

Inclusive employment: a short introductory guide on participatory approaches for person-centred evaluations



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2.

Background

In 2025, the Creating Opportunities through Local Innovation Fellowship (COLIF) co-produced a guide that rethinks inclusive employment as a collective responsibility for all sectors (private, public and voluntary).

Six principles emerged from discussions and interviews with stakeholders spanning all three sectors and reflections on Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership's work on inclusive employment. The principles are as follows.

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.

A detailed description of how the principles above can be turned into practice is available via the following link: [Partnering for inclusive employment: a guide for local economies.](#)

While barriers to work are influenced by large structural issues, e.g., access to appropriate education and training opportunities, the ways in which such barriers are experienced can be highly personal. This document builds on COLIF's work to demonstrate how **participatory life-course methods** can be used in relation to inclusive employment as a way of understanding 'what works' and 'what needs strengthening'. Participatory methods prioritise lived experience voices by inviting individuals to reflect on their relationships with certain subject matters, e.g., employment, and think about key events that have influenced that relationship (positively and negatively).

Primarily, this guide is for organisations that run activities and programmes to support individuals into employment. The outlined approach aims to stimulate reflection and ensure the voices of individuals who experience barriers to work are heard - and focused upon - during evaluations.

3.

Introduction

Participatory life-course methods are used in social research to understand complex matters and give meaning to a range of issues through the voices of individuals experiencing barriers and inequalities during daily life.

The approach centres around **open questions**. Importantly, such questions can require time and trust to unpack. It is recommended that individuals are in a comfortable environment and efforts have been made to build positive relationships. Ideally, you would have spent some time with the individuals whose life-courses are of interest and taken an active part in the activities you wish to evaluate with them. General chat about the weather, the local area and any shared interests can make an important difference during initial interactions. Relationship-building in this manner is key to participatory methods and requires careful attention. Specifically, it is recommended that these methods are used by those who are experienced in working with the participating individuals/groups. This point is particularly important in relation to vulnerable individuals/groups and appropriate safeguarding policies should be in place prior to any participation. While this guide focuses on the practicalities of using participatory methods, experience in relationship-building and a good understanding of the individuals and/or groups who are engaged by the methods is essential. The remaining sections concentrate on the practical aspects of using participatory life-course methods in evaluating activities around inclusive employment.



4.

Guiding questions

After an initial phase of relationship-building (as described above), a guiding question like the one below can be used to start off a conversation about employment.



“How would you describe your past experiences around work – and looking for work?”

This question will help to guide a conversation that begins to identify influential events and experiences around an individual’s relationship with seeking work. If interested in particular events and experiences, questions around them can be included in the conversation. Examples of the types of questions that might be asked are as follows.



“How did you find [insert activity or project] and did it change anything for you? If so, what and why?”

“How did your meetings/conversations with [insert name of organisation or individual] influence how you feel about [insert relevant outcome, e.g., seeking work, participating in training, writing a CV etc]?”

Responses to relevant open questions (as above) will help to sketch out a life-course timeline (together). The process of annotating and sketching a timeline can help individuals express themselves and reflect on what is important to them. The example timeline on the next page - which chooses leaving school as a starting point - demonstrates the type of notes that may be made with the participating individual. Essentially, all that is required is a piece of paper, a starting point and guiding open questions (like the ones above). The key to making the process meaningful is to ensure the participating individual leads what is being captured. The example on the next page also includes points around when it might be appropriate to ask follow-up questions to understand how that individual felt and how a certain event/activity influenced change for them. Overall, conversations can be far-reaching and take time. The example’s main intention is to demonstrate how notes/sketches **can be made together** to capture key points.

5.

Example

First job in the local grocers. I got on well with the owner. They didn't mind that I had no formal qualifications. But new owners came in and made workers join a training course. I didn't get on with that. (2015-2018).

You lose confidence in yourself and apart from my people skills I didn't know what to put on my CV or how to even start one.

The pandemic made things worse. It was impossible to speak about jobs face-to-face and get yourself known. I felt like there was no hope. (2019-2022).

Being here was difficult to begin with - low confidence! But I got to know people and they got to know me. My confidence began to build and the team here really helped me to sell my skills, like for a CV. Hearing that I was good with people from others made a big difference! (2023-2024).

Leaving school
(2014)



This is an opportunity to ask how the change made the individual feel. Their response can be included as added notes/drawings that are made together.

This point relates to a volunteering programme and is a good opportunity to delve deeper about how volunteering made a difference, e.g., who were the key people and what were the key activities that helped?

Sharing learning

The conversational nature of participatory life-course methods has the potential to generate a lot of rich insights. While there are many ways to deal with such insights, this section concentrates on the basics of generating learning and sharing it appropriately.

An initial approach to summarising key learning is to look for common themes in what different individuals said - especially around changes that are of interest to an evaluation - and pull together the key influences around their experiences. For example, where **building confidence** is identified as a common theme, the notes from the timelining sessions may reveal that interactions with a certain person or in a certain place acted as a key influence. To present this learning in a powerful manner, a summary of how that person or place made individuals feel would be helpful. Ideally, the individuals who participated in the timelining sessions would be included in confirming key themes and the (co)production of a summary around how they felt and why. Group sessions around **what was learnt** and holding discussions to reach an agreement on **what others should know** adds meaning to sharing (reporting) learning.

Finally, the learning that is generated by methods like participatory life-course timelines is often undervalued. Important points to include in reporting to ensure the learning is valued are:

1. The evaluation concentrates on the experiences of people as unique individuals.
2. Therefore, the learning generated relates to a particular context (e.g., place/programme and a specific group).
3. The experiences/themes/influences highlighted by the timelines demonstrate cases of small-scale but high-quality change because individual life-courses (experiences), which are not the same from one person to another, are considered.
4. Methods - like participatory life-course timelines - that support reflection and concentrate on what is important to particular individuals (co)produce learning, as opposed to checking progress/change against predetermined targets.
5. The aims of such evaluations are not to determine what can be replicated elsewhere. Instead, key influences on what works (and does not) in a specific context are learnt and can be shared to inspire building other contexts where the experiences/perspectives of other individuals are valued and considered.

Many of the themes included in this guide relate to practices that require ethical considerations such as safeguarding, ethical research practice/approval and inclusion. The contents presented should be viewed as an introductory overview. Any work with individuals and groups outlined in the Care Act 2014 should follow appropriate duty of care responsibilities and safeguarding policies should be in place.

