



# Building more inclusive community energy co-operatives:

## A Participatory Toolkit



# About this toolkit

This toolkit is for co-operatives that want to increase the diversity of their membership and include communities that are currently under-represented in the co-operative space. It is also for anyone interested in building a more inclusive co-operative movement by drawing on participatory research and design approaches.

Led by Repowering London, this toolkit has been created in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Energy in Bristol and Dr Anna Rebmann from King's College London. It has also been supported by a generous grant from the Barrow Cadbury Trust Connect Fund.

# About Repowering London

Repowering London is a community energy development organisation that aims to support all Londoners to participate in and benefit from the transition to a low-carbon society.

We have supported the establishment of ten energy co-operatives, which seek to transform the energy sector through an emphasis on community co-operation and ownership, affordable clean energy, and a redistribution of profits from energy sales so that they benefit local communities.

The research that has led to this toolkit primarily focused on increasing diversity in community energy co-operatives based in London. However, we believe that our approaches and tools are useful for the wider co-operative sector in the UK.





# Contents

- 1. Why grow the co-operative economy? **05**
- 2. Our research objective **07**
- 3. From participatory research to co-design **10**
- 4. Understanding and implementing participatory research **16**
- 5. Understanding and implementing co-design **22**
- 6. Five insights for co-operative membership **38**
- 7. Resources **46**
- 8. References **51**
- 9. Acknowledgements **53**

# Why grow the co-operative economy?

Co-operatives (co-ops) can be understood as **economic institutions or initiatives that are owned and controlled by their members**. Given their core principle of one-person, one-vote, they provide a radical alternative to capitalist economies, which privilege individualism and competition over collectivism and co-operation.

Alongside agricultural co-ops, health care co-ops and housing co-ops, energy co-ops embody a different vision of how power should be distributed and deployed in economic activity.

According to the New Economics Foundation (NEF) co-ops can play an essential role in the enactment of what Raymond Williams termed '**the long revolution**' - the fight to build a non-hierarchical, democratic and equitable society in which values of solidarity, dignity and mutuality thrive.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite their transformative potential, the UK co-operative sector currently accounts for less than **1% of national business turnover**. The UK also has disproportionately fewer co-operatives and mutual companies compared to most other OECD countries.<sup>1</sup>



➤ Moreover, a significant number of communities are also under-represented in the community energy sector. A survey conducted by Co-operatives UK in 2020 found that among community share investors in the UK\*, 73% were university graduates, 92% were White and one in three were aged over 65. Just 4% of investors are under age 35.<sup>2</sup>

Community energy, more broadly, shows the same trend. A membership survey published by Community Energy England in 2022 shows a similar trend: 95% of respondents were White, 67% were male, and 88% were over 50, where these details were provided.<sup>3</sup>

Communities under-represented in the co-operative economy, therefore, include people under 50, people from the Global Majority, and people without a university degree.

NEF has identified several barriers to co-operative expansion, including membership and cultural isolation. To tackle membership, it recommends: 'An ambitious expansion of co-operative membership, while making active membership as easy as possible and reducing the transaction costs and burdens of co-operation (costs, financial and non-financial).'

To tackle cultural isolation, it recommends: 'More deeply embedding co-operatives in wider social movements and communities [to] give co-ops the strong cultural and social underpinnings that have driven the most successful co-operative economies elsewhere.'

**We hope this toolkit will support other co-operatives in implementing these recommendations.**

\*More on community shares on pages 8-9

# Our research objective

In this section, learn what we hoped to achieve from this work.



## Areas for exploration

How might we design inclusive community share and membership offers to make participation in energy co-operatives more attractive and accessible to a wider range of Londoners?

Having defined our aim – to increase the diversity of our membership to include communities currently under-represented in the co-operative economy – that was the question we asked ourselves.

Unlike corporate shares, which are predominately concerned with profit, community shares are more of a social investment. They offer communities a viable means to invest in social enterprises, allowing the latter to raise funds for a variety of initiatives.





➤ One way to understand them is as a form of community-led investment, i.e., a **'practice of investing with meaningful input, decision-making power, and ownership from grassroots stakeholders'**.<sup>4</sup>

Generally, community share investors automatically become members of the co-op issuing the shares. However, membership in co-ops is not limited to purchasing community shares; it can also be acquired through a nominal fee, an investment of time, or another type of engagement or commitment.

Historically, Repowering London's membership has been coupled with community shares. As we recruit most of our co-op members through community share offers, the vast majority can be classified as investors.

This is something we wanted to challenge through our new research objective - not by shunning community shares, but by: a) making them more inclusive; and b) designing alternative membership offers to complement them.

One issue we had to contend with is that being a member of a community energy co-op does not hold the same 'obvious' benefits as other co-ops.<sup>5</sup> For instance, whereas a member of a co-operative retail store would benefit from receiving financial benefits through discounts, energy co-operatives are not yet able to supply discounted electricity directly to households (see **Local Electricity Bill** for further information). This means we had to think deeply about types of value exchange that go beyond the monetary. As co-ops are all about collaboration and democracy, we wanted to explore this question through participatory approaches.

# From participatory research to co-design

# Creating partners in change

Participatory approaches in research and design involve people affected by the issue at hand with the purpose of enabling action and change.

**Participatory Research** engages those who are not necessarily trained in research but belong to or represent the interests of the people who are the focus of the research, through the research process.<sup>6</sup> They then make decisions about research objectives and research design, and participate in data collection and analysis.

This ensures that research is co-constructed through partnerships between different stakeholders.

The goal is not only to generate knowledge, but also to empower community members to effect change.

**Co-design**, another participatory approach, turns its attention to design, a field that has historically been led by experts. It recognises that the individuals affected by a problem should actively participate in designing solutions.

They are not just passive recipients; they are equal partners in the process.<sup>6,7</sup> This ensures that the entire design process is undertaken in conjunction with people who are impacted by the problem being addressed.



- For this project, we drew on both approaches to shape our methodology.

### Participatory Research:

- Recruiting Community Researchers who would be trained in participatory approaches to lead the research process, while being embedded within a local Repowering London energy co-op.
- Collectively defining research questions, methods and activities around our research objective.

### Co-design:

- Conducting engagement activities in North Kensington and Newham to raise awareness of the co-ops and the project, have exploratory conversations around our research questions, and recruit co-designers from our local communities.
- Running c–design workshops to produce an output with our co-designers, in line with our research objective.



➤ An important first step for any participatory project is to identify the communities that you are going to work with. For Repowering London, this was easy. **We embedded the project within two of our community energy co-ops, located in North Kensington and Newham.** These co-ops anchored our research and in turn the research helped us to develop the co-ops further.

Both areas chosen have a vibrant community sector as well a young and ethnically diverse population. They each also have a high degree of economic deprivation and a relatively low number of university graduates, making them well-suited to our research. <sup>8</sup>



The co-ops that Repowering London facilitates in these areas are at very different development stages. North Kensington Community Energy (NKCE), created in 2018, is a well-established energy co-op with more than **200 members**. It has successfully installed solar panels across four community sites so far, raising approximately **£200,000 from investors** to do so.

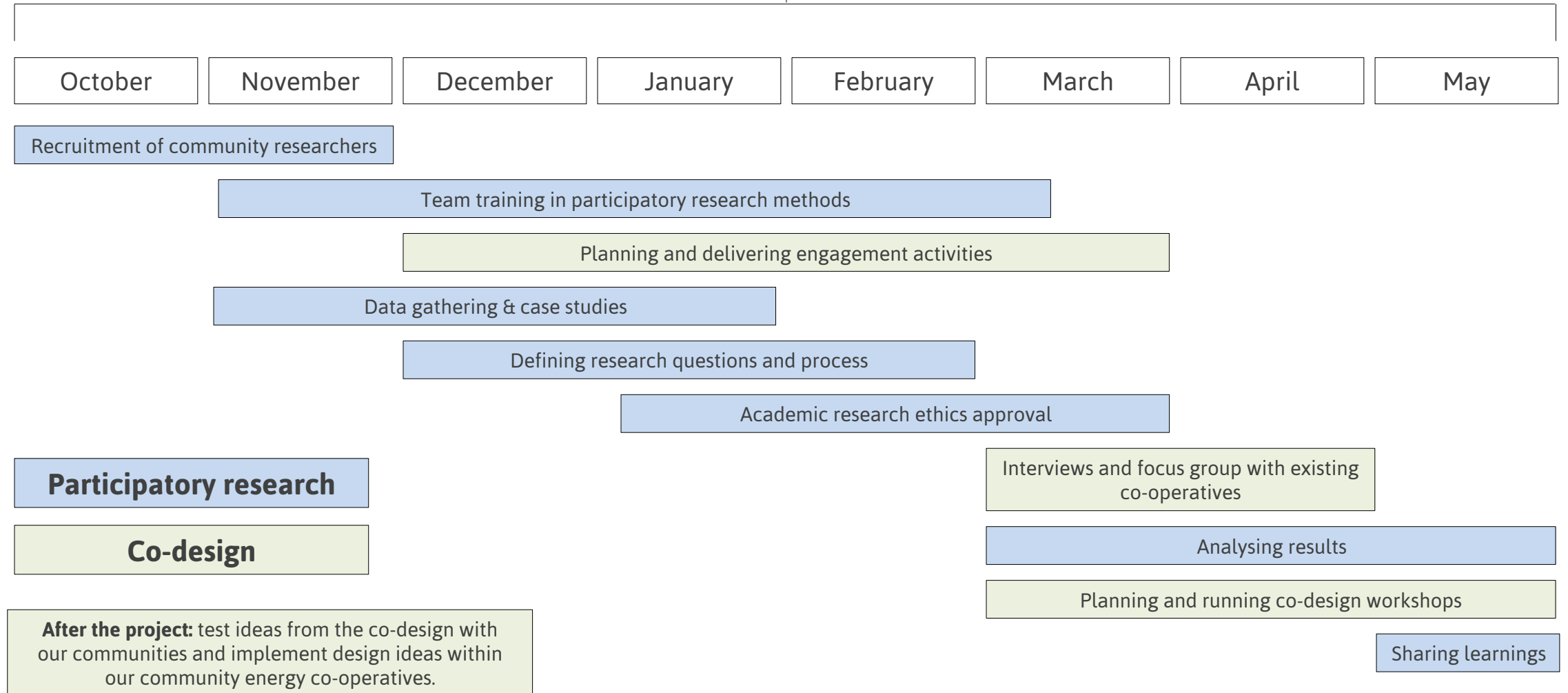


- Community Energy Newham (CEN), in comparison, is a nascent co-op created in 2023. It has installed solar panels on two libraries thus far, with plans to install on six more sites this year. The group has yet to hold a community share offer.

Both NKCE and CEN are planning to introduce community share offers in 2024 and 2025. The research and design insights in this toolkit will inform their share offers and membership campaigns.



## Project timeline: 2023 - 2024



# Understanding and implementing participatory research

In this section, you will learn more about what participatory research is, how we used it, and what we learnt from the process.



# Working with community researchers

One of the most important aspects of this project was the recruitment of local community researchers to conduct the research. Community researchers are individuals who are members of a community and who are given training to conduct research in their own community.

Our funding allowed us to recruit two paid community researchers for two days per week for the duration of the project. Both would be embedded within their local energy co-op, be trained in participatory research methods and lead on activities and research.

For our project we used a free three-week Future Learn course: **Research Methods: A Practical Guide to Peer and Community Research**, developed by researchers at King's College London. The course introduces participatory research methods and provides training on the basic skills needed to design and run a participatory research project.

During this process, we learnt that the positionality of the community researchers will have a significant impact on how the research is conducted. And that this is a strength that needs to be embraced and worked with. Positionality refers to where a person is located in relation to their various social identities (i.e., gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, geographical location).





Researchers will be active in their community through everyday activities and will reach out to their peers during the research process. Effective recruitment is therefore essential. Where do you advertise the role? Who will you prioritise? Which networks are a part of the researchers' everyday lives?

The community researchers we recruited were young mums with strong organising skills and connections to local groups, including school parents. Both took pride in their respective neighbourhoods and experienced a sense of belonging in their communities.



Nasri, a mother to three teenagers, was already working with Repowering London as the North Kensington Community Energy Lead. She has lived in North Kensington for ten years and has a wealth of experience as a community organiser in the area. In addition to her commitments as a Community Researcher on this project, Nasri continued her work at Midaye, a Somali development network providing educational and social activities for women and girls. She is passionate about community organising, education for change, and building a strong and resilient community in North Kensington.



Ruth, a mother of two young boys, moved to Newham six years ago and has since become involved in various community initiatives in the area, including parents' groups and networks, Forest Gate Community Garden, volunteering with an art for wellbeing group, and running Playstreet events. Passionate about the environment, she previously worked at Sustrans, a walking, wheeling and cycling charity. After taking a break from work to have time for her children, she's committed to creating a good work and childcare balance for parents and families, as well as being able to work and build positive change locally.

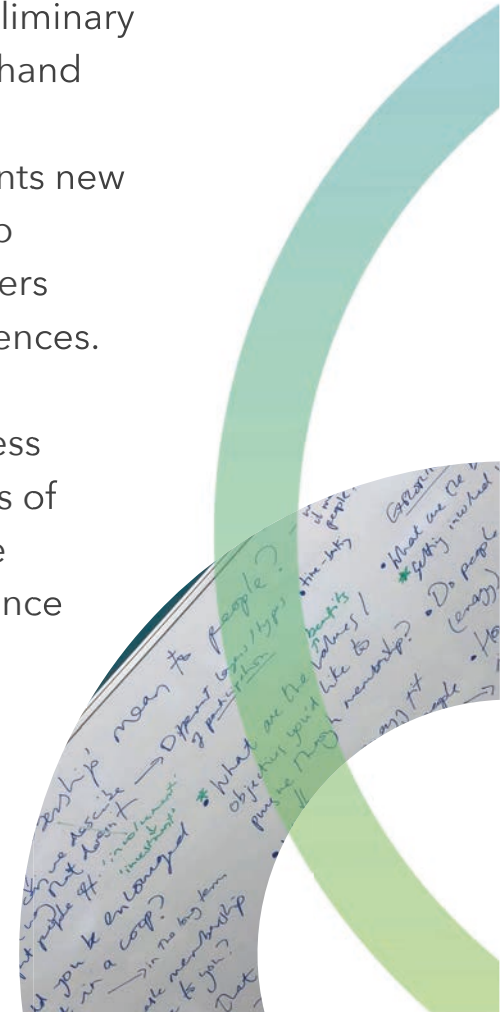
# Defining research questions

A key lesson we learnt is that defining research questions takes time. Research questions differ from research objectives in that they are significantly more specific. Whereas our objectives framed the broad intent of our research, our questions were precise queries which would then be answered through the research. Here, we had to strike a fine balance to ensure that the questions were neither so broad that they could not be answered, nor so narrow that they distracted from our objectives.

Answering a research question can entail a multitude of research methods, involving different participants at different stages of the research project.

We decided that we wanted to carry out preliminary interviews to better understand the issue at hand before beginning the co-design phase. We generated a list of questions for local residents new to co-operatives, as well as for existing co-op members. Repowering London team members could then learn from these different experiences.

The knowledge garnered through this process helped us to define the purpose and outputs of our co-design workshops. This took us some time, as we had to define the scope of influence and find a tangible output that would be relatively easy to produce.



# Key takeaways

- **Adopting adaptive methodologies can be useful.** We learnt that striking the right balance between 'stage-gate' and 'agile' approaches is important. Stage-gate is sequential. It involves fully completing a stage before moving on to the next phase. Agile, in comparison, is more cyclical. It responds to new information as and when it comes in. Research that combines the fluidity of agile in relationship-building and the structural clarity of stage-gate in expectation management can benefit from both methodologies.
- **Understand the impact of the applicable research processes.** Our partnership with King's College London meant we had to follow rigorous academic standards.

We underestimated the time that activities such as securing ethics approval, conducting data analysis, and synthesising existing research would take. In hindsight, having more time between the initial data collection and subsequent co-design workshops would have made for a smoother research process.

- **It takes time to gather insights.** Although we were able to gather enough insights to inform our co-design workshops, we were not able to gather as many insights as we would have liked. For instance, due to time constraints, we were unable to conduct interviews or focus groups with existing co-operative members. Allocating more time for this phase would have allowed us to gather more wide-ranging insights.



# Key takeaways

- **Integration of research and social movements may be helpful.** If co-ops flourish by linking business models to social movements, can we create a similar success story by integrating research methods with social movements? While this was on our minds during this project, it is not something we were able to explore in detail. We know that there is a large body of work exploring this space, especially from a decolonial perspective. We would want to learn more about this for our future research projects.
- **Building empathetic and authentic relationships is essential.** The importance of taking time to build relationships with researchers and co-designers cannot be overstated. People come from different walks of life, with different sets of expertise and expectations and different ways of working. Dedicating time to learning how to communicate and collaborate with each other at the start of the process can be hugely helpful to creating a friendly atmosphere in the long run.

# Understanding and implementing co-design

In this section, you will learn more about what co-design is, how we used it, and what we learnt from the process.

# Understanding co-design

**First, what is design?** Design is about envisioning and planning a future, for imagining what 'ought to be' in order to get there. Design is what community energy does. As do other social innovators.<sup>9</sup>

Common steps of the design process are:

**Research > Analysis & Synthesis > Ideation  
> Selection & Decision-making**

The word co-design is often misused to describe any kind of participation. For example, this includes focus groups where people are giving feedback. But true co-design is more than just participation. It is about sharing power and working together to make decisions.

**True co-design is more than just participation. It is about sharing power and working together to make decisions.**

In our project, it took some time to clarify what we were co-designing and how we would be sharing power. We realised we would not have enough time to go through the design process in its entirety. So, we decided to focus on the research and ideation phases in the workshops, with the intention of inviting co-designers to future co-op meetings for selection and decision-making phases.



- **Different people and organisations may be involved at different stages of the design process.** In some cases, co-design may run throughout the design process. In other cases, the participants may change over the stages, or some stages may not involve co-design. It all depends on the context – the resources available, the outcome being designed, and the people involved.

For example, we did not want to make co-design too burdensome for our participants, so our initial process involved people in the research stage – finding out how they currently participate in their communities and what motivates them to do so. We analysed this data before moving to a co-design ideation stage.

Here, our participants co- designed how they would like to participate in North Kensington Community Energy and Community Energy Newham, by mapping a journey of co-operation (more on this later). The next stage of co-design would be to develop and test these new membership journeys in the community.

For further information on core principles and common frameworks for co-design, please refer to the **Resources** section at the end of the toolkit. ➤



➤ In both North Kensington and Newham, we ran two co-design workshops lasting 2.5-3 hours each, over the span of a week. We did this with a set of 10 to 12 participants who attended both workshops.

As mentioned previously, the broad groups currently under-represented in the co-operative economy include people under 50, people of the Global Majority, and people who do not hold a university degree. Our goal was to recruit co-designers from among these audiences. To do so, we ran community engagement activities to raise awareness of our co-ops as well as our specific research project.



We were successful in recruiting the co-designers we wanted. In North Kensington, we worked with 10 co-designers. Among them, nine identified as women, nine were aged under 50, four had not graduated from university, and all were from the Global Majority. In Newham, we worked with 12 co-designers. Among them, eight were under 50, seven had not graduated from university, and 11 were from the Global Majority. None of the co-designers had been involved in a co-op before.



## Community engagement activities

We placed a strong focus on designing a diverse range of activities, from using postcards to conduct research to organising creative activities where research was not the focus. It was important that we started by raising awareness of our co-operatives and generating interest in the topic, as well as building trust with local communities, before mentioning our research project and recruiting for the co-design workshops.



➤ We used creative approaches to run engagement activities and raise awareness of our research project. We ran a Creative Energy Club in Newham, where we invited participants to create collages on the theme of co-operation. In North Kensington, we ran an Energy Support Workshop at which we shared energy-saving tips before introducing the concept of community energy as a solution to mitigate future energy crises.

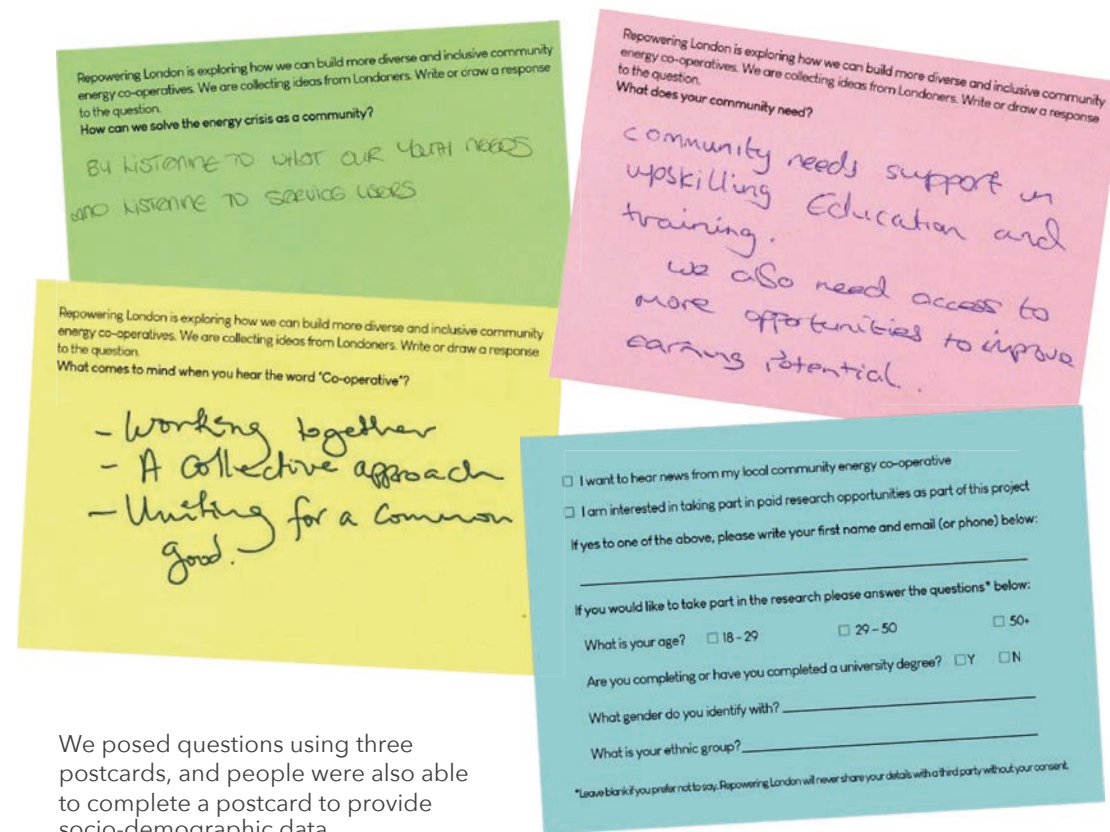
At both workshops, we had exploratory conversations on the theme of co-operatives, and raised awareness of our research before encouraging participants to fill out postcards.



➤ We used postcards as a 'hook' – something easy for people to engage with, a way to spark exploratory conversations, to get a feeling for people's perceptions of community energy. And, eventually, to recruit for our co-design workshops. Our community researchers distributed these at pop-up stalls, community fairs, local shops, bus stops, and to their neighbours and friends. We were inspired to use postcards by No Jobs in the Arts, an organisation that surveyed early-career creatives in the East Midlands through simple postcards asking: 'What do you want?'<sup>10</sup>

This approach also proved to be an efficient way to collect socio-demographic data and create a pool of residents from which to recruit our co-designers. We noticed that people were more trusting when sharing data when it was done on paper, and after a warm-up discussion with a community researcher.

In total, more than 60 postcards were filled out, with some people filling out all of the three versions.



We posed questions using three postcards, and people were also able to complete a postcard to provide socio-demographic data

# Co-designing a journey

We defined our co-design output as a co-operative membership journey, or a 'journey of co-operation'. After careful reflection, we decided this was an achievable output in line with our research objective.

We focused our first co-design workshops on understanding people's current community activities and volunteering journeys, and produced our required outputs during the second set of workshops. These were divided into two parts:



- A 'co-operation market', where co-designers went in groups around the room to speak to the research team about different stages of involvement in a co-operative. We were inspired by design researcher Olive Conner's 'market of ideas' concept as a marketplace for the future.<sup>11</sup>
- A 'journey building' session, where we created our journeys of co-operation with the co-designer and a lead facilitator.



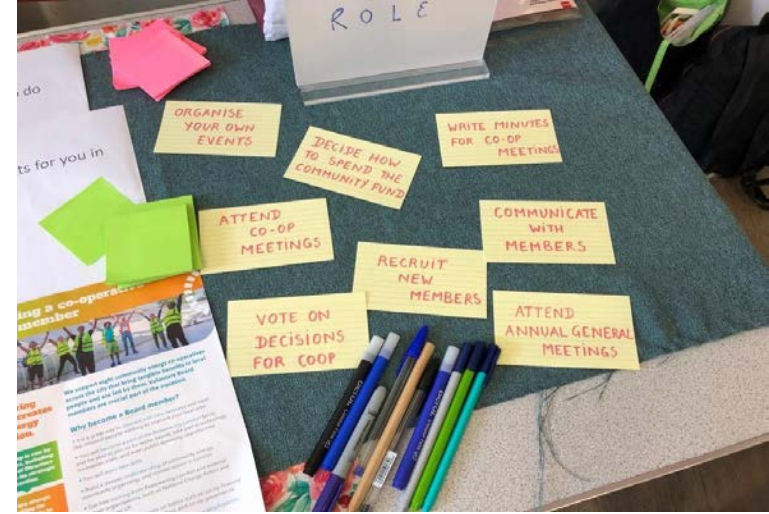


Left: We used a volunteering journey example from Scouts UK to inspire our co-designers<sup>12</sup>



We tested out two different approaches at our co-design workshops:

In North Kensington, we collectively built a membership journey as a group during the co-operation market. During their conversations on tables, co-designers started adding post-it notes to a journey mapped out on the wall. This created a dynamic atmosphere, but it also meant that the joint journey-building session afterwards was much shorter than planned, without the option for co-designers to build their journeys in a smaller group first.



In Newham, we used storyboards for people to build their journeys in groups after the co-operation market. Each group then presented its journey to the other groups, and the lead facilitator built the journey with everyone's presentations. This brought more structure to the workshop and enabled us to capture more insights from the participants. However, it also required us to extend the session.

The co-operation market included four tables related to different stages of involvement: taking part in a first activity; becoming a regular participant; taking responsibility; and taking up a leadership role.

Overall, our key challenge was to manage the co-design process in two time-boxed sessions.

# Insights from NKCE's membership journey

- Clear, accessible language is essential from the start.
- Energy support workshops are an ideal activity to attract new audiences, providing an accessible entry point and increasing the relevance of energy co-ops.
- People interested in getting involved are invited to a members' meeting, where they receive a membership welcome pack. Perks include a WhatsApp group with energy tips, annual events, and free lightbulbs.



- New members receive mentoring opportunities and training programmes focusing on energy support, as well as digital and communication skills.
- Celebration is a key part of the membership journey.

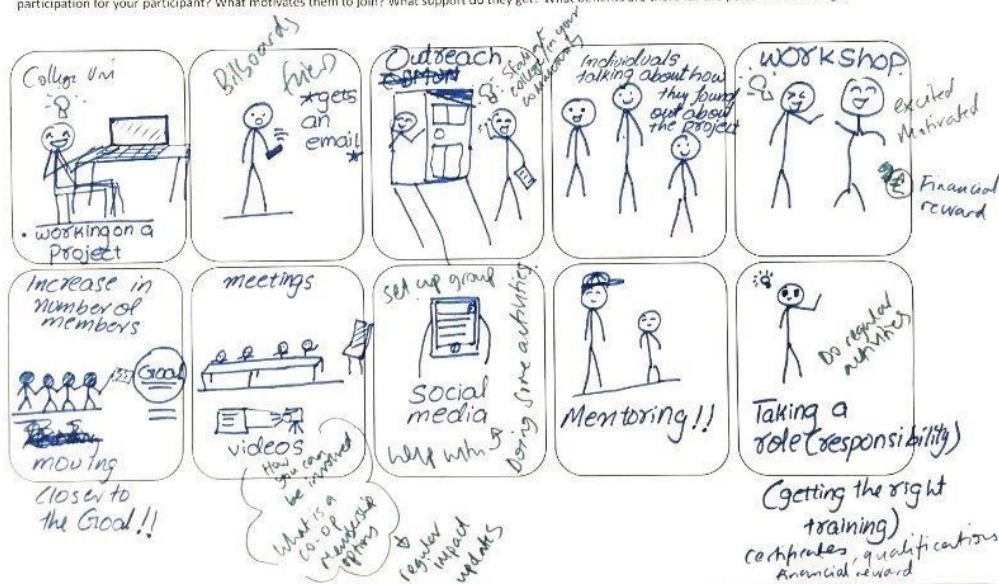


# Insights from CEN's membership journey

WAY TO SUCCESS!!

## TELL THE STORY OF THE JOURNEY OF COOPERATION

Draw / tell the story of what it would look like for someone participating in and joining the <sup>energy</sup> cooperative? Think about: What are different stages of participation for your participant? What motivates them to join? What support do they get? What benefits are there for the person at each stage?



- Infographics and visual media raise awareness of the energy co-op, and videos are used for onboarding new members.

- Activities include sharing food, games with prizes, and raffles. Financial rewards increase motivation.

- Members who invest time benefit from training opportunities, with a focus on solar energy skills. Certificates are awarded during ceremonies at Annual General Meetings.

- Members can take on roles that match their skills and professional aspirations (e.g. ambassador, coach, cook). They are mentored throughout the journey and empowered to become mentors.

# Key takeaways

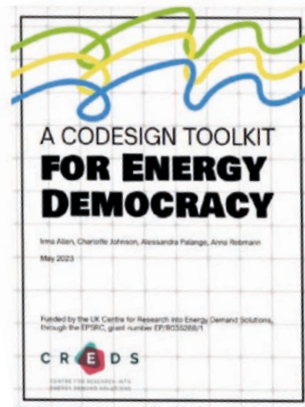
- **The success of co-design is based on who you recruit through your community engagement activities, which are an essential part of co-design.**  
The way in which participants are recruited influences what they will go on to design, especially when designing something that is novel. For instance, the co-designers in North Kensington, who were recruited through an energy advice workshop, ended up drawing on energy advice in their journey of co-operation, while the co-designers in Newham prioritised training in solar energy.
- **Remain conscious of how much you are asking of people.** We had originally planned three workshops but later adapted the activities to suit two. This was based on our community researcher Nasri's suggestion, to ensure recruitment from communities traditionally under-represented (and therefore, potentially less interested) in co-operatives.
- **Providing childcare and compensation can make a huge difference in the capacity to recruit co-designers.** We paid all participants £150 as compensation for attending both workshops. We made sure the compensation process was well-organised and inclusive, including the option for a cash payment. We also checked in with the participants prior to the workshops to find out about additional needs or barriers to participation.



- ○ **Carve out as much time as you can for the co-design itself.** Over the course of the two workshops, we spent a lot of time gleaning insights from participants about their current involvement in the community. If we had done this through interviews we could have spent less time gathering insights and more time implementing these via co-design. That being said, taking time to build relationships with co-designers is essential, which is why co-design generally takes place over a longer period of time.
- **If the concept you are exploring is new to the co-designers, keep it simple, relatable and creative.** The complexity of our project arose from the fact that we were exploring a topic that was new to the co-designers, while not having an obvious impact on them. Keeping it simple and creative with a 'market of co-operation' format meant we were better able to maintain people's interest and engage them in co-design.

# Tools for co-design

*A Codesign Toolkit for Energy Democracy* by Irma Allen, Charlotte Johnson, Alessandra Palange and Anna Rebmann. Created to encourage the use of co-design in community energy, this book outlines valuable mindsets and skillsets for co-design. These were developed through conducting research with community groups in Newham and informed the setup of Community Energy Newham.



Cover design: Jess Holdaway

*Beyond Sticky Notes* by KA McKercher. This book outlines co-design mindsets, methods and movements including a model of care, bits of inspiration, and guidelines for best practice. McKercher's expertise lies in co-design for health and social care systems - services with an immediate and significant impact on people's lives. In contrast, our work focuses on designing the future of co-operatives. This makes our work not only less 'sensitive' but also less urgent, making it harder to engage underserved communities who may have other priorities.






We created our own co-design materials which can be used as tools. Based on McKercher’s work, we created a:

- Co-design workshop guide
- North Kensington workshop plan
- Newham workshop plan

We also wrote a co-design brief for all our co-designers.<sup>14</sup>

The core ideas we embodied were:

- Adopting an asset-based approach
- Respecting people's lived experiences
- Spending time building genuine relationships
- Being prepared to relinquish some power to participants
- Seeing co-design as an ongoing process rather than a one-off outcome.



## Co-design brief

For our co-operative membership research project

### Who are we?

We are a small team of **community organisers** and **researchers**. We work for **energy co-operatives** in North Kensington and Newham through [Repowering London](#), and on topics relating to social entrepreneurship and renewable energy.

**Energy co-operatives** are created by people coming together to invest time and money to develop renewable energy projects (e.g. installing solar panels on a school). The people involved are members of the co-operative, making decisions on how the business is run and its profits distributed. It's a way of taking back control of our energy system, currently in the hands of energy companies. It's about building a new system based on community and co-operation.

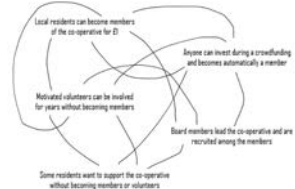
### What is the research about?

We started this project because we noticed that some of London's diverse communities aren't currently well represented in energy cooperatives. A co-operative is owned and driven by its members, and so **we want more people to join energy co-operatives as members**.

With this research, we're exploring new ways to make joining energy cooperatives more appealing and accessible to a wider range of Londoners. To this purpose, we need to better define **how people can get involved** in our energy co-operatives, and **what our membership offer is**.

### What are we designing?

A **membership journey**. Currently the way people get involved in our energy co-operatives is a bit messy:



### Co-design Workshops Plan

Co-operative membership research project, Newham

Workshops:

Community researcher to send co-design brief, PIS and consent forms to the community researcher to call participants

Community researcher to call participants

During the project: we want to get inspiration and generate ideas together so we can make energy co-operatives like CEN more attractive

Project timeline: we will have two co-design workshops, compensated time, make sure people are available for both workshops

Workshop participation: Dietary requirements, childcare, transport costs, any other barriers?

Workshop ethics form and consent form (consent form to be signed on the day)

### Workshop – 2.5 hours

Workshop Objectives and Alignment

Safety and connection and to build shared understanding about the purpose of how to work together.

Workshop agenda to help people move on from activities: Nayim.

Activity	Materials & Facilitator
People arrive – talk about consent – give co-design brief	Co-design brief
Get consent forms signed	Consent forms
Welcome, introductions & icebreaker	

We have created a range of resources that can offer a guide for future co-design projects

# Five insights for co-operative membership

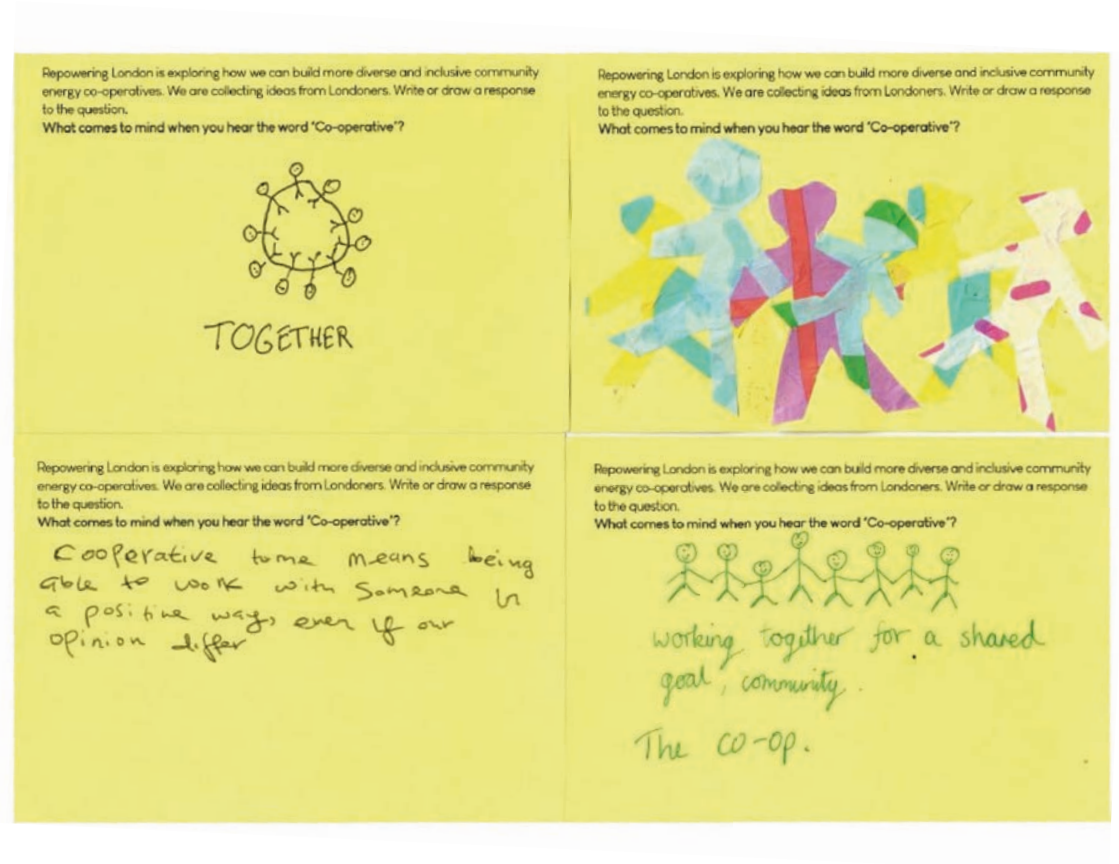
These insights were gleaned during four  
co-design workshops.

# Insight 1: Raising awareness comes first

Our survey postcards showed that most people we spoke to had not come across a co-operative business before.

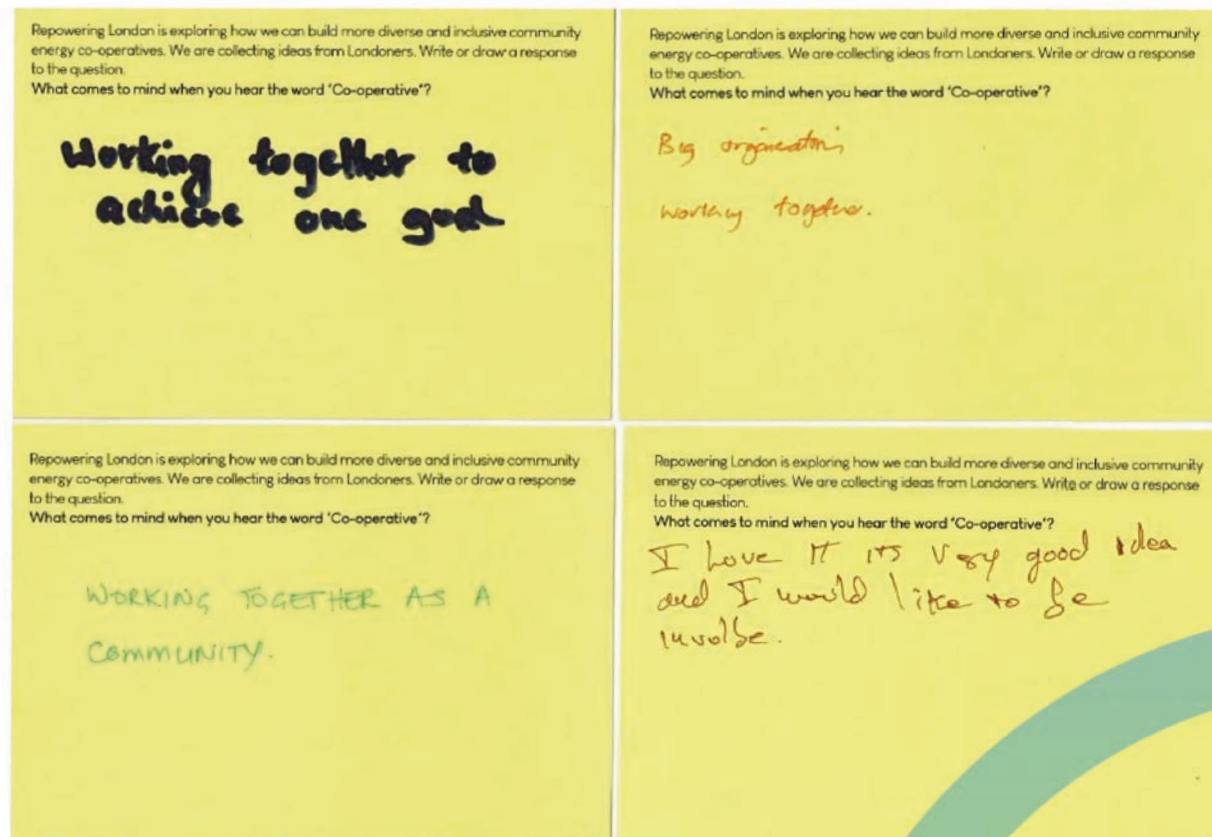
Though the word 'co-operation' evoked notions of collaboration, community, and togetherness, mentions of 'organisation', 'work' or 'business model' were far and few between. This shows that there is little literacy around the economic mechanics of co-operative business models, particularly among people that might benefit from them the most.

Getting more people involved in energy co-operatives will require developing campaigns that communicate the rich social and economic potential of co-ops for



➤ helping people engage with causes that matter to them, be that gentrification or unemployment. Organisations like Co-operatives UK and Stir to Action are already doing crucial work in this area, laying a firm foundation for future efforts to build on.

We can also look to growing fields such as data visualisation, transmedia narratives, digital art and ethnographic research to help make a cultural shift towards a better and broader understanding of co-operative business models.





# Insight 2: Investment follows membership

We found that people perceived investing time and investing money to be distinct but equally valuable forms of investment.

We spoke to our co-designers about community shares and investing money in co-operatives. None of our co-designers had invested in a community project before, nor were they familiar with community shares as a concept.

Most people felt that involvement in a co-op should begin with a time-based investment, with a more conventional monetary investment to follow later. This would allow people to develop confidence in the co-op's mission before they make a financial contribution towards it.

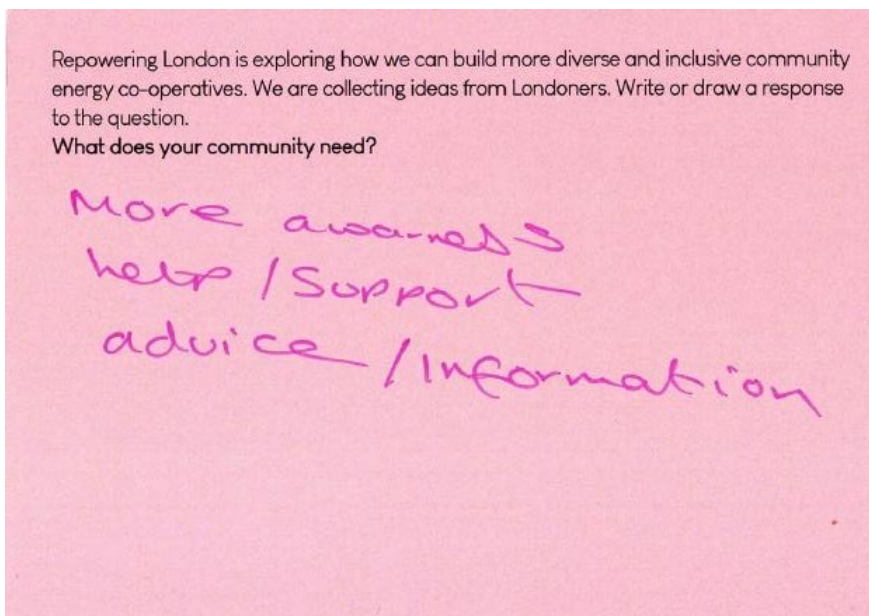
Another preference that came to light was related to language. When we showed co-designers a campaign flyer for a typical community share offer, almost all of them agreed that the word 'membership' was much more appealing than 'investment'. Co-ops, therefore, need to be more mindful of the connotations and consequences of these terms when designing recruitment campaigns.

Opting for language that is less rigidly defined will lead to wider interest and involvement.

A share offer flyer created by Repowering London and NKCE in 2020.



- **Co-designers said they would need support to feel confident investing in a co-operative.** Arrangements such as paying shares in instalments, using a mobile-friendly app, and investing as a group were seen as helpful. However, individual financial limitations and a general lack of trust were still seen as two of the most important barriers.



One idea proposed during the discussion was to run financial advice open days, where a local volunteer and community shares advisor tries to increase people's financial knowledge and to answer any questions they might have. If such initiatives were bolstered by backing from local councils and community leaders, co-ops would be able to cultivate a more trusting relationship with potential members.

In parallel to this research project, Repowering London has been working with Sharenergy to develop CoShares, an investment platform for the community energy sector. CoShares aims to ease and reduce the administration of share offers for co-ops, but also to make investing in energy co-ops more attractive to a wider audience, by increasing transparency and accessibility. Our community researchers tested the app to help improve it.

# Insight 3: Membership as a volunteering experience

Inspired by discussions around different types of investment, **we explored the idea of opening our membership to people volunteering time rather than investing money.** To understand this better, we gathered insights from co-designers about their experiences and expectations when it comes to volunteering.



There was a consensus that volunteering needs to be both rewarding and rewarded. People not only want to feel like they are working towards a vision they adhere to, but also to feel appreciated for their efforts and to experience a sense of belonging in the community. Training, skills and employability stood out as key motivators for volunteers. Volunteering also needed to be flexible, working around people's existing commitments.

Other rewards mentioned were food, gatherings, and experiences. We discussed how this could be incorporated into our membership journey and developed a set of 'How might we' questions to inform our design process. Some of these findings corresponded to previous research on the topic.<sup>14</sup>

# Insight 4: Creating energy-themed benefits

Because energy co-operatives are not able to supply discounted electricity directly to households yet, we explored the possibility of creating alternative benefits.

Co-designers in North Kensington mentioned energy advice as one key benefit an energy co-op could provide. This led us to ask how we might tie energy advice to our membership offer.

The suggestions were wide-ranging, including: a members-only WhatsApp group to share energy-saving tips, advice on applying for grants and updates about the energy sector; a training course for members focusing on energy support; and a welcome pack with complimentary LED bulbs.

Co-designers in Newham also mentioned members-only experiences such as slow-cooker raffles, WhatsApp groups and annual events. They were most interested in learning about solar energy, as well as mentoring and training opportunities with completion certificates that would improve their employment prospects.

Clearly, there is an appetite for non-monetary benefits that allow members and experts to come together for knowledge exchange, mutual learning, and communal gatherings. Responding to these demands will allow co-ops to attract members despite the logistical and financial constraints they are under.



# Insight 5: Recruiting members through research

Once we completed the workshops, the majority of co-designers in both North Kensington and Newham expressed a desire to join their local co-op. This was motivated by: an interest in seeing their journeys of co-operation brought to life; an energising feeling sparked by spending two half-days sharing ideas with the same people; an appreciation of the financial compensation offered for their contributions; and a newly gained enthusiasm for co-operative models.

**This project illustrates how paid research opportunities can be an extremely efficient avenue for getting new audiences involved in co-operatives.** In order for this approach to be successful, research needs to prioritise

recruitment from diverse groups, bringing a variety of opinions and experiences to the forefront. It also needs to dedicate significant time to introducing people to the concept of co-operative energy. The fact that some co-designers grasped the concept only towards the end of our sessions underscores the importance of this step.

Following the workshops, we invited all co-designers to join the upcoming Annual General Meetings for their respective local co-ops. Here, we will be implementing our insights by enrolling them as members. By recruiting co-designers to design a more inclusive membership journey, we have also managed to recruit members in a more inclusive way.



# Resources



## Further exploration

- [Research Methods: A Practical Guide to Peer and Community Research](#), a three-week online course
- ['The Future of Membership'](#), a report by the New Citizenship Project
- [The ABCs of the New Economy](#), a 'primer' created by Stir to Action
- [A Toolkit for Co-Created Community Engagement Projects](#), by the Migration Museum
- [Making the Community Energy Sector More Inclusive](#), Jamboards used for our workshop in December 2023
- [Case studies of other co-operatives with inclusive membership offers](#)

# Principles of co-design

**'Co-design is an approach to designing with, not for, people. It involves sharing power, prioritising relationships, using participatory means and building capacity.'**

McKercher, 2020 [7]

## Everyone is creative

We all have creative ideas about how the world should be. Co-design taps into this innate creativity. People who face the problem firsthand contribute their unique perspectives.<sup>7,10</sup>

## Lived experience matters

Those who will use the solutions bring valuable expertise – their lived experiences. This insight is crucial for creating designs that truly serve them.<sup>7, 8</sup>

## Professionals become facilitators

Expert professionals aren't obsolete. Their role has shifted. Instead of being sole creators and producers of solutions, they now collaborate with users, facilitating the creative process and combining expertise for better outcomes.<sup>6,9</sup>

## Share power and ensure everyone's voice can be heard

It is important to consider power differentials within the co-design process and work to ensure everyone is equal. This involves reflecting on how society shapes power dynamics and working to stop existing social inequalities from being reproduced through the co-design process.<sup>7</sup>

## Prioritise relationships

For co-design to work, there needs to be trust among those participating and this is developed through taking the time and prioritising the building of relationships.<sup>7</sup>



# Is it co-design? The Spectrum of Participation

Co-design is about sharing power and working together to make decisions, and the Spectrum of Participation below (adapted from IAP2<sup>15</sup>) shows different ways people can participate. At one end, people are informed about projects or given the chance to feedback on set outcomes.

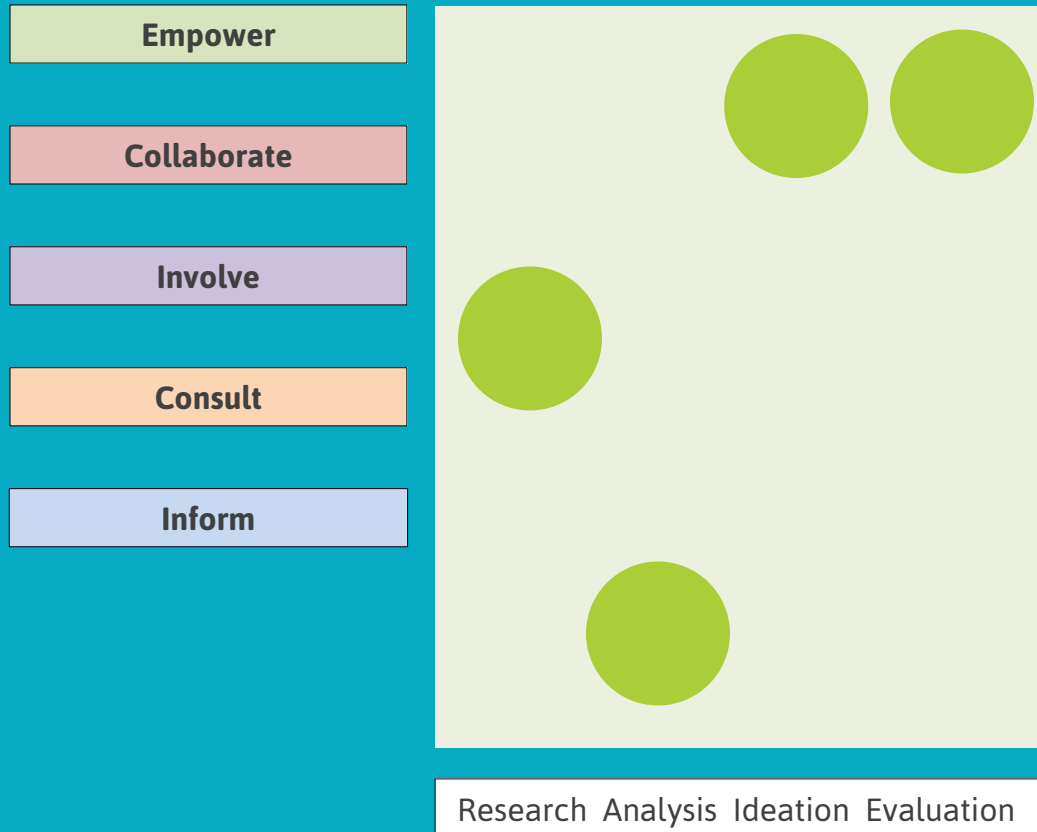
At the other end, where co-design sits, the community has significant influence over decisions.

This embodies a more democratic design process. Co-design only occurs when decision-making powers are shared and participants are allowed to design things and shape outcomes.

Other participation has its place, but we need to be clear about what kind of participation we are after and make clear to participants how their participation will influence the results.

<b>Inform</b>	<b>Consult</b>	<b>Involve</b>	<b>Collaborate</b>	<b>Empower</b>
Provide balanced, objective, and timely information	Obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions	Work with the public to consider and understand concerns and aspirations	Partner with the public in decision making	Place final decision-making in hands of the public

# The co-design landscape framework



The co-design landscape framework<sup>16</sup> shows how different people and organisations may be involved at different stages of the research process.

In some cases, co-design may run throughout the design process, with all engagement involving the collaborate and empowerment steps with the same participants.

In other cases, the participants may change over the stages, or some stages may not involve co- design.

# References and notes

1. 'Co-operatives Unleashed: Doubling the size of the UK's co-operative sector', New Economics Foundation, 2018.

2. 'Understanding a maturing community shares market', Co-operatives UK, 2020.

3. 'Community Energy Member/Investor Reach & Impact Report 2022', Community Energy England/CAG Consultants, June 2022.

4. 'Social Investment by Design. Challenging power with participation in the social investment market', Ruby Frankland, on [www.connectfund.org.uk](http://www.connectfund.org.uk), 2023.

5. We use the term 'energy co-operatives', but they are in fact Community Benefit Societies – see Co-operatives UK's *Community Shares Handbook*.

6. 'Co-creation and the new landscapes of design', Sanders, Elizabeth B-N., and Pieter Jan Stappers. *Co-design 4.1*, 2008.

7. *Beyond sticky notes.: Doing Co-design for Real*, KA McKercher, Inscope Books, 2020.

8. Qualifications by London Borough, Trust for London, 2022.

9. *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, Ezio Manzini, MIT press, 2015

10. 'Postcard Survey of Early-career Creatives in the East Midlands', Jo Wheeler & No Jobs in the Arts, 2022.

# References and notes continued

11. 'Field Note #21: In which we survey the word market and offer six design principles for Idea Factory Market', Olive Conner, 2024.

12. See 'Steps in the the volunteer joining journey', [www.scouts.org.uk](http://www.scouts.org.uk)

13. Co-design workshop guide; North Kensington workshop plan; Newham workshop plan; Co-design brief, Repowering London and Dr Anna Rebmann, 2024. All available at <https://tinyurl.com/5ydvnkz4>

14. 'Time well spent 2023: Volunteering among the global majority', NCVO, Amy McGarvey, Rei Kanemura, Alex Farrow, 2023.

15. IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, International Association for Public Participation, 2007. Available at <https://bit.ly/4c7XrEP>

16. 'Towards a framework for urban landscape co-design: Linking the participation ladder and the design cycle', Gaete Cruz, Macarena, et al. *CoDesign* 19.3, 2022.

# Acknowledgements



This project was made possible with the Barrow Cadbury Trust Connect Fund.

## Toolkit authors:

Eva Goudouneix

Dr Anna Rebmann

## Editor:

Nida Sajid

## Research project team:

Patricia Calixto Pires

Ruth Chiat

Eva Goudouneix

Nasri Ismael

Nayim Patel

Anna Rebmann

Nick Stromberg

## Co-designers in Newham:

Anees, David,

Esther, Frederic,

Joshua, Melissa,

Mene, Nour,

Olawale, Oluwatosin,

Opeyemi,

Wesley

## Co-designers in North Kensington:

Ajit, Ascia,

Christine,

Einas, Fatima,

Nabila, Naima,

Patricia,

Sanae,

Tahanis

