



# Migrant Service Users' Participation in Social Services Handbook for Professionals



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**MONIHELI**

This handbook examines **the participation of migrant service users in the development of social services** in Finland, focusing on barriers to participation and practical strategies for improving co-development. The findings are based on a national survey, interviews with wellbeing services county workers and migrant service users, and discussions with NGO representatives.

The findings highlight that meaningful participation requires accessible information, professional interpretation, trust-building, adequate resources, culturally responsive practices, and stronger cooperation between public services and migrant-led and migrant-serving organisations.

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# INTRODUCTION

In this handbook, migrant service users' participation in social services refers to two related forms of involvement. First, migrant service users should have opportunities to influence decisions that affect their own lives and the services they use. Second, they should be able to participate in the co-development of services so that these are shaped not only by professionals but also by the people who use them.

Service user participation (also referred to as service user involvement) is widely recognised as a desirable feature of social services. International and national guidelines recommend that social services are organised in ways that promote meaningful service user participation. In the Statement of Ethical Principles, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) states that "social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives."

The Finnish Act on Wellbeing Services Counties 611/2021 also confirms this right. Chapter 5, Section 29 states that residents and service users of a wellbeing services county have the right to participate in and influence the county's activities. One way to promote participation is to plan and develop services together with service users.

Service user participation is therefore not only a theoretical ideal but also a practice supported by Finnish legislation. Supporting participation means shifting from a service delivery model to a partnership model. Active participation empowers individuals to take part in decisions that affect their lives and supports independence, dignity and self-determination. In practice, this may include helping people make informed choices about their care or choose their own support workers.



Limited resources across Finnish social services can reduce opportunities for meaningful service user participation. Supporting participation requires time and commitment from both service users and professionals. When staff are overstretched, professionals may not have sufficient time to build relationships, involve service users in decision-making, or support genuine co-development. Supporting service user participation can, in turn, improve health, well-being, and the quality of care.

This handbook presents findings from a nationwide survey and interviews on how migrant service users are involved in the co-development of social services in Finland. It examines the experiences of social services professionals, migrant service users and NGO representatives, and identifies both barriers to participation and practical ways to strengthen it.

The handbook also provides a brief overview of commonly used methods for involving migrant service users in service development, together with their strengths and limitations. We also offer a checklist that can support service users' involvement in the co-development of social services.

The appendix includes a selection of anti-racism training courses and practical guidance available in Finland. These resources can help professionals address both personal bias and structural racism, which may prevent migrant service users from participating meaningfully in social services.



# MAPPING PARTICIPATION PRACTICES IN SOCIAL SERVICES

## What is this about?



This chapter presents the mapping conducted within Finnish social services. The mapping consisted of an online survey and individual interviews with professionals from different wellbeing services counties. Additionally, social services users and NGOs working with vulnerable migrant groups were interviewed. The main aim of this inquiry was to explore whether and how migrant service users are involved in the development of social services.

## Wellbeing services counties: Survey

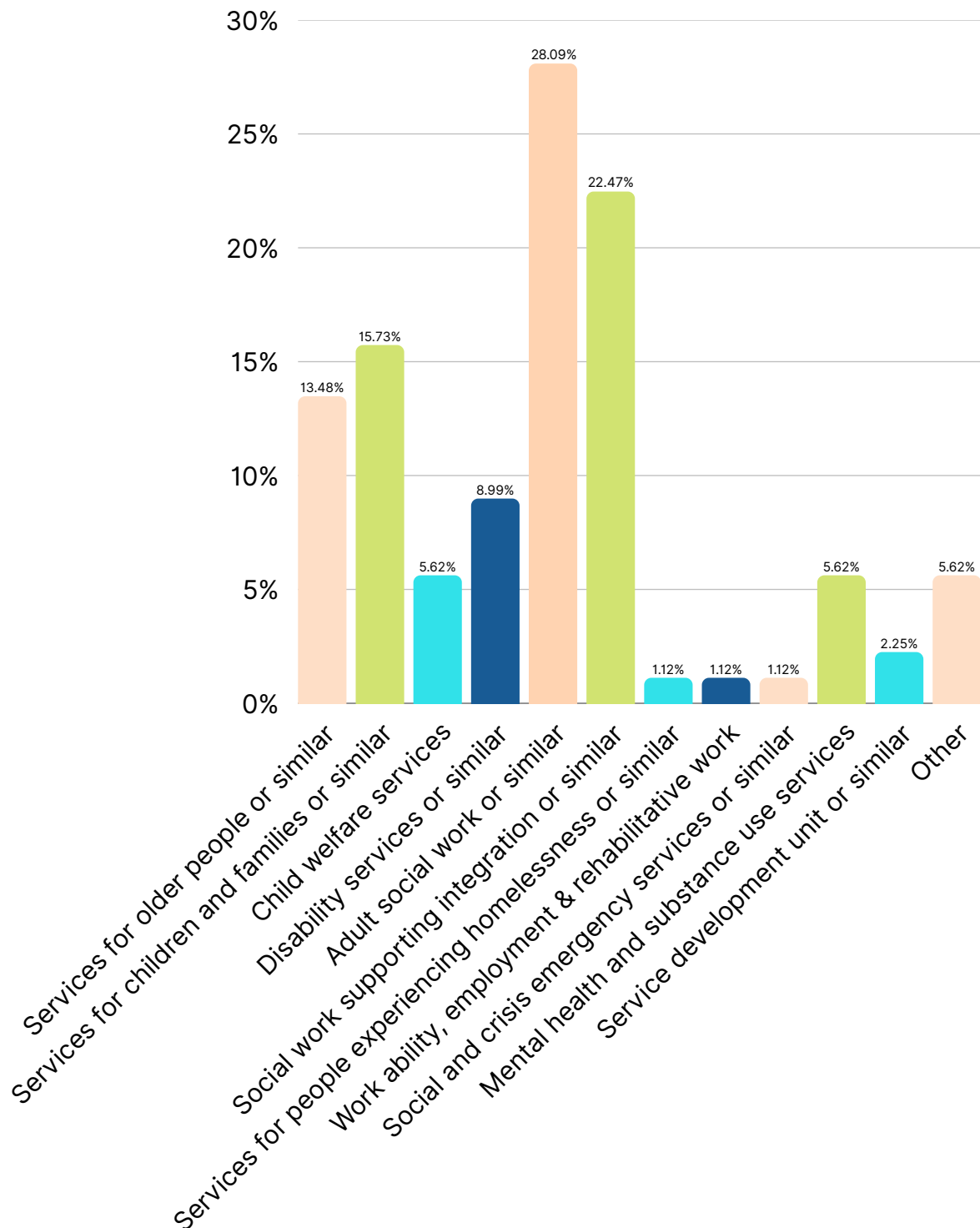
Between October and December 2025, a short survey was sent to all wellbeing services counties and to the City of Helsinki. Åland was not included in the mapping.

The target groups were workers in social services units and experts from development departments. The survey was sent to 192 people, and 89 responses were received, giving a response rate of 49 percent. Responses were received from all wellbeing services counties except Kainuu and Central Ostrobothnia.[1]

The data were sufficient to identify general trends in the involvement of migrant service users in service development. The following figure shows the distribution of responses across different social service units. Most responses came from adult social work units, integration-related social services, services for older people, and services for children and families.

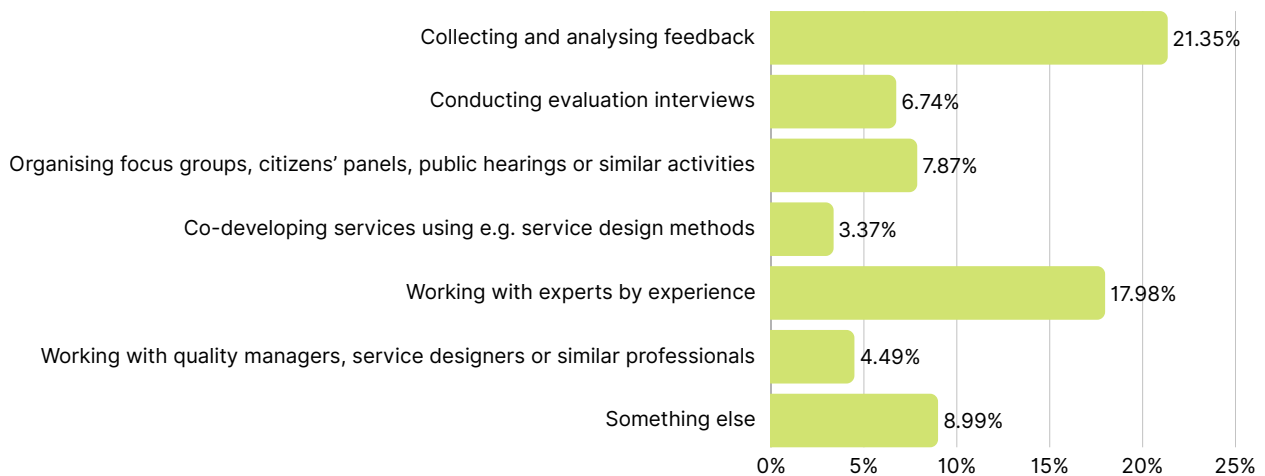
[1] Contacting social service professionals proved challenging because contact information was often not publicly available. In addition, several wellbeing services counties required research permits before employees could be approached, even though the study did not involve collecting personal data from workers or service users. These administrative requirements may make future collaboration and knowledge exchange more difficult.

## Which social services unit or team do you work in?



More than half of the respondents (56.8%) had no experience of developing social services together with service users with migrant backgrounds, even though different methods have been tested in social services development.

## Have you used any of these methods with migrant service users?

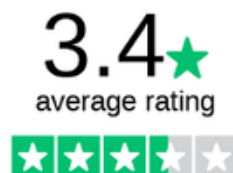


Respondents selecting "We do something else" mentioned the following activities:

- collecting information about the experience of inclusion and well-being through a multilingual survey (in cooperation with municipalities)
- close cooperation with the NGOs working with people of migrant backgrounds, or the regional thematic network of NGOs
- development of activities for people of migrant backgrounds in the multidisciplinary network.

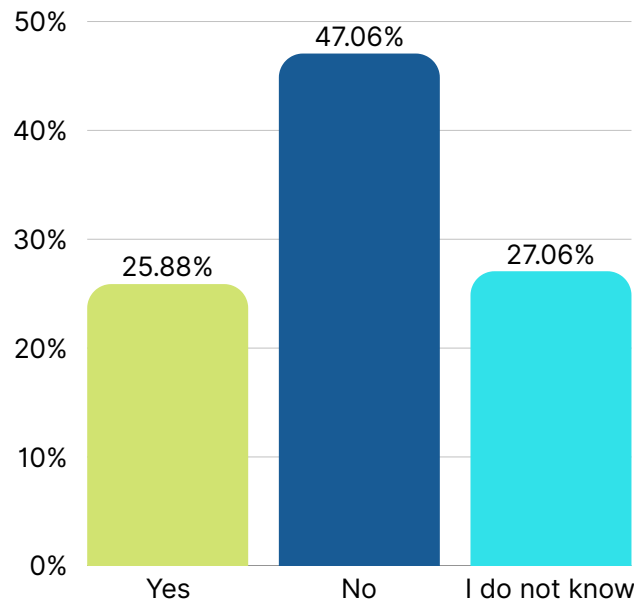
We also asked how useful the co-creation methods used were from the perspective of social services professionals. The average rating was 3.4 out of 5, suggesting room for improvement. More details about their usefulness were discussed in the interviews with the selected social services professionals.

How useful were these methods for service development?  
(1 = not at all useful, 5 = very useful)



We also asked whether social services cooperated with NGOs or similar actors through projects that could provide opportunities for service development. Only about 26% of respondents indicated such cooperation. This suggests that opportunities for co-development with civil society remain limited in many wellbeing services counties.

Does your unit develop services through projects supporting migrants, in cooperation with NGOs, parishes or similar organisations?



## Wellbeing services counties: Interviews

Based on the survey findings, we invited social service professionals and development specialists from selected wellbeing services counties to participate in follow-up interviews.

The additional information was collected from 8 workers from 6 different counties (Helsinki, Keski-Suomi, Varsinais-Suomi, Etelä-Pohjanmaa, Päijät-Häme, Kanta-Häme).

We conducted semi-structured interviews. The questions were sent to county workers in advance, and each interview then continued based on the answers given. The interviews were not recorded; notes were taken during the meetings and transcribed afterwards.

## Interview highlights

Discussions with social services workers were particularly important because they helped interpret the survey findings. A recurring pattern in Finland is that one institution starts using a method and others follow, sometimes without properly evaluating whether the activity works as intended.

One example is the wide use of various **questionnaires** and **surveys** to measure service user satisfaction and map their ideas for service development. Yet the workers themselves do not find them particularly useful for service development. Even when questionnaires are available in a respondent's native language, limited literacy may reduce their usefulness. Online surveys present additional barriers for people with limited digital skills.

Collecting information through surveys therefore has limitations. Surveys may appear to offer a real opportunity to participate, but their functionality, effectiveness and usefulness are questionable if they do not lead to visible changes. In such cases, service users' actual influence remains minimal.

In **evaluation interviews**, the biggest challenge is that many service users do not feel able to give open feedback or criticism. The discussion often ends with expressions of strong satisfaction or gratitude for the services. This may be genuine, but interviews with NGO representatives suggest that cultural norms can also play a role: in some contexts, people are expected to be polite, avoid complaining and not criticize authorities. In such situations, it is difficult to collect data that can genuinely support development work.

Working with **experts by experience** is generally considered valuable. However, discussions may become dominated by participants with stronger language skills or greater confidence in speaking about their experiences. It is generally recommended that several years have passed since the person used the services.

Other methods have also been used with service users with migrant backgrounds, such as **Learning Café** events where language skills were carefully considered. The key question is which language(s) should be used. Any choice may exclude some groups, while interpretation into several languages at the same time is time-consuming and can make the activity longer and more demanding.

**Innovation competitions** have generally produced limited results. Improvements often remain focused on individual experiences rather than structural improvements.

As the survey findings show, service users are often not directly involved in service development. Instead, social services workers rely on multidisciplinary networks where professionals from different sectors meet. In these networks, service users' needs are interpreted through professionals' perspectives. While these practical challenges are real, they should not prevent social services from testing approaches that involve service users more directly.

## Other recommendations and remarks

Based on the interviews, the following practical recommendations can support the meaningful participation of migrant service users in decision-making and service development:

**Use professional interpreters and allow sufficient time.** Using professional interpreters can significantly improve the participation of migrant service users. However, interpretation, particularly into several languages, requires additional time and should be considered when planning meetings, workshops, or co-development activities.

**Engage service users at the right stage of their integration journey.** People who have only recently arrived in Finland often have limited knowledge of the social service system and may find it difficult to suggest improvements. They may also rely heavily on the opinions of professionals. More experienced migrant service users and experts by experience are often better able to reflect critically on services and contribute concrete development ideas.

**Carefully consider the composition of participant groups.** The composition of a group can strongly influence the quality of discussion. In some situations, participants may feel more comfortable if groups are separated by gender, age, or other relevant characteristics. In other cases, culturally diverse groups may encourage broader perspectives and reduce social pressure within individual communities. There is no single model that fits every situation, and group composition should always reflect the purpose of the activity.

**Promote diversity within social service teams.** Colleagues with diverse backgrounds, including those with lived experience of integration, bring valuable perspectives.

**Invest time in building trust before asking for participation.** Trust does not develop automatically in every cultural context. It may require considerable time, particularly among people whose first contact with social services has involved stressful situations, such as child protection. Without a trusting relationship, service users may hesitate to express their opinions openly or participate in development activities.

**Allocate resources for participation and development work.** Meaningful participation requires time, planning, and staff capacity. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted that heavy workloads leave little opportunity for development beyond direct client work. Organisations should therefore recognise participation as a core part of service quality and allocate sufficient resources to support it.

## Social service users: Interviews

A total of six migrant service users participated in this part of the study through interviews or other forms of experience sharing about their interactions with social services.

We conducted semi-structured interviews. We had 11 questions prepared for participants and the dialogue continued based on their answers. The interviews were not recorded. Instead, notes were taken during each interview and transcribed afterwards.

The interviews explored participants' experiences of social services more broadly, while also examining whether and how their views and ideas had been considered. None of the participants had previous experience of participating in service development.

## Interview highlights

**Cultural sensitivity, racism[1], and language accessibility** were mentioned by several participants. According to them, social services workers have preconceptions and stereotypes about people with migrant backgrounds. Participants described situations in which professionals made assumptions about their needs based on their language or cultural background rather than on an individual assessment. Generally, it may be difficult to manage one's own affairs when people lack language and digital skills. Participants particularly appreciated situations in which professionals could communicate in their preferred language.

**Shared decision-making** is a core principle of social counselling and something that is at the heart of social services work. In some cases, shared decision-making did not happen. The interaction with the adult social worker was followed by interventions that were neither needed nor wanted by the client. Help was not provided for the problem that the client had brought (housing), but other interventions were offered against the client's wishes (child protection, digital support). In another case, the client's personal information was shared with an outsourced service they had never agreed to use or felt they needed. These examples illustrate that participation is not limited to involvement in service development. It also depends on whether service users are genuinely involved in decisions about their own care and support.

[1] The appendix of this handbook includes different training materials on cultural sensitivity and anti-racism in the Finnish context.



*Authorities often say that migrants do not ask for help, which was not my case. I asked for help, but they did not offer the help I needed.*

**Understanding social services** is considered challenging by people with migrant backgrounds. Many participants found it difficult to understand the structure of social services and to identify which service was appropriate for their situation. Long waiting times sometimes resulted in participants losing motivation to seek support. As problems remained unresolved, their situations could become more complex and require more intensive interventions later.

**Accessible communication** was raised by service users on several occasions. Service users also lacked clear advice and instructions. They felt they had to figure out everything by themselves, even though they had an appointed case worker.

**Prejudices** also affect people with migrant backgrounds. Several participants described arriving with concerns or misconceptions about social services, particularly child protection. In some cases, these were corrected when service users used the service and found the workers very helpful, respectful and considerate. Service users were also very grateful for the (mostly) free-of-charge services and comprehensive social support system.

**A low-threshold approach** was consistently valued by the participants. Participants, particularly younger adults, appreciated approachable and informal communication with professionals. Participants also valued being able to approach workers directly without an appointment, for example via WhatsApp. Receiving practical support quickly increased participants' confidence in seeking help again in the future.

## NGO representatives: Interviews

NGO representatives were interviewed because they work closely with migrant communities and can offer valuable insights into both the experiences of service users and the collaboration between civil society and social services.

Some groups of people with migrant backgrounds are particularly difficult to reach when exploring their experiences of the accessibility and usefulness of social services. These include, for example, older people with migrant backgrounds, those with disabilities or long-term illnesses, and people with lower socioeconomic status. For this reason, we interviewed NGOs that work closely with groups at greater risk of social exclusion and discrimination.

The interviews explored the gaps that NGO representatives observe in social services and whether they have experience of participating in service development. Interviewees explained that NGO representatives are often invited to participate in service development or expert networks, whereas migrant service users themselves are only rarely included.

One interviewee summarized the challenge as follows:



*The Act on social welfare is good, but in reality, money is missing everywhere. Often, social authorities break the law because they do not offer services they are entitled to provide. In situations like that, there is no space for service development if what is required by the law is not happening. For that reason, there should be measures in place to see how many people social services cannot actually serve because of the lack of resources.*

## Interview highlights

**Accessibility of information** emerged as one of the most frequently discussed themes. According to NGO representatives, many service users are not fully informed about their rights or the services available to them. Information should be tailored to the individual's needs and communicated in a way that ensures understanding. Increasing digitalization has created additional barriers for people with limited digital skills, making online forms and digital communication difficult to use.

**Cultural sensitivity** is a recognised challenge in social services. There might be a lack of understanding of service users' cultural backgrounds (e.g., that a male service user cannot be alone with a female worker during home visits). As previously mentioned, in some cultures people might not dare to complain. But when they do not speak openly about their needs, they may not receive the services or other support they need.

**Language and interpretation** relate to difficulties in expressing needs clearly, particularly when discussing complex or sensitive issues in a second language. A clear understanding of what is being said, what it means, and what impact it has might be missing. Even when interpreters are available, challenges may remain. If the interpreter comes from the same local community, some service users may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues because they fear a lack of privacy or possible social stigma.

One interviewee described this perspective particularly well:



*Some social services professionals consider working with migrants difficult. But we want them to see the person first as a member of their target group (e.g., older people), and only then as a migrant. We need to address their basic needs as older people first, and only then consider cultural sensitivity.*

**Shared decision-making** was consistently linked to trust by NGO professionals. Without trust, service users may hesitate to share their needs openly, making shared decision-making difficult. Trust is difficult to build when service users meet a different social worker at every appointment. Continuity of professional relationships was repeatedly identified as an important factor supporting participation. How and whether service users' needs and wishes are taken into consideration by social services professionals depends greatly on the worker. Interviewees also observed that people's opportunities to influence decisions may depend on their legal status and on whether they have family members who can help them navigate the Finnish social service system.

Taken together, the NGO interviews reinforce the findings from the previous chapters. NGO representatives highlighted that meaningful participation depends not only on appropriate methods but also on trust, accessible communication, continuity of support, and genuine collaboration between social services and migrant communities. NGOs can play an important role in strengthening these conditions because of their close relationships with the communities they serve.



## **PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES: CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this handbook show that meaningful participation of migrant service users depends less on individual participation methods than on the conditions in which participation takes place. Trust, accessible communication, cultural sensitivity, sufficient time, and genuine opportunities to influence services emerged as the key factors supporting meaningful participation.

### **Build trust before expecting participation**

Trust emerged as a prerequisite across all interviews. Service users were more willing to participate when they experienced respectful communication, continuity in professional relationships, and confidence that their views would be taken seriously.

### **Make participation accessible**

Participation should not depend on language skills, digital literacy, or familiarity with the Finnish social service system. Information should be available in plain language[2], interpretation should be provided where needed, and participation methods should be adapted to participants' abilities and preferences.

### **Match participation methods to the objective**

No single participation method is suitable for every purpose. Organisations should select methods according to whether the aim is to collect feedback, generate ideas, co-develop services, or support shared decision-making.

### **Work together with NGOs[3]**

NGOs play an important role in reaching migrant communities, building trust, and identifying emerging needs. Long-term cooperation between social services and NGOs can strengthen participation and improve the relevance of services.

[2] To improve the accessibility of information, we can recommend social services training and a manual on accessible communication developed by our project partner THL:

<https://www.julkari.fi/items/07a3679c-ea16-4a09-a650-63ce2a488027>.

[3] In building meaningful partnerships with NGOs, we can also recommend Moniheli's Co-Act model: <https://moniheli.fi/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Co-Act-Model-AkT-2025-FI.pdf>.

## **Demonstrate that participation matters**

People are more likely to participate again when they see that their contributions have influenced services. Organisations should therefore communicate how feedback has been used and what changes have resulted.

Participation is meaningful only when it leads to visible influence. Asking people for their opinions without explaining how their views have been considered may reduce trust and discourage future participation. Closing the feedback loop is therefore an essential part of meaningful participation.

Organisations should also recognise that participation exists on different levels. While questionnaires and surveys are valuable for collecting feedback, they do not provide the same opportunities for influence as co-development workshops, advisory groups, or shared decision-making processes. Choosing the appropriate method depends on the intended level of participation.

Strengthening the participation of migrant service users is not a separate task but an essential part of developing high-quality, person-centred social services. Although meaningful participation requires time, resources, and commitment, the experiences presented in this handbook demonstrate that even small changes in communication, trust-building, and collaboration can make participation more inclusive and effective.

Many of the recommendations presented in this handbook are relevant not only for migrant service users but also for other groups who may face barriers to participation, including people with disabilities, older adults, or individuals with limited literacy or digital skills. Designing participation to be more accessible and inclusive benefits social services as a whole.

To learn more about social work theories and methods to support participation of service users, check the resources at the end of the handbook.



## CO-DEVELOPING SOCIAL SERVICES WITH MIGRANT SERVICE USERS

The findings presented in the previous chapters demonstrate that meaningful participation depends not only on the methods used but also on careful planning, trust, accessible communication, and genuine opportunities for influence. This chapter translates those findings into practical guidance for planning and implementing co-development activities with migrant service users. It includes a checklist of key considerations for organising a co-development event, together with an overview of different participation methods and their main advantages and limitations.

One of the key recommendations is not to try to include everyone in a single event. There is no single approach that works for all groups. Instead, carefully consider who the activity is intended for and be aware of the factors that may enable or prevent participation. Organising several smaller events tailored to different groups is often more effective than trying to accommodate everyone in one session.

Meaningful participation in service development requires careful planning, sufficient time, and adequate resources, including funding, staff capacity, and appropriate facilities. If these conditions cannot be met, there is a greater risk that the activity will not achieve its objectives. In such cases, it may be better to postpone the event until the necessary resources are available.

### What to consider before a co-development activity

Successful co-development requires careful preparation. The following checklist summarizes the key issues to consider before planning a co-development activity with migrant service users. While every situation is different, these recommendations can help create meaningful and inclusive participation.

#### **Define the purpose and objectives**

Clearly identify what you want to achieve before planning the activity. Consider what issue you are trying to address, why participation is needed, and how service users can contribute. Having clear objectives will help you choose appropriate methods and keep the activity focused.

**Choose the participation method carefully**

Although surveys and questionnaires can be useful for collecting broad feedback, they often provide limited opportunities for dialogue and co-development. Consider whether another method would better support your objectives.

**Recognise participants' contributions**

Whenever possible, compensate participants for their time, experience, and expertise. Payment recognises the value of lived experience and can also reduce power imbalances between professionals and service users, particularly in activities that require a significant time commitment.

**Build trust before inviting people**

Trust cannot be built on the day of the event. It develops over time through respectful relationships and ongoing collaboration. Before deciding whether to participate, people often consider: Will this benefit me or my community? Do I trust the organisers? Will my contribution make a difference?

Building trust should therefore be viewed as an essential part of the preparation process rather than a task to be completed during the event itself.

**Select participants thoughtfully**

Carefully consider who should participate. Language, age, gender, cultural background, previous experience, and community roles may all influence group dynamics. The most appropriate group composition depends on the objectives of the activity.

**Discuss ownership of ideas before the activity begins**

Participants should understand how their ideas will be used, who will make decisions about implementation, and whether they will continue to be involved in developing the proposed solutions. Whenever possible, treat participants as ongoing partners rather than simply sources of ideas.

**Promise only what can realistically be achieved**

Before inviting participants, ensure there is organisational commitment to consider the proposed ideas. Be transparent about what can and cannot be implemented and explain how decisions will be made after the activity.

**Use an independent facilitator whenever possible**

In co-development activities, professionals, service users, and other stakeholders often participate together. An independent facilitator can help maintain a balanced discussion and ensure that all voices are heard. The facilitator's role is to guide the process rather than influence the content of the discussion.

### **Plan how you will communicate the results**

Before organising the activity, decide how participants will be informed about the outcomes. Explaining how their ideas were considered, and why some proposals were or were not implemented, helps build trust and encourages future participation.

## **Co-development methods**

This section introduces some of the co-development methods most commonly used in Finnish social services. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of all available methods. Instead, it presents approaches that are frequently used in practice, together with their advantages, limitations, and recommendations for involving migrant service users.

## **Feedback**



### **Best for collecting broad feedback from many service users**

Feedback is one of the most widely used methods for collecting service users' experiences, identifying development needs, and evaluating service quality. While feedback alone does not provide the same opportunities for participation as co-development methods, it remains an important tool when it is carefully planned and followed by meaningful action.

Feedback can be collected through a variety of channels, including questionnaires, face-to-face discussions, public forums, suggestion boxes, social media, mobile applications, chatbots, and other digital platforms.

The choice of method should reflect the characteristics of the target group, including language preferences, digital skills, accessibility needs, and opportunities for dialogue.

When feedback is intended to support service development, the entire feedback cycle should be planned. This includes designing the questions, collecting the data, analyzing the results, involving service users in interpreting the findings where appropriate, and communicating how the feedback has informed service improvements.

**Recommendations:**

- Adapt feedback tools to different audiences based on literacy skills, digital skills, gender, etc.
- Where relevant, collect additional background information such as length of stay in Finland, family situation, and previous occupation to understand client contexts better and enable more personalized service development.
- Use accessible language, translate surveys into key languages, and/or use interpreters.
- Explain how information from the feedback will be used.
- Review feedback forms regularly and update the questions.

| Advantages                                                                                                                           | Challenges                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Relatively easy way to collect insights from the service users                                                                       | Needs to be designed carefully in terms of e.g., accessibility, demographic characteristics, protection of personal information, etc.                   |
| When data are properly analyzed, feedback can enhance service quality by identifying the needs and concerns of migrant service users | Language barriers and varying levels of digital literacy may limit participation, particularly among newly arrived migrants and other vulnerable groups |
| Provides timely insights into service users' experiences and supports continuous service improvement                                 | Special training in handling and analyzing feedback might be needed, especially regarding sensitive complaints                                          |

## Evaluation interview



### Best for exploring individual experiences in greater depth

Evaluation interviews provide a deeper understanding of service users' experiences than written feedback alone. They allow participants to explain their views in their own words and enable the interviewer to ask follow-up questions when clarification is needed. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the purpose of the evaluation.

#### Recommendations:

- Decide who will conduct the interviews (internal/external worker)
- Provide interpretation when needed.
- Explain how the information from the interview will be used.
- Review interview questions regularly.
- Plan participant recruitment.
- Decide on the timing of interviews.

| Advantages                                                                                                                          | Challenges                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviews allow the evaluator to gain a direct response from the interviewee along with the opportunity to ask follow-up questions | The interview and analysis might be time-consuming                                                                                                                               |
| An interview can provide more detailed descriptive feedback on services                                                             | Service users may hesitate to express criticism, particularly when interviewed by someone involved in their care or when they continue to receive services from the organisation |
|                                                                                                                                     | Special skills might be needed to make sense of the analysis/results                                                                                                             |

## Focus groups



**Best for exploring shared experiences, discussing complex topics, and generating ideas for service improvement through facilitated group discussion**

A focus group is a qualitative research and participation method that explores participants' experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and ideas about a specific topic through facilitated group discussion. Focus groups typically include six to eight participants and are guided by a trained moderator. A second person usually takes notes on key observations.

Carefully consider the composition of each group. Large differences in socioeconomic background, life experience, status, or authority may influence group dynamics and discourage some participants from expressing their views openly.

Ethical considerations should be addressed before organising a focus group. Although participants can be asked to respect confidentiality, the facilitator cannot guarantee that discussions will remain private once the session has ended.

### **Recommendations:**

- Select participants carefully to create a safe and balanced discussion.
- Use an experienced moderator who can encourage participation from quieter members.
- Provide interpretation when needed and ensure that participants understand each other.
- Establish ground rules regarding respectful communication and confidentiality.
- Summarise the outcomes and explain how participants' ideas will be used in service development.

| Advantages                                                                                                                           | Challenges                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participants build on one another's ideas, often generating insights that would be difficult to obtain through individual interviews | Requires careful planning, skilled facilitation, and sufficient resources, which may limit its use in routine social service practice     |
| Focus groups can generate ideas for further service development                                                                      | Participants may not open up on controversial issues; confidentiality and anonymity are harder to maintain in groups                      |
| Provides richer and more detailed information than surveys by capturing discussion, interaction, and non-verbal communication        | Some participants may dominate the discussion, while quieter participants may contribute less unless actively encouraged by the moderator |

## Citizens' panels



### **Best for involving a diverse group of residents in discussing strategic issues, policies, or long-term service development**

Citizens' panels bring together a diverse group of residents to discuss complex public issues and provide informed recommendations to decision-makers. Participants are purposefully selected to reflect different perspectives, including age, gender, and socioeconomic background.

Although citizens' panels are most commonly used in policymaking, the same approach can also support strategic service development in social services. Citizens' panels review expert presentations on specific topics, discuss the issues and challenge the experts. Citizens' panels can be organised in a variety of ways.

Several Finnish wellbeing services counties, including Lapland, Pirkanmaa, and Central Finland, have used citizens' panels to discuss issues such as digital services, independent living for older adults, and the future organisation of health and social services. These examples demonstrate that the method can support strategic planning and public engagement.

**Recommendations:**

- Recruit participants transparently to ensure broad representation.
- Provide accessible background information before the discussions.
- Use plain language and interpretation when needed.
- Allow sufficient time for participants to understand complex topics.
- Communicate how the panel's recommendations influenced decision-making.

| Advantages                                                                                                               | Challenges                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strengthens participants' sense of inclusion and representation in decision-making                                       | If expectations are not managed carefully, participants may become disappointed if their recommendations are not implemented      |
| Provides participants with a deeper understanding of how public organisations operate and make decisions                 | May exclude certain residents, such as non-native speakers or those not willing to participate in this type of discussion setting |
| Increases the transparency of decision-making and helps to understand the needs and concerns of the service users better | Requires considerable organisational resources for recruitment, facilitation, communication, and follow-up                        |

## Participatory action research



**Best for long-term collaboration with service users and communities to identify problems, develop solutions, and strengthen both services and community capacity**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach in which research is carried out with people rather than on or for them. Service users and community members actively participate throughout the entire process, from identifying the research questions to analyzing the findings and applying the results in practice.

In PAR, academic research is combined with community action and often also involves advocacy. PAR is based on a partnership between researchers and participants in which knowledge and experiences are shared and decisions are made together. Rather than being research subjects, participants become co-researchers who contribute to defining priorities, interpreting findings, and shaping solutions.

PAR is often used to address social inequalities and improve services by involving service users, practitioners, community organisations, and other stakeholders in developing practical solutions. The approach has been widely applied in health and social care, particularly in work with Indigenous communities and culturally and linguistically diverse populations. By valuing community knowledge and shared decision-making, PAR helps reduce unequal power relationships and strengthens community capacity.

### **Recommendations:**

- Engage participants from the beginning by involving them in defining the research questions and objectives.
- Share decision-making throughout the process.
- Allow sufficient time and resources for building relationships and collaboration.
- Plan how findings will be translated into action.
- Communicate outcomes and continue working with participants beyond the project whenever possible.

| Advantages                                                                                      | Challenges                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Services become more responsive by incorporating the lived experiences of migrant service users | Time- and resource-intensive                                                                                 |
| Strengthens trust between migrant communities and public authorities                            | Requires advanced facilitation skills and experience in participatory approaches                             |
| Empowers participants and strengthens community capacity                                        | Participants may expect changes that are not feasible due to financial, legal, or organisational constraints |
| Increases participants' understanding of the services, their purpose, and limitations           | Combining different linguistic and ethnic groups might be challenging                                        |

## Experts by experience



### **Best for service planning, evaluation, staff training, and peer support**

An expert by experience is a person who has lived experience of a particular life situation, health condition, disability, addiction, or public service. In some cases, family members or other close relatives may also act as experts by experience by drawing on their own lived experiences.

Experts by experience complete specific training and work alongside professionals. They contribute the service user perspective to service evaluation, development, education, and decision-making while also helping professionals better understand the realities of living with a particular condition or life situation.

Experts by experience are already widely involved in developing services in Finland, including employment, housing, child protection, and mental health services. Several wellbeing services counties have also developed their own models for involving experts by experience in service development and peer support.

It is important to remember that people of migrant backgrounds use a wide range of public services. Their lived experience is therefore valuable not only in integration services but also in mainstream social, health, education, employment, and other public services.

**Recommendations:**

- Recruit experts by experience from diverse migrant backgrounds.
- Provide appropriate training and ongoing support.
- Clearly define roles and expectations.
- Recognise expertise through appropriate remuneration.
- Ensure experts have genuine opportunities to influence decisions.

| Advantages                                                                                                                           | Challenges                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Experts by experience are paid for their contribution, recognizing the value of their lived experience and reducing power imbalances | Power balance between the professionals and experts by experience – who has decision-making power?         |
| Meaningful work can provide experts by experience with new, positive experiences of working with public authorities                  | Recruiting experts by experience from underrepresented migrant communities may require additional outreach |

## World Café



**Best for exploring multiple perspectives,  
generating ideas, and encouraging dialogue among  
diverse groups**

World Café is a facilitated discussion method that enables participants to explore questions collaboratively through a series of small-group conversations. Originally developed for community action, it is now widely used in organisational development, strategic planning, and service improvement.

The method is based on seven design principles, including a clear purpose, a welcoming environment, meaningful questions, equal participation, sharing diverse perspectives, active listening, and collective learning.

For more information and resources on the World Café method, see [theworldcafe.com](http://theworldcafe.com).

**Recommendations:**

- Prepare questions that encourage discussion rather than yes/no answers.
- Mix participants thoughtfully while maintaining a safe environment.
- Use visual materials and plain language whenever possible.
- Summarise discussions after each round.
- Explain how the collected ideas will influence future service development.

| Advantages                                                                                                            | Challenges                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Creates opportunities for participants to build new relationships and expand their professional or community networks | Compared to interviews and focus group discussions, the collected data is less descriptive. Participants tend to write short sentences or express an idea in just a few words. |
| World Café conversations frequently extend beyond the event itself and can inspire participants to act                |                                                                                                                                                                                |

## Final reflections

Meaningful participation of migrant service users in social services does not result from using any particular method. What matters is creating the conditions that enable people to participate.

To conclude, we would like to emphasise the following:

### **Participation is a process**

Meaningful participation begins long before a workshop takes place and continues after it ends. Building connections and developing trust with migrant service users and migrant communities should therefore happen long before the co-development starts.

### **There is no universal method**

Different objectives require different methods. Different groups require different ways of working as well. A single approach is unlikely to work for everyone, and targeted approaches are necessary.

### **From consultation to partnership**

The handbook encourages moving beyond collecting opinions towards genuine co-development. People of migrant backgrounds are not solely service users. They have their own expertise, experience, agency and ideas. True participation means encouraging them to become trusted partners of public authorities whose opinions matter.

We hope this handbook helps shift how service user participation in social services is understood and supports more meaningful participation by migrant service users. The practical tips and recommendations can help social services professionals and wellbeing services county leadership work towards this goal.

# RESOURCES

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## Experts by experience

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Niemikotisäätiö: [niemikoti.fi/kokemusasantuntijat/kokemusasantuntijuus-niemikotisaatiossa/](https://niemikoti.fi/kokemusasantuntijat/kokemusasantuntijuus-niemikotisaatiossa/)

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## APPENDIX: ANTI-RACISM TRAINING COURSES IN FINLAND

### Online course on anti-racism for professionals (THL)

- **Target group:** Professionals and students in health care, social services, education, and safety
- **Format:** 16 videos in Finnish with English subtitles; reflection questions at the end of each section
- **Duration:** Approximately 4–5 hours of video materials, plus written resources such as a glossary
- **Materials:** <https://verkkokoulut.thl.fi/login/index.php>

### Anti-racism in youth work (The Peace Education Institute)

- **Target group:** Youth work professionals
- **Format:** Online course materials in Finnish
- **Duration:** An access code is required to check the duration
- **Materials:**
  - [Guide](#)
  - [Training](#)

### Anti-racism for trainers (The Peace Education Institute)

- **Target group:** Teachers and subject teachers
- **Format:** Self-paced Moodle course in Finnish, including reading materials, videos with transcripts, and experience sharing
- **Duration:** Approximately 3–4 hours, including two videos (31 and 51 minutes)
- **Materials:** <https://moodle.rauhankasvatus.fi/>

### Tools for Speaking about Racism and Discrimination: A guide for families and professionals (Familia ry)

- **Target group:** Intercultural families and professionals working with them (e.g. teachers)
- **Format:** Guide available in Finnish and English with practical tips; discussion-based workshop model
- **Duration:** Varies depending on the organiser

- **Materials:**
  - Guide in English
  - Guide in Finnish

## Together without Racism: Workshop and Teaching Package for Grades 4–7 (All Our Children – Yhteiset Lapsemme ry)

- **Target group:** Students in grades 4–7 and their teachers
- **Format:** A guided remote session and a workshop led by a project worker, including participatory group activities, stories, and video. Available in Finnish and English.
- **Duration:** Varies depending on the organiser/trainer
- **Materials:**
  - Workshops
  - Guide (in Finnish)

## Basic training on anti-racism (IM Sweden)

- **Target group:** Primarily IM members, volunteers, and staff, but open to everyone
- **Format:** Self-paced online materials in Swedish; quizzes at the end of each section and videos depicting different everyday situations (e.g. at the workplace and in a restaurant)
- **Duration:** Approximately 3 hours
- **Materials:**

[https://rise.articulate.com/share/vJMYx\\_sLs65lWXnxAP8fl7kdV53ggbdz#/lessons/YE6l6RnL492A3bRW7xYSeRWY03D8HXpG](https://rise.articulate.com/share/vJMYx_sLs65lWXnxAP8fl7kdV53ggbdz#/lessons/YE6l6RnL492A3bRW7xYSeRWY03D8HXpG)

## Other courses

Finnish universities and universities of applied science offer courses on topics such as multicultural Finland, multiculturalism as a strength, and skills for working in multicultural teams. Some courses are free, while others are subject to a fee.