids with their own panels of people with lived experience.

This could look like:

Asking bidders to provide clear evidence of how they've consulted and involved people with lived experience – e.g. including feedback from people who've received support in their own words.

Assessing evidence of involvement – incorporating a scoring metric for the approaches bidders have taken to involving people with lived experience in robust and meaningful ways.

Phrasing questions in a way that encourages bidders to platform the voices of people with lived experience – e.g. "Based on conversations with people you support, how will you support people using the service to pursue activities that matter most to them?"

Simplifying tender documents to be more accessible – enabling people with lived experience to access them, whether they're involved in evaluating or co-producing a bid.

Using clear formatting – use widely spaced short paragraphs, larger font sizes, or Easy Read format, and require that bidders do the same, especially for questions that will be marked by people with lived experience. It's vital that you provide bidders with the information they need to write their responses in a way that is accessible to those who will be evaluating them.

EXAMPLE

During a tender for a Supported Living service, bidders were asked to submit one of their answers for evaluation by a panel of people with lived experience.

Commissioners required that this response was submitted in Easy Read to be accessible to panel members, allowing for as many pages as bidders needed to present sufficient information in this format.

4 GO-LIVE

The tender is now live and potential service providers can start submitting clarification questions and bids; at first glance, there is no obvious opportunity to involve people with lived experience.

However, at this point in the process it's important that you keep 2 groups of people with lived experience in the loop:

Your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel

Keep everyone involved well-informed via their preferred communication method of what happens now, how long it will take, and what will happen next.

This is vital to ensure that everyone remains included in the whole process and has time to prepare for the evaluation stage.

You should also check-in on people's experiences so far and use their responses to tweak your approach moving forward, ensuring processes remain inclusive and support everyone's wellbeing.

People currently supported by services

Uncommunicated changes can be stressful and upsetting for both current staff and people being supported, so giving them as long as possible to emotionally process and prepare for the transition can be beneficial.

Agree with the current provider in advance what you'll share and when, ensuring the transparency and inclusion of the process aligns with their approach to supporting the wellbeing of their colleagues and people they support.



5 TENDER EVALUATION & SCORING

The tender window has now closed, and all bidders have submitted their proposals to be evaluated and scored.

Ideally, the same people that were involved in designing the specification and evaluation criteria should be invited to participate in this process to uphold consistency.

However, we recognise that people's preferences and circumstances may change and they may no longer be able to participate, or at least not to the same extent. In this instance, different people with lived experience should be invited into your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel and given sufficient time to review all documentation.

As long as the voice of lived experience has been threaded through every prior stage and people continue to be involved, the process will remain strong, without compromising the integrity of the co-production practice.

As this part of commissioning is subject to pre-established time constraints, this can be the most challenging time to provide the flexibility people with lived experience may need to participate in evaluation.

To make this as straightforward, accessible, and transparent as possible, you may want to consider the following things before evaluation starts:

Holding pre-meetings

While the bid is live to prepare people for what evaluation entails and how quickly they will be asked to do it – especially if they are new to the commissioning process.

This will enable you to put any support measures in place for the actual evaluation period and enable people to feel confident in their understanding and abilities.

EXAMPLE

In their commissioning exercises, Lambeth Council issues test exercises so people with lived experience can practise evaluating a document and receive feedback or further training before marking the real bid.

Designing your scoring system with the group you're working with

The scoring system you use for each process needs to be co-designed with the people who will be using it, ensuring it makes sense to everyone. Consider presenting multiple systems and letting them choose, tailoring to meet the group's unique needs wherever required.

Explaining that scores will be discussed and agreed collectively

Let people know that their chosen score won't always be the final official score to avoid feelings of exclusion or not being heard.

Once evaluation has begun, you can uphold accessibility and transparency through:

Asking for people with lived experience's thoughts first – avoiding people following along with commissioners' scores rather than sharing their authentic views.

Sharing all information – e.g. not assuming that people with lived experience won't understand or won't want to see financial information. Supporting access to this information is central to people making informed and meaningful decisions, and commissioners should assess everyone's individual strengths rather than assuming group-wide abilities.

Creating a space for smaller group discussions – e.g. breakout groups if online or separate rooms if in-person, giving people space to understand information and discuss with a supporter before feeding back and justifying their scores to the whole group.

Providing a glossary to remind people of what technical terms mean – an accessible glossary is available in our complementary Guide for People with Lived Experience that you can use if preferred.

Giving enough time for everyone to read each answer, understand the information, and decide what score they want to give.

Scheduling breaks between evaluating each organisation's bid to avoid confusion when evaluating the same questions from different bidders.

Facilitated reading processes e.g. allowing for breaks in the schedule for a person with lived experience to test and confirm their understanding with a supporter.

A NOTE ON SCORING SYSTEMS

While the exact scoring system you use should be chosen and tailored with your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel, here are some things to consider that will ensure the options you present are accessible and useable.

Consider zoning scores - too many options can be confusing and cause ambiguity, but too few scoring options risks lack of differentiation between scores. Zoning them into colour-coded zones can be helpful to start conversations and get people to narrow down from there.

Clearly explain the difference between numerical scores – e.g. to score a 'X', an answer needs to include 'X, Y, and Z'.

Make sure the scoring system is visually clear and contextualised - smiley faces can look childish, so many would prefer Photosymbols as a visual tool instead. Traffic light colours are useful, but some find this approach infantilising and it risks people gravitating towards preferred colours, so make sure people understand what the colours are supposed to indicate.

Don't use a system with a middle number - this risks people fence-sitting rather than reflecting their actual feelings.

EXAMPLE

Bradford Council uses a scale of 1-4 to score bids, a system which works well for some neurodivergent people in particular, as it eliminates a completely neutral middle score.



PRESENTATIONS

You have now reached the end of evaluation and have agreed scores for all written bids; but you still have more opportunities to hear from people with lived experience.

Bidder presentations or interviews can create a valuable space to hear about people's experiences and opinions in their own words. Encouraging bidders to include lived experience in their team to deliver any presentations and awarding scores for those bidders who do so meaningfully.

Your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel should also be invited to evaluate presentations and ask questions, recognising the uniquely informed perspectives they will bring to these conversations.

What this could look like:

Multi-stage processes as a default – you could require that every commissioning process you run must have a presentation as the rule rather than the exception.

Adjusting timescales to account for involving people in presentations – recognising that people with lived experience may require more time to prepare and building longer timelines between bid submission and presentations accordingly.

Respectful practices – e.g. not using strict time limits for people with lived experience delivering presentations and not rushing or cutting them off.

Accounting for the varying needs of people with lived experience involved in both sides of the conversation – informing presenting providers about the needs of people on the Evaluation Panel and accommodating the needs of the presenting team in turn.



Introductions pre-presentation - familiarity with commissioners can make giving presentations less intimidating for people with lived experience on both sides of the table.

Communicating to presenters that the whole panel are decision-makers – emphasising that involvement is not tokenistic and will have a meaningful impact on who the contract is awarded to.

Empowering people with lived experience to ask interview questions – preparing loose scripts beforehand or helping people word what they want to ask and supporting them to ask follow-up queries, ensuring real understanding and authentic communication.

Separating scoring processes from presentations – multi-tasking can be challenging, so only asking people with lived experience to observe the presentation and ask questions in the room, then assign it a score afterwards, can be helpful to dedicate sufficient time and focus to each part of the process.

EXAMPLE

When re-contracting the independent chair of their Workforce Experts Advisory Group for people with lived experience, Skills for Care (SfC) invited a member of the group to help lead the process.

Through a series of planning calls, they identified that **S** would benefit from a pre-prepared script to use during interviews with prospective providers, and recordings of the interviews to revisit later.

A SfC team member drafted a script outline for the introduction and conclusion of each interview, helped **S** word the questions he wanted to ask, and ran through the whole script on a call to ensure he felt comfortable and confident.

Using this, **S** successfully led the interview process with all bidders and asked questions that were important to him and the wider group; SfC then held a follow-up call with **S** to watch the interviews back and assign scores.

“The group has helped me to develop new skills and build my confidence. I feel like I am helping people to have their voices heard.”

- Shaun Armour, Group Chair

6 CONTRACT AWARD

Bids have been evaluated and scored, and you should have a winning provider – but inclusive involvement is not over!

The outcome of the process, based on the contributions they have made, should always be shared with your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel. This is also a vital point to collect feedback on the process as a whole and learn lessons that will improve the experience for people with a learning disability and autistic people moving forward.

This could look like:

Proactively keeping people informed – sharing timescales for decision-making and reminders of what people can/can't say to maintain the integrity of the standstill period.

Holding a live meeting with the involved people with lived experience to make or explain the final award decision.

2-tier evaluations – one to shortlist winning bidders, followed by another to select a winner.

Agreeing bidder feedback with your Lived Experience Collaboration Panel – to truly reflect the perspectives that have been involved in decision-making, and to give feedback that will help unsuccessful providers get better at meaningfully consulting people with lived experience in the future.

Payment AND thanks – if experts by profession are being paid to be involved and experts by experience are being asked to contribute for free, it creates a power imbalance that can affect people's comfort and confidence to participate openly and honestly. Fair payment and explicit recognition of people's time and insights acknowledges the value placed on their involvement. This should be explained clearly from the start of involvement, and the options and process around claiming which should be made as simple as possible. As noted at the start of this guide, if payment is not currently possible, you should consider what other benefits you can offer to recognise people's contributions.

Debriefs, 'You Said, We Did', and lessons learned processes – to gather feedback on the accessibility of activities and any areas for improvement, check on people's wellbeing, and show commitment to involving people well, improving how you do it, and ensuring people had a meaningful and empowered experience.

NEXT STEPS

The standstill period is over and the contract has been awarded – you can celebrate knowing that you've commissioned a service alongside the community it will support.

The priorities and commitments shaped through involvement should now be carried through into the mobilisation and delivery of the service and all future reviews, audits, and quality assessments. There will be countless opportunities to meaningfully involve people with lived experience throughout these processes, and taking as many of them as possible will set you up for success the next time the contract is recommissioned.

You should consider:

Involving people with lived experience in quality evaluations – ask people supported by the services about their experiences and what could be done better during any audits, ensuring their voice remains at the heart of the service throughout its delivery.

Advertising future opportunities for involvement – especially to people who weren't involved in the previous process. This will prevent the same voices being heard each time and give everyone a chance to have an impact.

Learning should be continuous and endless – develop an ongoing structure with a lived experience cohort - whether a mailing list of people who can be contacted for involvement opportunities, an involvement network, or an internal steering or advocacy group. Use this infrastructure to maintain regular contact with people, advertise opportunities, and share commissioning outcomes regularly. This will keep voices of lived experience at the heart of your processes and practices, cultivating an ethos of meaningful involvement and co-production that best serves everyone in your community.



TOP TIPS FOR INCLUSIVE INVOLVEMENT IN COMMISSIONING

These top tips are for everyone involved in commissioning - commissioners, people with lived experience, and their supporters, families, and carers.

They reflect the values and behaviours that help people collaborate well, share power, and make better decisions together.

1. Start together

- People are most likely to influence decisions when they are involved from the beginning.
- Good involvement is not something that happens at the end of a process; it happens at the start and throughout.

2. Support people to participate

- Not everyone communicates using words or takes part in the same way.
- Remove barriers by using clear information, providing support where needed, and making sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

3. Value and share lived experience

- Lived experience is a form of expertise. When different experiences, perspectives, and skills come together, decisions are stronger and services are better.
- People with lived experience help shape decisions, not just respond to them.

4. Be open and honest

- Everyone should understand what is happening, how decisions are made, and what they can influence.
- Being clear about opportunities, limitations, and outcomes helps to build trust and meaningful involvement.

5. Learn and improve together

- No process is perfect. Listen to feedback, reflect on what worked well, and use learnings to improve future involvement and commissioning activity together, empowering people with lived experience to shape how you grow.

AN INVOLVEMENT CHECKLIST FOR COMMISSIONERS

Use this checklist at the beginning and end of each stage to help ensure people with lived experience are meaningfully involved throughout the commissioning process.

It supports planning, reflection, learning and evidence of impact, and may provide supporting evidence for governance, audit, inspection, and quality assurance activities.



RAG Rating*

- **Green** – Fully evidenced and consistently embedded
- **Amber** – Partially evidenced or inconsistently applied
- **Red** – Significant gaps identified
- **N/A** – Not applicable to this activity

*As noted in our section on scoring systems, we recognise that traffic light colours may not be everyone's preferred system for evaluating the success of planning and delivering involvement opportunities. As in scoring bids, make sure you use the system that works best for you and your team; if that's not RAG rating then please use the one that does make sense to you while using this checklist.

Evidence & Actions

For any Amber or Red ratings, document the evidence available, gaps identified, actions required, responsible lead, and target completion date.

Throughout each process, document the steps you took to make it accessible and inclusive, and store this information centrally. This information will be key to consistently evolving and improving your approach, providing valuable evidence for any internal or external audits and ensuring that meaningful involvement remains part of team infrastructure over time.

INVOLVEMENT DOMAIN	ASSESSMENT QUESTION	RAG
Leadership, Resourcing & Infrastructure	Team and Project Leaders have the required capacity and expertise to support and manage meaningful involvement throughout the process.	
	Budget is allocated to enable people with lived experience to work alongside commissioners, with appropriate support throughout the commissioning process.	
	People with lived experience are fairly paid and recognised for their time, knowledge and contribution.	
Accessibility & Inclusion	People with lived experience are asked how they communicate and what support they need, and information and ways of working are adapted so everyone can contribute and influence decisions.	
Representation & Power Sharing	People with a range of lived experiences are involved, and invited to co-lead processes where appropriate.	
Market Engagement	People with lived experience work alongside commissioners from the earliest stage, before key decisions have been made.	
Specification Design	The specification clearly reflects what matters to people with lived experience and shows how their contributions have shaped it.	
Evaluation Criteria & Tender Design	People with lived experience work alongside commissioners to decide what good looks like and help develop the evaluation criteria.	
Go-Live	People with lived experience continue to be part of the process and are kept informed about what is happening and what comes next.	
Evaluation & Scoring	People with lived experience have a meaningful role in evaluating bids, with their scoring carrying sufficient weight to influence the outcome.	
Presentations	People with lived experience play a meaningful role in presentations, including asking questions and helping make decisions.	
Contract Award	People with lived experience are told what was decided, how their contribution influenced the decision, and what happens next.	
Learning & Continuous Improvement	People with lived experience work alongside commissioners to review the process, identify what should change and shape future commissioning.	

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For wider support to implement good involvement and co-production practice, we've included a selection of resources from other organisations that could be helpful.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these are a solid foundation on which to build your commissioning practice and culture alongside this guide.

Inclusion International

🔗 How-to Checklists | Listen Include Respect

Gloriously Ordinary Lives

🔗 Gloriously Ordinary Language

Learning Disability England (2024)

🔗 Co-production Guidance and Information

National Autistic Society

🔗 NAS Guidance on the importance of autistic voices and meaningful consultation

National Development Team for Inclusion

🔗 Webinars and Events

National Service User Network

🔗 4Pi Involvement Standards - NSUN website

NHS England

🔗 Supporting people with a learning disability and autistic people to live happier, healthier, longer lives: Bitesize guide for local systems

🔗 Accessible Information Standard – requirements (DAPB1605)

🔗 Working in partnership with people and communities: Statutory guidance

🔗 Making meetings accessible

🔗 Core20PLUS5 (adults) – an approach to reducing healthcare inequalities

NHS England, LGA, ADASS (2015)

🔗 Building the right support, National Guidance

NICE (2018)

🔗 Arranging services for people with a learning disability and behaviour that challenges: A quick guide for commissioners

PMLD Link

🔗 Supporting people with profound and multiple learning disabilities - Core & Essential Service Standards

PMLD Network and Mencap

🔗 Raising Our Sights Commissioning Guide

Simon Duffy

🔗 Keys to Citizenship

Skills for Care

🔗 Highfield's Principles of Commissioning for Wellbeing Level 5 Qualification

🔗 Learning disability commissioning framework

🔗 Learning disabilities and behaviour that challenges: service design and delivery

Skills for Health

🔗 Supporting autistic people and/or people with a learning disability

Social Change Agency

🔗 Pay for Involvement Playbook

Social Care Institute for Excellence

🔗 Co-production: what it is and how to do it - SCIE

Think Local Act Personal

🔗 When things need to change - Making It Real

🔗 Asset-Based Commissioning

The Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism

🔗 Training Hub

ABOUT US

TURNING POINT

We're a leading social enterprise, designing and delivering health and social care services in the fields of learning disability, autism, acquired brain injury, substance use, and mental health.

We currently work in over 280 locations across England, empowering those we support to improve their health and wellbeing, learn, and bring about positive change in their lives.

> ***We're so pleased to have supported the co-production of this important guidance alongside self-advocates, professionals, and Learning Disability England. It has the power to strengthen commissioning practice, ensuring services genuinely meet people's needs and the right people have opportunities to influence service design."***
>
> **- Julie Bass,** Turning Point CEO

LEARNING DISABILITY ENGLAND

Learning Disability England brings together people and organisations to create a movement for change where people with a learning disability, families, friends and paid supporters, come together on an equal basis.

As a membership organisation, members work together to build a world where people with a learning disability have good lives, with equal choices and opportunities.

> ***This guidance sets out a clear path through the commissioning process for both commissioners and people with lived experience. By making sure everyone understands what to expect and what involvement looks like at its best, we can make sure people are meaningfully included every step of the way.***
>
> **- Scott Watkin BEM,** LDE Member

HOW THIS GUIDANCE WAS PUT TOGETHER

Turning Point and Learning Disability England are pleased to have co-produced this guidance with people with lived experience, family members, and experts by profession from across the sector.

Thank you to everyone who contributed their time and expertise, and especially to Paradigm for facilitating the co-production workshops.

Through a series of workshops co-chaired by learning disability advocates, Scott Watkin and Sally Warren, the guidance has emerged.

It aims to provide real examples of how we can make it work well and remove barriers for people to bring their lived experience to the commissioning process.

The process used for developing this guidance aims to lead by example – developed using the principles of co-production to ensure it is meaningful and impactful.

The guidance above is underpinned by these principles.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE:

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