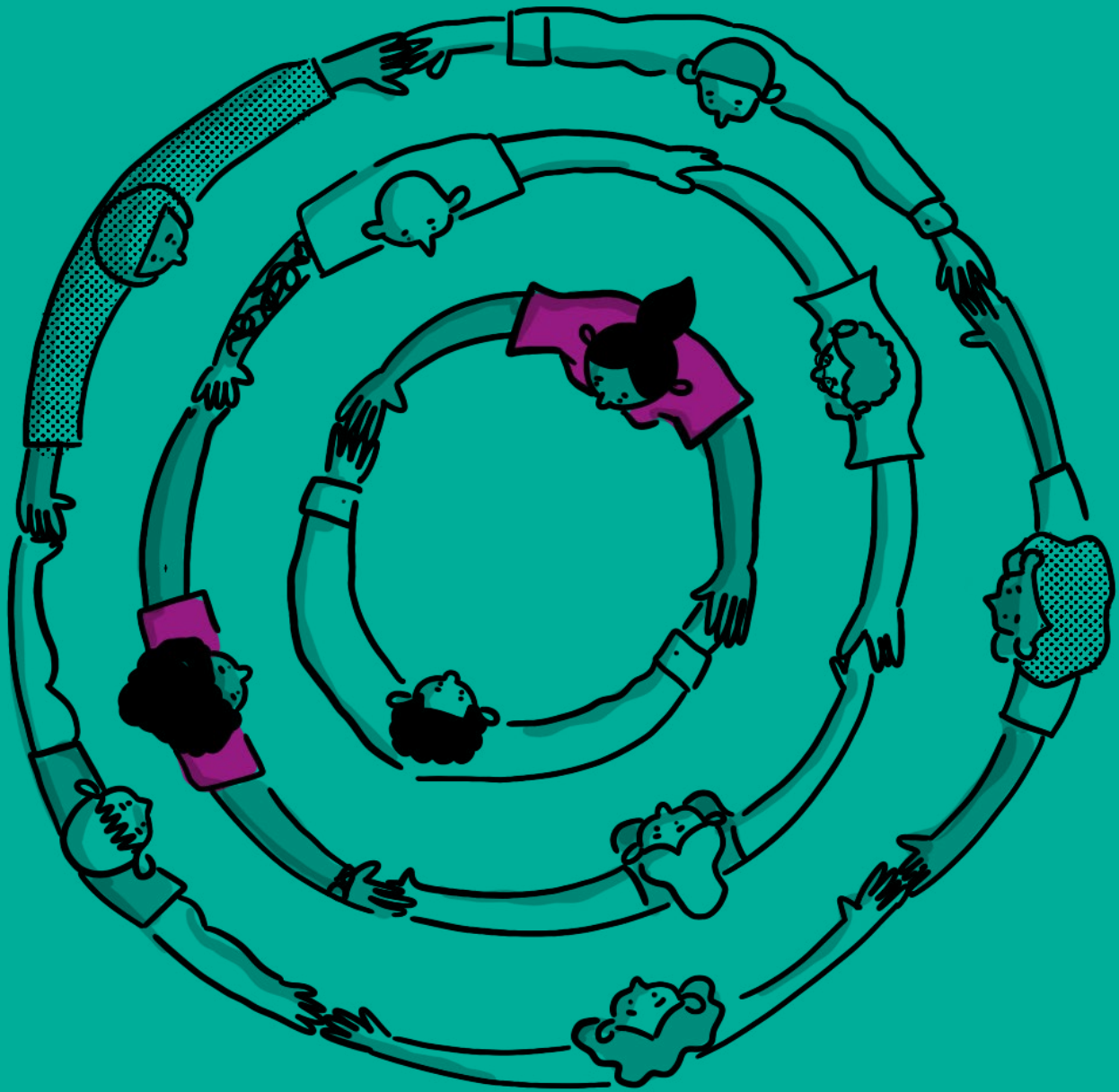




PARTNERING FOR INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

A guide for local economies

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OPENING STATEMENT

This guide emerges from a pilot research programme called Creating Opportunities through Local Innovation Fellowships (COLIF).

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Cardiff University, University of Exeter, University of Oxford and Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP) came together through COLIF to explore what works and what needs strengthening to achieve meaningful inclusive employment in Oxfordshire.

The project is part of a wider collaboration with University of Bath, University of Bristol, University of Southampton and Swansea University, which aims to address local inequalities.



COLIF'S RESEARCH ON INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT INVOLVED:

1

A research review drawing on 50 academic studies, alongside insights from policy reports and other UK documents on inclusive employment.

2

Interviews with 13 key stakeholders in Oxfordshire. They spanned the public, private and voluntary sectors.

3

Stakeholder discussions on COLIF's research during 17 Oxfordshire-based events and meetings on inclusive employment.

In this guide, citations to existing research and direct attributions to COLIF's research activities are omitted for readability. All ideas included are cited or attributed appropriately in COLIF's report for OIEP (available at: <https://www.oiep.org.uk/>).

Thank you to all the participants who contributed to COLIF's research, without whom this guide would not be possible.

INTRODUCTION

Terms in **bold** are explained in the Glossary.

OIEP is made up of key stakeholders who partner to plan, promote and support activities that inspire inclusive employment throughout Oxfordshire. In Spring 2025, the partnership initiated a study (COLIF) to explore what is working well and what can be strengthened in relation to inclusive job opportunities.

This guide is based on the COLIF study's findings. The content that is presented aims to demonstrate how sustained **cross-sector** conversations and collaborative **co-design** supports inclusive employment opportunities where inclusion is dealt with meaningfully. Meaning is created by placing people and care at the centre of local plans for inclusive employment. By doing so, a deeper understanding of inclusion can be established locally. This deeper understanding is outlined in the next section: 'What is inclusive employment?'.

COLIF's research focused on Oxfordshire, but the project findings are relevant more broadly across the UK. Transferable ideas include how a region's key stakeholders can work together to understand and respond to challenges that are associated with barriers to employment.

STAKEHOLDERS WHO CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE ARE:



LOCAL AUTHORITIES



EMPLOYERS



**VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY
& SOCIAL ENTERPRISES
(VCSEs)**



EDUCATION PROVIDERS



Where relevant, key considerations relating to differences within the stakeholder groups are covered.

The experiences and actions of the stakeholders listed above are voiced to demonstrate how inclusion can be considered collaboratively. These insights should be regarded as a starting point for meaningful collaborative action. New challenges and further insights will continue to emerge. Sustained collaboration will help to share resources **equitably** in response to these challenges.

Future efforts must embed the perspectives of people who experience barriers to work in plans for inclusive employment. This takes time! Trust needs to be built in contexts where it has been absent or damaged over long time periods.

Care, **trust**, and **sustained relationships** go a long way!

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT?

Inclusion addresses the barriers experienced by groups and individuals who are excluded from aspects of daily life by society's **norms**. People experience exclusion when business-as-usual approaches overlook certain circumstances and experiences.

ISSUES ARISE WHEN:

- **Norms** are rigid.
- Time and space are not created to listen to and value alternative perspectives.
- Certain perspectives are disregarded due to longstanding prejudices.

Through inclusion, people can find comfort and care in their day-to-day life and go about their daily routines with confidence. The absence of comfort and care is often driven by local inequalities and exclusion that has been endured by people with certain characteristics and cultures. Employment is only part of the picture if inclusion is approached meaningfully. Where, how and why people have experienced exclusion is particularly important.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Does an individual have safe and comfortable living arrangements (as defined by them)?
- Can they access basic needs (including digital connectivity)?

- Do they feel comfortable and valued in their local area?
- Do they have access to space and time to think about what they value and their aspirations?
- Do they have trusted relationships that are built on mutual care?

These questions require time for **co-design**, where diverse voices shape **co-designed** processes and aims.

Sustained collaboration and reflection with diverse partners and communities in this way fosters caring and trustworthy relationships. It is important that care and trust are treated as mutual, two-way, qualities.

This is where all stakeholders acknowledge their role in caring and building trust, and the benefits they gain in doing so.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH SUCH A COMPLEX CHALLENGE?

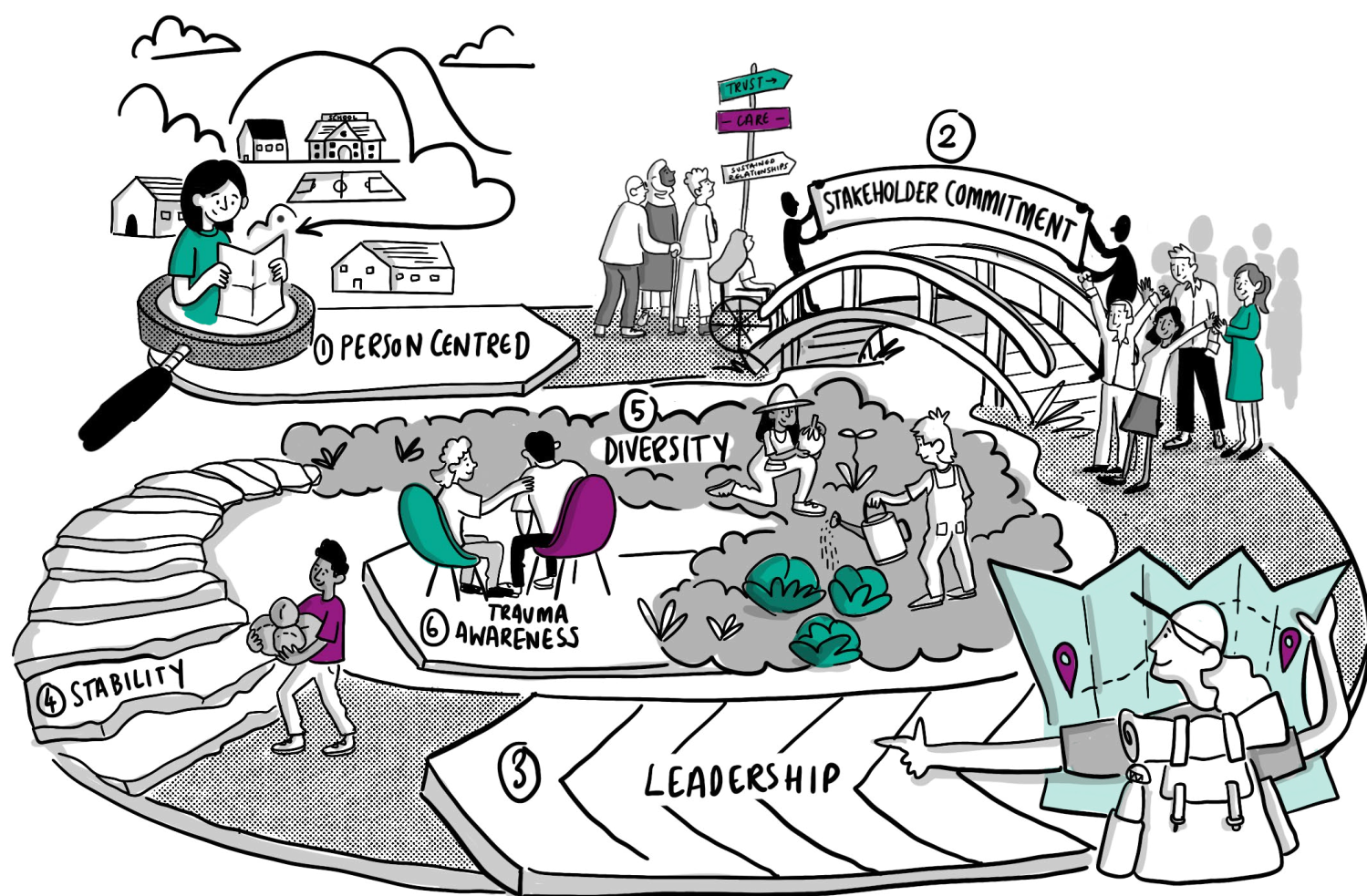
Care and trust need to be embedded into local employment plans and sustained. Therefore, a shift from certain **norms** is required. Economic strategies tend to rely on actions that are designed using large datasets. Such actions are trusted to yield consistent results when applied. Yet, requirements for meaningful action around inclusion can vary from place-to-place, person-to-person and over time.

Inclusion is best managed as an ongoing collaborative process, where requirements are discussed, reflected upon, actioned and refined in cycles. Actions are further strengthened when more diverse voices are involved in these cycles.

COLIF'S RESEARCH IDENTIFIED SIX KEY PRINCIPLES AS FOUNDATIONS FOR COLLABORATIVE ACTION.

1. **Person-centred, place-based adaptation of policies**
2. **Invested commitment from all stakeholders**
3. **Lived-experience leadership to review and adapt action**
4. **Stability for spaces and organisations that are lived experience led**
5. **Acknowledgement of diversity within diversity**
6. **Awareness around trauma**

COLIF'S RESEARCH IDENTIFIED SIX KEY PRINCIPLES AS FOUNDATIONS FOR COLLABORATIVE ACTION



USING THIS GUIDE

OUR SIX KEY PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSION ARE DISCUSSED IN RELATION TO A LOCAL ECONOMY'S KEY STAKEHOLDERS.

EACH SECTION FOCUSES ON WHAT WORKS AND WHAT NEEDS STRENGTHENING.

- **Principles 1 to 3** cover specific actions for each stakeholder group.
- **Principles 4 to 6** present common considerations that are applicable to all stakeholders.

The recommendations made are a starting point for embedding meaningful inclusion in the economic strategies of local areas.

1. PERSON-CENTRED, PLACE-BASED ADAPTATION OF POLICIES

Inclusive employment policies often summarise guidance for employers in checklists of actions. These checklists are useful but only a first step towards addressing inclusion.

Place-based adaptations involve considering how job characteristics (including the workplace) may exclude people, and whether social and cultural inequalities in a local area need more focus. The best responses come through collaboration with excluded groups and individuals. Direct discussions help identify person-centred considerations, while partnerships with trusted organisations strengthen relationships and build inclusion.

The table covers how this principle can be considered and actioned by all key stakeholders.

WHAT WORKS?	
LOCAL AUTHORITIES	- Local data helps adapt national policies (e.g. living wages that consider local living costs). KPIs work best when tied to outcomes like care, trust, safety, housing, and jobs. Cities and Councils of Sanctuary show how participatory methods and community champions shape work inclusively. - Listening and co-designing ensures policies fit real circumstances (e.g. flexible training for new residents).
EMPLOYERS	- Commitments like Disability Confident and OIEP's inclusive employment charter show visible support. - Inclusive policies are stronger when part of workplace culture. - Safe, caring environments let employees share and influence practices. - Collaborative recruitment and training discussions highlight barriers (e.g. digital access). - Partnerships with trusted organisations drive meaningful changes to recruitment processes.
VCSEs	- Local organisations act as key trusted points of care, especially for unsupported individuals. - Pathways to employment are stronger when co-designed with trusted VCSEs. - Trusting and caring relationships with VCSEs helps people build confidence around employment.
EDUCATION PROVIDERS (INCLUDING RESEARCH)	- Training is strongest when co-designed with families and individuals. - Programmes exploring real barriers build confidence and skills. - Qualitative research shows small adaptations make big impact. - Personal stories of success powerfully share benefits of co-designed training.



WHAT CAN BE STRENGTHENED?

- Avoid duplicating data by engaging with initiatives and partners that are already collecting local data (e.g. [Marmot Places](#)).
 - Gather data sensitively. Some groups distrust institutions due to the inequalities and barriers that they have experienced.
 - Focus and reflect on why groups are underrepresented in surveys and official data.
-
- Small employers face time and capacity limits; disengagement isn't always by choice.
 - Collaboration with larger employers can give access to HR tools, training, and funding.
 - Positive cases around inclusion deserve recognition, even if small scale.
 - Case studies from small businesses are as important as larger scale changes in spreading positive practice.
-
- Small/local **VCSEs** often lack recognition and resources despite making big differences.
 - Limited capacity makes it hard for them to network or access funding.
 - Stronger links with larger organisations can amplify their work.
 - The increased presence of other stakeholders in communities helps highlight and resource **VCSEs** contributions to inclusion.
 - Outreach should focus on small-scale but impactful activities, creating opportunities for long-term partnerships.
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- Reform should value individual growth as well as attainment.
 - Strong collaborations between schools, **VCSEs**, and businesses support inclusion.
 - Training opportunities should be **co-designed** with people facing barriers.
 - Qualitative research needs better recognition in policy.
 - Stories explain how trust builds uniquely in different communities and amongst different people and groups.
 - Documenting qualitative insights builds a knowledge base for future work.

2. INVESTED COMMITMENT FROM ALL STAKEHOLDERS

Invested commitment centres on the prioritisation of care and trust. Adherence to minimum legal requirements can only go so far in terms of meaningful inclusion.

All local stakeholders need to invest time to create dialogues with each other and people experiencing barriers to work.

Awareness around the barriers being experienced and social inequalities is essential. This awareness helps to set priorities and share resources equitably to sustain caring and trustworthy relationships.

The table covers how this principle can be considered and actioned by all key stakeholders.

WHAT WORKS?	
LOCAL AUTHORITIES	• Positive relationships with locals reduce mistrust and change perceptions. • Projects rooted in communities mend trust, especially when co-designed. • Showing visible action that is based on community input proves voices are heard. • Local authorities build trust further by expanding activities that include diverse voices in decisions.
EMPLOYERS	• Employers show commitment by inviting communities into workplaces and being active locally. • Inclusive events with diverse groups demonstrate that employers are welcoming. • Sustained partnerships between employers, schools, colleges, and VCSEs create innovative employment pathways. • Employers learn about barriers people face when they are active in communities, leading to co-designed jobs and recruitment processes. • Innovations grow stronger with top-level support from leaders and boards, signalling commitment to inclusion.
VCSEs	• VCSEs support inclusion by joining cross-sector discussions and raising awareness of inequalities. • Their presence increases knowledge of barriers among other stakeholders. • Collaboration across local areas amplifies collective voices. • Confidence is built when cross-sector collaborations prioritise tackling barriers that are created by negative experiences in educational settings.
EDUCATION PROVIDERS (INCLUDING RESEARCH)	• Education programmes that focus on outcomes beyond educational attainment support inclusion. • Providers show commitment by co-designing programmes with individuals who are experiencing barriers. • Inclusive co-design builds confidence, sustained participation, and long-term engagement in communities. • Personal outcomes fuel passions and drive co-design of new opportunities.



WHAT CAN BE STRENGTHENED?

- Overlapping authority areas can cause disjointed work and duplicate activities.
- Duplicated work can harm relationships between large and small authorities.
- Trust is lost when new collaborators replace existing ones.
- Communities feel tensions when local authorities are disjointed and new collaborators replace trusted ones.
- Existing relationships must be respected and prioritised to avoid damaging trust.
- Community-based relationships need sustained recognition and legal backing.
- Smaller employers' work should be valued, even when small-scale.
- Frameworks should support partnerships between small and large employers.
- Access to funding and resources (e.g. HR and training) can help smaller employers sustain their positive work around inclusion.
- **VCSEs** can become overstretched when they dedicate time to **cross-sector** discussions and decision-making processes.
- They are sometimes overlooked in decision-making circles altogether.
- Partnerships that collate and amplify **VCSE** voices can make a difference, for example, the [National Association for Voluntary and Community Action's \(NAVCA\)](#) work on collaborative healthcare delivery built business cases for investment in local **VCSEs**.
- Such collaborations enhance locally relevant inclusive employment opportunities.
- Previously overlooked voices bring fresh ideas and reshape opportunities.
- Research institutions are often seen as intimidating, particularly by those historically excluded from education, which reinforces barriers.
- Stronger community presence and collaboration with local employers, schools, colleges and **VCSEs** can counter deeply engrained barriers. For example, community-facing events increase access to education spaces and provide opportunities to hear diverse voices.
- [Civic University Agreements \(CUAs\)](#) aim to support community engagement activities, but they must recognise the value of diverse voices and commit to including them in long-term plans.

3. LIVED-EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP TO REVIEW AND ADAPT ACTION

Knowledge and skills that are associated with lived experience help to **co-design** actions around inclusive employment. Care and trust are embedded meaningfully in efforts to review and redesign education, training and employment experiences. Essentially, lived experience provides a direct window into how social barriers and inequalities are experienced and how they can be addressed.

The voices of individuals experiencing barriers have more influence when leadership pathways for them are **co-designed**. These voices inspire new ways of thinking and create opportunities and spaces that can be accessed by diverse groups (now and in the future).

The table covers how this principle can be considered and actioned by all key stakeholders.

WHAT WORKS?	
LOCAL AUTHORITIES	• Lived experience strengthens decision-making when communities are directly involved. • Building relationships in trusted community spaces helps to understand and address barriers. • Awareness around how people experiencing barriers are often framed as “problems to fix” and moving away from this view helps in build relationships. • When lived experience informs design, people work as equal partners.
EMPLOYERS	• Pathways to leadership that value lived experience show inclusion is central to workplace culture. • Diverse leadership broadens understanding of barriers through collaboration. • Inclusion grows when employers work with training providers and VCSEs. • Lived experience leadership is often strong in businesses with a social purpose, including in small businesses that offer tailored employment pathways to specific groups. • Employees in tailored employment settings feel valued and build strong workplace bonds.
VCSEs	• Lived experience leadership within VCSEs drives co-design of inclusive actions. • Community-level collaborations ensure lived perspectives are part of employment pathways. • Paid roles that value lived experience create opportunities for trusted mentoring, peer support and employment pathways that centre on care. • Peer mentoring led by lived experience provides stability and trust for people facing barriers to work.
EDUCATION PROVIDERS (INCLUDING RESEARCH)	• Lived experience leadership enriches compulsory and higher education. • Collaborations with households and communities make co-designed programmes effective. • Barriers such as poor access to health or infrastructure are better understood through engaging with and valuing lived experience. • Co-designed participatory methods create innovative opportunities and challenge inequality. More information here.



WHAT CAN BE STRENGTHENED?

- Individuals with lived experience face barriers in local authority pathways to employment.
- Recruitment often demands formal evidence instead of valuing storytelling and listening.
- Formal communications sometimes position people with barriers as “the problem”.
- Language in community-facing communications should be reviewed by lived experience leaders or collaborators.
- Employment strategies need early engagement and fair resourcing for local collaborators.
- Some businesses that are driven by social purpose focus only on delivering quality, not scaling up. This needs acknowledgement.
- **Co-designing** pathways with larger employers can expand options, but must be handled sensitively.
- Employees should have genuine choice about whether to pursue employment pathways to jobs with larger employers.
- Leaders with lived experience risk burnout as they become more involved in influential decision-making circles.
- Lived experience insights are vital but should be shared by all stakeholders to reduce pressure on local **VCSE** leaders.
- Low pay in the **VCSE** sector limits sustainability.
- Wider recognition of **VCSEs'** work can encourage economic investment and help to raise salaries in the sector.
- Sustaining lived experience leadership depends on valuing it locally and resourcing it **equitably**.
- Success is still measured mainly by attainment, which undervalues lived experience.
- At transition points (e.g. primary to secondary school and life after compulsory education), students risk losing trusted relationships with mentors and key local **VCSEs**.
- The loss of trusted relationships can damage confidence and delay progress, much like a bereavement.
- Transitions in the education system and into employment should prioritise maintaining trusted relationships and **co-design** progression into independent working on an individual basis.

4. STABILITY FOR SPACES AND ORGANISATIONS THAT ARE LIVED EXPERIENCE LED

Spaces and organisations that are led by lived experience provide insights into:

- social inequalities,
- historic and current prejudices,
- longstanding barriers to education and employment.

Through these spaces and organisations, individuals access places and relationships that centre on trust and care. [Community mapping techniques](#) can be adopted to acknowledge such spaces and organisations. However, a simple record of what is out there is not enough to demonstrate their value. Stories showcase the diversity of impacts that are achieved and how these impacts can vary from case-to-case, even when the same organisation and spaces are involved. Research approaches (e.g. **participatory methods**) that listen to and share these stories need to be adopted by stakeholders who have the resources to do so. Currently, this type of research is commissioned as and when deemed necessary, and if it can be afforded.

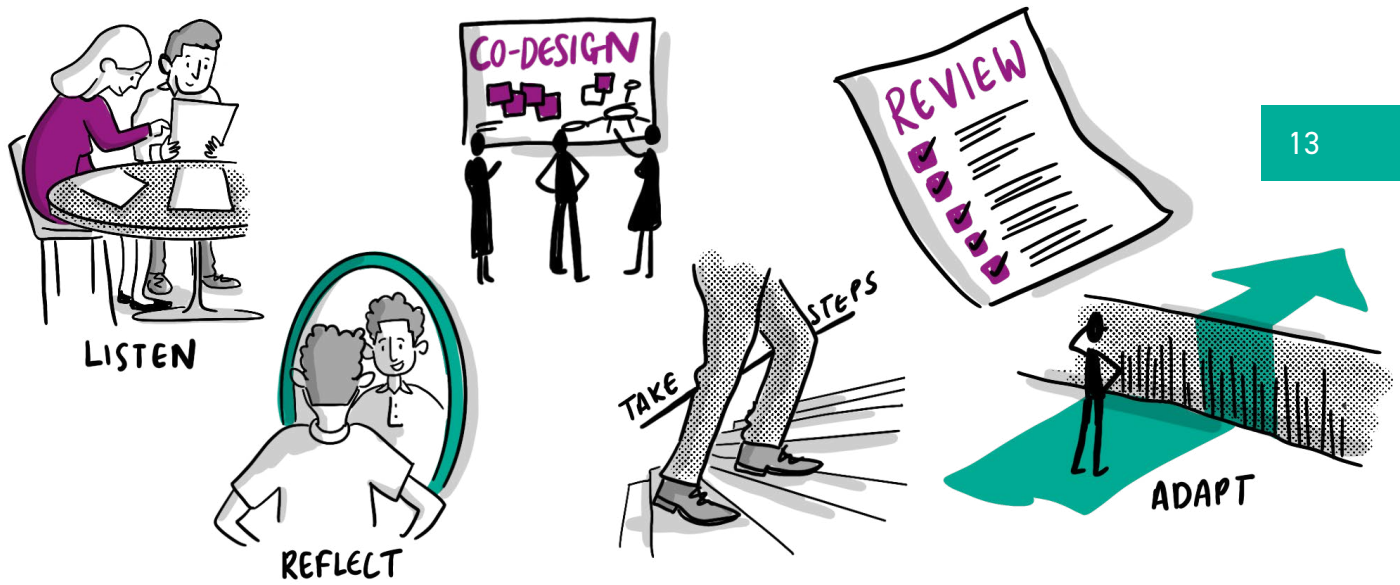


PRIORITIES

1. Rethink how research is costed by institutions, with added attention given to how and when overheads are applied.
2. Value ethical research that is generated by communities and by independent researchers. For example: [Oxfordshire: a county of community wealth building](#).

Community wealth, which rethinks economics by valuing positive social change, is an important consideration here. Positive change can involve providing new spaces for social activities and **co-designing** meaningful activities with communities. Going forward, social value and procurement frameworks should prioritise these types of actions. Such frameworks help to share wealth across local economies. Wealth is distributed more **equitably** when spaces and organisations that work with communities attract investment. Added investment gives these spaces and organisations more stability.

Encouragingly, there are positive developments in this area. For example, [a new national procurement framework](#) for local authorities adds greater weighting to social outcomes. Ideally, these developments will inform similar approaches to **social value and procurement** across all sectors.



5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

Acknowledgement of diversity within diversity refers to:

- challenging stereotypes that emerge through grouping people with similar characteristics and experiences,
- not expecting similar responses from people with shared characteristics and experiences.

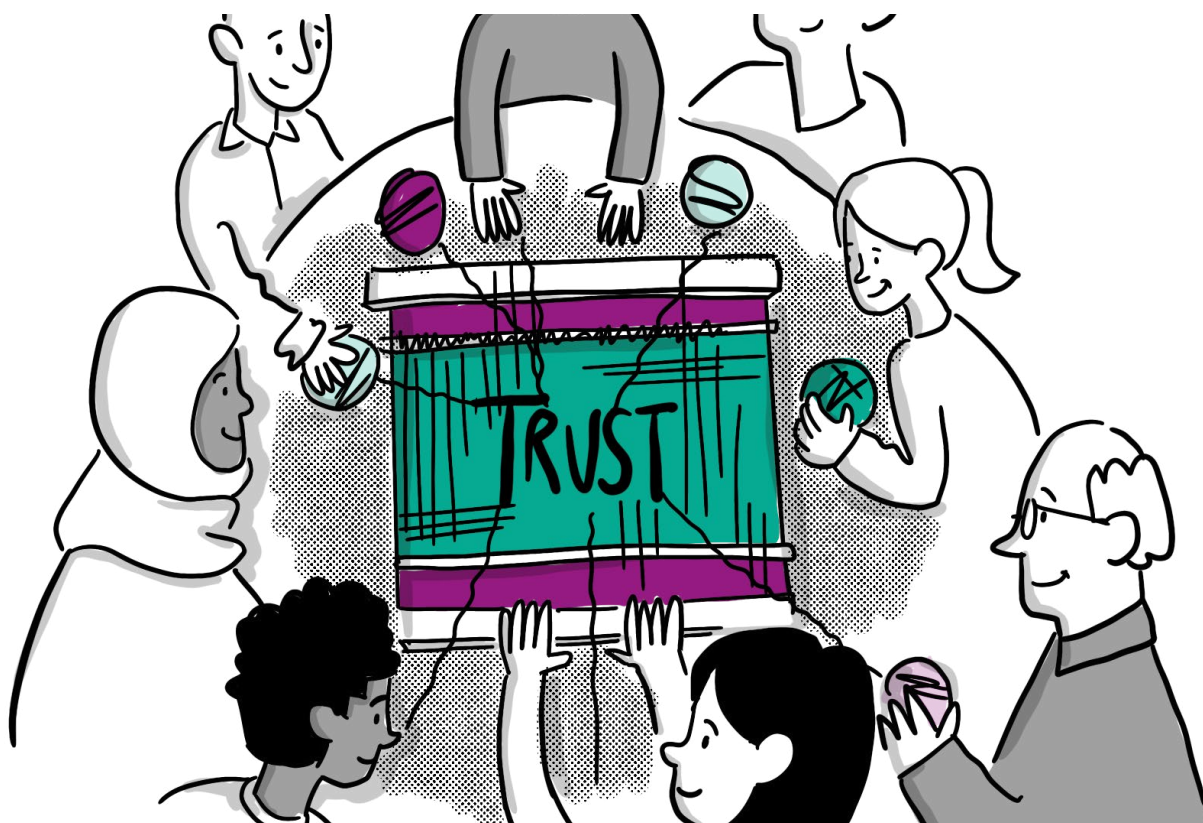
Data on widespread social inequalities can provide an indication of key priorities and whose voices have been overlooked. However, the way in which inequalities combine for an individual, and in relation to their daily life, defines how they experience barriers. This is called **intersectionality**.

Where barriers are complex and have deep roots, set actions cannot be expected to work for everyone (even if they have been **co-designed**). While some stakeholders may feel out of their depth in relation to highly individualised cases, a deep sense of care across all stakeholders can ensure people with such experiences are not overlooked. Barriers will remain in place, and can become more pronounced, if individuals are seen as being replaceable by another individual with similar characteristics. Local collaborations must ensure that non-judgemental relationships can be accessed and sustained by people who experience highly individualised barriers. In these circumstances, cycles of **co-design** help to break down barriers on their terms. Each cycle is taken as a small step and reflected on together to inform a person's next steps.

This process is enhanced as relationships get stronger through **care** and **trust**.

6. AWARENESS AROUND TRAUMA

Trauma is complex! While lived experience can help to **co-design** programmes more carefully, what ends up being effective can be extremely difficult to pinpoint. This statement does not aim to undermine significant bodies of research on trauma; recommendations underpinned by relevant research should be drawn from where possible.



Flexibility with co-designed goals is important. This is not to say that individuals with difficult life experiences should not have aspirations. The point to make clear is that their self-worth is not defined by how long they take to achieve their aspirations or whether they achieve them at all. Currently, it is difficult to build relationships on such flexible terms in relation to employment. **Cross-sectoral** conversations need to focus on sharing resources **equitably**, where spaces and relationships that centre on these sensitivities are forged and sustained in communities.

Marked changes in culture are required. The timeframes that are involved in building and/or rebuilding trust and confidence can be extensive. Sometimes no outcomes beyond continued engagement and a person's presence can be shown. A culture shift is needed to give continued engagement (being present) value. Sometimes resource allocation processes must let go of their desired outcomes, and allocate resources based on sustained meaningful care. Unfortunately, approaches to resource allocation based on these terms are open to exploitation. However, that risk should not lead to inaction. Transparency and honesty can be regarded as foundations that safeguard resource allocation processes against potential exploitation.

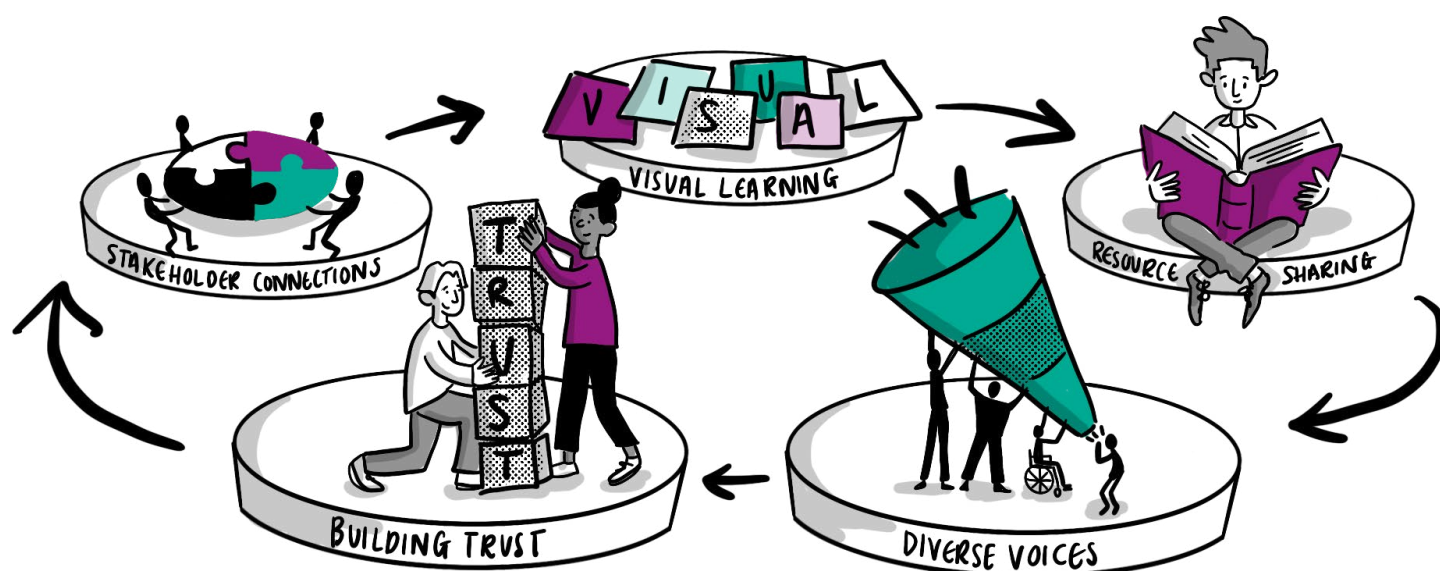


Cross-sector conversations should focus on how these foundations can be built on to establish trusted processes for flexible resource allocation when it is required.

WHAT NEXT?

This guide's recommendations are best applied where good relationships are maintained across all key stakeholders. **Cross-sector** partnerships, like OIEP, can enable regular conversations and new relationships to develop.

Anchor organisations can play an important role in sustaining inclusion within local economies. They have a significant influence on local areas through their size and involvement in public services. A big difference can be made if they adopt and maintain inclusive practices to recruitment and consider inclusive local businesses when procuring products and services.



THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS ARE FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS:

Reflect on your collaborations and partnerships with other stakeholders, and carefully assess whether resources are shared **equitably** to strengthen care, trust, and long-lasting relationships within your communities.

Involve diverse voices – particularly ones that have been overlooked in the past – in decision-making. This point is particularly important for decision-making around resource allocation.

If collaborations and partnerships with other stakeholders and communities are not in place, reach out to local organisations and engage with the day-to-day barriers communities face.

Building trust in communities means recognising that some groups may lack the time, resources, or confidence to take part in decision-making. Reaching out and being present helps develop the trust needed for meaningful involvement.

Share learning and make this learning visible. In Oxfordshire, [OIEP's website](#) serves as a hub of information and case studies. Similar active local networks and **cross-sector** information resources will be key in sustaining progress around inclusive employment.

GLOSSARY

TERM	DEFINITION
Anchor organisations:	Large organisations (usually non-profit, public sector) in a local area. Local National Health Service Trusts are an example.
Cities and Councils of Sanctuary:	A national initiative where local authorities commit to welcoming refugees and asylum seekers with care.
Co-design:	Any process that collectively defines issues, plans actions, and produces outputs in response to them.
Community champions:	Individuals or groups in a community who encourage participation in activities and discussions, ensuring community voices are heard.
Community wealth:	An approach that concerns generating and sharing wealth to strengthen local social outcomes and address inequalities.
Cross-sector:	Discussions and activities that involve stakeholders across the public, private, and voluntary sectors.
Equitably:	The fair distribution of resources, where past inequalities around resource-sharing are taken into account and addressed.
Infrastructure:	The physical structures of societies and communities, like buildings, roads, and green spaces.
Intersectionality:	The way in which different characteristics and aspects of a person's identity, and how others see their identity, combine to influence how they experience life.
KPIs:	Key Performance Indicators: measures and outcomes used to assess whether a project or programme has achieved its goals.
Living wage:	Salaries that account for living costs and enable people to maintain a good standard of living.
Marmot places:	A national programme that has provided resources to areas with significant social inequalities to understand and address them.
Norms:	Behaviours and ways of life that are accepted as being normal in society. Usually, norms are influenced by dominant perspectives.
Participatory methods:	Methods that involve processes and activities (often creative) that are used to voice the opinions and experiences of groups and/or individuals appropriately.
Social value and procurement:	Approaches that value social outcomes and impacts, and consider them in processes that help organisations - including businesses - source and obtain products and services that are essential for their operations.
VCSEs:	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises is a term for organisations that are not in the public or private sector and have a social purpose.