



NATIONAL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK | FIRST EDITION

National Co-Design Standards Framework

Distinguishing Genuine Co-Design from Symbolic Consultation in Australian Policy and Service Reform

National Lived Experience Commission | June 2026 | Version 1.0 | Public Interest Publication

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1. Purpose and Scope

This framework establishes national standards for distinguishing genuine co-design from symbolic consultation in Australian policy and service reform processes. It is published by the National Lived Experience Commission (NLEC) in the exercise of its charitable mandate to advance public debate and to convert lived experience into public-interest evidence directed at changes to law, policy, practice and system design.

The framework is intended for use by:

- Government departments, statutory bodies and regulatory agencies designing or evaluating consultation and co-design processes
- Lived experience organisations, advocacy bodies and peak bodies assessing the quality of engagement offered to their communities
- Parliamentary committees, Senate inquiries and review bodies examining whether genuine co-design obligations have been met
- Researchers, evaluators and auditors assessing the quality of participation processes
- People with lived experience who wish to understand whether the processes they are invited to participate in constitute genuine co-design

This framework does not have statutory force. It is a public-interest standards document published by a registered charity in the exercise of its charitable mandate to advance public debate. Its authority rests in the quality of its evidence base, the rigour of its methodology and the legitimacy of its public-benefit purpose.

2. The Problem: Consultation Without Co-Design

Australia has a well-documented consultation problem. Across health, disability, housing, justice, social services and education, governments and institutions routinely engage people with lived experience of their systems — and then design, implement and evaluate those systems largely without reference to what they heard.

"Consultation occurred, but genuine co-design did not."

— Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Submission No. 446 to the Senate Inquiry into the National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment (Securing the NDIS for Future Generations) Bill 2026, June 2026

The consequences of this failure are not abstract. When the proposed NDIS Amendment Bill was introduced to Parliament on 14 May 2026, the government's own modelling projected that 346,000 people would be removed from or denied access to the NDIS by 2031. The largest single savings measure — \$13.2 billion — targeted Social and Community Participation and Capacity Building supports, which are the supports most critical for people with psychosocial disability. Disability organisations, including AFDO, argued before the Senate inquiry that this outcome was the direct result of a process that consulted but did not genuinely co-design.

This is not an isolated example. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, the Royal Commission into Mental Health in Victoria, and numerous other national inquiries have all identified the same pattern: consultation processes that satisfy procedural requirements without producing substantive influence on outcomes.

The problem is not that governments and institutions are unwilling to engage with lived experience. The problem is that there are no agreed national standards for what genuine co-design requires — and therefore no basis for holding institutions accountable when they fall short.

This framework addresses that gap.

3. Definitions

Term	Definition
Lived experience	The direct, first-hand experience of people who have navigated, been subject to, or been affected by the systems, policies, services and institutions that are the subject of reform. Lived experience is not a demographic category — it is a form of knowledge generated by direct system contact.
Consultation	A process in which people with lived experience are invited to provide input to a decision-making process that has already been substantially framed by others. Consultation may be genuine or tokenistic. Even genuine consultation does not constitute co-design.
Co-design	A process in which people with lived experience are involved as genuine partners in defining the problem, generating options, evaluating alternatives and shaping the final decision. Co-design requires shared power, not merely shared information.
Symbolic consultation	A process that satisfies the procedural requirements of consultation without producing substantive influence on outcomes. Symbolic consultation is characterised by: predetermined conclusions; tokenistic participation; inadequate time and resources; absence of feedback loops; and no accountability for whether input was used.
Genuine co-design	A process that meets the standards set out in Section 5 of this framework. Genuine co-design is characterised by: shared power; early and sustained involvement; fair remuneration; transparent decision-making; feedback loops; and public accountability for outcomes.
Co-design accountability	The obligation of institutions that claim to have co-designed policies, services or systems to demonstrate, through transparent public reporting, that the standards of genuine co-design

Term	Definition
	were met.

4. The Spectrum of Participation

Participation in policy and service reform exists on a spectrum. The following spectrum, adapted from Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) and updated to reflect contemporary Australian practice, provides a framework for understanding where any given process sits:

Level	Description	Characteristics	Co-Design?
1. Tokenism	Participation for appearance only	No genuine influence; predetermined outcomes; participants used for legitimacy	No
2. Information provision	One-way communication to participants	Participants informed of decisions already made; no input sought	No
3. Consultation	Input sought but not binding	Views gathered; institution retains full decision-making power; no obligation to act on input	No
4. Involvement	Ongoing engagement with feedback	Input genuinely considered; feedback provided on how input was used; institution retains decision-making power	Partial
5. Collaboration	Shared problem definition and option generation	Lived experience contributors involved in framing the problem and generating options; institution retains final decision	Partial
6. Co-design	Shared power in design and decision-making	Lived experience contributors involved from the outset; shared power in defining problems, generating options and shaping decisions; transparent accountability for outcomes	Yes
7. Lived experience leadership	Lived experience contributors lead the process	People with lived experience hold decision-making authority; institution provides resources and support; outcomes determined by lived experience community	Yes — highest form

Most Australian government consultation processes currently operate at Levels 2–3. Many processes described as "co-design" operate at Levels 3–4. Genuine co-design requires Level 6 or above.

5. The Seven Standards of Genuine Co-Design

NLEC's National Co-Design Standards Framework establishes seven standards that must be met for a process to constitute genuine co-design. These standards are derived from: Australia's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); the principles of the National Disability Strategy; the findings of multiple royal commissions and parliamentary inquiries; and the lived experience intelligence gathered by NLEC and its sector partners.

S1 Early and Sustained Involvement

People with lived experience must be involved from the earliest stages of the reform process — before the problem has been defined, before options have been generated and before any preferred direction has been identified. Involvement that begins after key decisions have been made does not constitute co-design.

Minimum criteria:

- Lived experience contributors involved before problem definition is finalised
- Involvement sustained throughout the design, development, implementation and evaluation phases
- No predetermined conclusions at the point of engagement

Accountability indicators:

- Documentation of when lived experience contributors were first engaged relative to the reform timeline
- Evidence that lived experience input influenced problem definition, not merely solution selection

S2 Shared Power in Decision-Making

Genuine co-design requires that lived experience contributors hold meaningful decision-making power — not merely advisory influence. This does not require that lived experience contributors hold a veto over all decisions, but it does require that their input has a demonstrable and documented effect on outcomes.

Minimum criteria:

- Lived experience contributors involved in defining the decision-making process itself
- Clear documentation of how lived experience input influenced each major decision point
- Transparent explanation of any decisions made contrary to lived experience input, including the reasons

Accountability indicators:

- Decision log showing lived experience input at each major decision point
- Public reporting on how input was used and where it was not used, with reasons

S3 Fair Remuneration and Resource Equity

Participation in co-design is not voluntary labour. People with lived experience who contribute to co-design processes must be fairly remunerated for their time, expertise and contribution. Processes that rely on unpaid participation systematically exclude people who cannot afford to participate without payment, and therefore produce evidence that does not represent the full range of lived experience.

Minimum criteria:

- All lived experience contributors offered fair payment at or above sector benchmark rates
- Remuneration not conditional on the content of contributions
- Participants informed of any potential impacts on income support or other entitlements before agreeing to participate
- Accessibility supports provided (transport, interpreting, cultural support, carer support) as required

Accountability indicators:

- Public disclosure of remuneration rates offered to lived experience contributors
- Evidence that accessibility barriers were identified and addressed

S4 Representative Diversity

Co-design processes must actively seek to include the full diversity of people affected by the reform, including those who are hardest to reach, most marginalised and most likely to be excluded from standard consultation processes. A co-design process that engages only the most articulate, most connected or most available members of a community does not produce representative lived experience intelligence.

Minimum criteria:

- Active recruitment strategies targeting under-represented groups, including First Nations peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with communication support needs, and people in remote and regional areas
- Demographic reporting on the diversity of participants
- Specific strategies to include people with the most severe and complex experiences of the system under reform

Accountability indicators:

- Published demographic profile of participants
- Evidence of targeted recruitment strategies for under-represented groups
- Assessment of whether the participant group is representative of the affected population

S5 Transparent Methodology and Documentation

The methods used to gather, analyse and use lived experience input must be clearly documented and publicly disclosed. Processes that gather lived experience input through undisclosed or poorly documented methods cannot be assessed for quality, and their findings cannot be verified or replicated.

Minimum criteria:

- Clear documentation of the methods used to gather lived experience input
- Transparent analysis methodology, including how themes were identified and weighted
- Public disclosure of the full findings of lived experience engagement, not merely selected excerpts
- Independent review of methodology where the reform is of significant public importance

Accountability indicators:

- Published methodology document
- Full publication of lived experience findings (subject to participant privacy protections)
- Independent methodological review for high-stakes reforms

S6 Feedback Loops and Iterative Engagement

Genuine co-design is iterative. Lived experience contributors must be provided with meaningful feedback on how their input has been used at each stage of the process, and must have the opportunity to respond to draft proposals, preliminary findings and proposed decisions before they are finalised.

Minimum criteria:

- Structured feedback provided to participants at each major stage of the process
- Opportunity for participants to review and respond to draft proposals before finalisation
- Clear explanation of any changes made between draft and final proposals, including the reasons

- Ongoing engagement throughout implementation, not merely during design

Accountability indicators:

- Documentation of feedback provided to participants at each stage
- Evidence of iterative revision in response to lived experience input
- Participant satisfaction assessment at the conclusion of the process

S7

Public Accountability for Outcomes

Institutions that claim to have co-designed policies, services or systems must publicly account for the outcomes of that process — including what was changed as a result of lived experience input, what was not changed and why, and how the outcomes of the reform will be monitored against the priorities identified by lived experience contributors.

Minimum criteria:

- Public report on the outcomes of the co-design process, including a clear account of how lived experience input influenced the final design
- Transparent explanation of any decisions made contrary to lived experience input
- Commitment to ongoing monitoring of reform outcomes against lived experience priorities
- Independent evaluation of whether co-design obligations were met

Accountability indicators:

- Published co-design outcomes report
- Independent evaluation of co-design quality
- Ongoing monitoring framework aligned with lived experience priorities

6. Co-Design Assessment Tool

The following assessment tool enables organisations, advocates, parliamentary committees and independent evaluators to assess whether a given process meets the standards of genuine co-design. Each standard is assessed on a four-point scale:

1 — Not Met

Standard not addressed; symbolic consultation only

2 — Partially Met

Some elements present but significant gaps remain

3 — Substantially Met

Most elements present; minor gaps

4 — Fully Met

All minimum criteria and accountability indicators met

Standard	Key Assessment Questions	Score (1-4)
S1: Early and Sustained Involvement	Were lived experience contributors involved before problem definition? Was involvement sustained throughout all phases?	[]
S2: Shared Power in Decision-Making	Is there documented evidence that lived experience input influenced major decisions? Were decisions made contrary to input explained publicly?	[]
S3: Fair Remuneration and Resource Equity	Were all participants fairly remunerated? Were accessibility barriers identified and addressed?	[]
S4: Representative Diversity	Were under-represented groups actively recruited? Is the participant profile representative of the affected population?	[]

Standard	Key Assessment Questions	Score (1-4)
S5: Transparent Methodology	Is the methodology publicly documented? Were full findings published?	[]
S6: Feedback Loops and Iterative Engagement	Were participants provided with structured feedback at each stage? Did they have the opportunity to respond to draft proposals?	[]
S7: Public Accountability for Outcomes	Has a public co-design outcomes report been published? Has independent evaluation been conducted?	[]
Total Score (out of 28)		[]

Total Score	Assessment	Interpretation
22-28	Genuine Co-Design	Process meets the standards of genuine co-design. Minor gaps may exist but do not undermine the overall quality of participation.
15-21	Substantial Consultation	Process goes beyond tokenism but falls short of genuine co-design. Significant improvements required to meet co-design standards.
8-14	Consultation Only	Process constitutes consultation, not co-design. Lived experience input may have been gathered but did not meaningfully shape outcomes.
7 or below	Symbolic Consultation	Process does not meet minimum standards for meaningful participation. Lived experience engagement was tokenistic or absent.

7. Accountability Indicators

The following accountability indicators provide a basis for public reporting on co-design quality. NLEC recommends that all government departments, statutory bodies and service providers that claim to have co-designed policies, services or systems publish an annual co-design accountability report addressing these indicators:

- **Participation data:** Number of lived experience contributors engaged; demographic profile; remuneration rates paid; accessibility supports provided
- **Process data:** Timeline of engagement relative to decision-making milestones; methods used; feedback mechanisms employed
- **Influence data:** Documented account of how lived experience input influenced each major decision; explanation of decisions made contrary to lived experience input
- **Outcome data:** Assessment of reform outcomes against priorities identified by lived experience contributors; independent evaluation findings
- **Co-design score:** Self-assessed score against NLEC's Co-Design Assessment Tool, with supporting evidence

8. Obligations Under International Law

Australia's obligations to involve people with disability in decisions that affect them are not merely aspirational. They are binding obligations under international law.

Article 4(3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Australia ratified in 2008, requires that:

"In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations."

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has consistently interpreted Article 4(3) as requiring genuine participation — not merely consultation — in all decisions that affect people with disability. The Committee has specifically stated that consultation processes that do not give people with disability meaningful influence over outcomes do not satisfy the requirements of Article 4(3).

Similar obligations apply under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Articles 18–19), and Australia's own National Disability Strategy 2021–2031, which commits to "meaningful participation" of people with disability in decisions that affect them.

NLEC's National Co-Design Standards Framework is designed to operationalise these obligations — to translate the principle of genuine participation into concrete, assessable standards that institutions can apply and that communities can use to hold institutions accountable.

9. Application to Current Reform Processes

The following table applies NLEC's Co-Design Assessment Tool to three current major Australian reform processes, based on publicly available information. These assessments are preliminary and will be updated as further information becomes available. NLEC invites affected organisations and individuals to contribute evidence to these assessments.

Reform Process	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	Total	Assessment
NDIS Amendment Bill 2026	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	10	Consultation Only
National Mental Health Workforce Capability Framework	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	14	Consultation Only
AAPW Establishment Process	4	3	3	4	2	3	2	21	Substantial Consultation

Important note on preliminary assessments: These assessments are based on publicly available information only and are subject to revision as further evidence becomes available. NLEC has not conducted a full independent assessment of any of these processes. These preliminary scores are published to demonstrate the application of the framework and to invite further evidence from affected communities and organisations. They do not constitute a final NLEC finding.

10. NLEC's Role in Co-Design Accountability

NLEC's National Co-Design Standards Framework is the first of a series of public-interest publications through which NLEC will build Australia's lived experience intelligence infrastructure. NLEC's role in co-design accountability includes:

- Standards development:** Developing, publishing and updating national standards for genuine co-design, in consultation with lived experience organisations, advocacy bodies, researchers and institutions
- Independent assessment:** Conducting and publishing independent assessments of the co-design quality of major Australian reform processes, based on lived experience evidence and publicly available information

- **Evidence gathering:** Gathering lived experience evidence on the quality of co-design processes from people who have participated in them, and publishing that evidence in the public interest
- **Capacity building:** Providing training, advisory services and resources to institutions seeking to improve the quality of their co-design processes
- **Sector collaboration:** Working with lived experience organisations, advocacy bodies, peak bodies and research institutions to strengthen the sector's collective capacity to hold institutions accountable for co-design quality

Invitation to Contribute

NLEC invites contributions to the development of this framework from:

- People with lived experience who have participated in government or institutional co-design processes and wish to share their assessment of the quality of that engagement
- Lived experience organisations, advocacy bodies and peak bodies with evidence relevant to the assessment of specific reform processes
- Researchers and evaluators with expertise in participation methodology, co-design quality assessment or related fields
- Government departments, statutory bodies and service providers that wish to have their co-design processes independently assessed against this framework

Contributions can be submitted to: **commissioner@nlec.au**

This framework is a living document.

It will be updated annually to reflect new evidence, emerging practice and feedback from the sector. NLEC welcomes critique, challenge and contribution — because the quality of this framework depends on the same principle it seeks to establish: that the people most affected by a system are the most important source of intelligence about how to improve it.

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