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# Exploring the value of a design for service approach to develop public services in the Community Voluntary Sector: A comparative analysis

## Context

In recent decades, voluntary organisations have played an increasingly significant role in the provision of public services across much of Europe (Pestoff, et al. 2006). In countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, the community and voluntary sector (CVS), also known as the Third Sector, played a substantial role in the construction of the post-war welfare state (Harris, et al. 2001; Pestoff, et al. 2006, 592). In the United Kingdom however, it was not until the 1990s that there was a significant shift in the CVS landscape, 'from grant aid supporting charities... to them being contracted to do that work on behalf of statutory organisations' (Bruce 2011). As a result, CVS has moved from supplementing state agencies, to working alongside government as a provider of essential public services (Cairns, Harris and Young 2005).

Following the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010, the CVS has suffered a significant contraction in state funding leaving the sector in a fragile state (New Philanthropy Capital 2010). The volatile fiscal climate has had a considerable impact on CVS organisations' capacity, yet the third sector community is also trying to respond to a sizeable increase in service demand (VONNE 2011). Coupled with this, the UK Government's *Putting People First* policy (2007) has signaled a complete revision of the existing adult social care model, asking service deliverers to place more emphasis on 'relational' rather than 'transactional' approaches to delivery (Needham and Carr 2009, 3). The CVS is therefore faced with the challenge of meeting these altered expectations of the services they deliver, and how they are offered (Voluntary Organisations Disability Group 2011). In such dynamic conditions, it remains unclear if the sector has the capacity to innovate at pace to accurately respond to the needs of their client groups (New Philanthropy Capital 2010).

Despite this, the community is continually referred to as a site of best practice and a leader in social innovation (Macmillan 2010; McLaughlin 2011). However there is little evidence that corroborates the perception that the third sector can deliver services in a distinctive way that improves outcomes for service users, with some believing voluntary organisations are 'better at believing they are innovative than being innovative' (Hopkins 2010). It is clear therefore that new approaches are needed if the sector is to deliver improved services for users at a rate that matches external expectations

## Introduction

Design for Service is one approach that is regarded as a driver for radical innovation, and a potential catalyst for transformational change (Burns, et al. 2006; Sangiorgi 2011; Manzini 2011) and has the ability to create value and incite transformation (Kimbell 2011; Wetter-Edman 2011; Warwick et al. 2012). With no current prescribed model to respond to the changes being placed on the sector, it is of significant value to understand the extent to which Design for Service could help the CVS community to 'deliver more and better public services' (HM Treasury 2007, 49)

This paper compares the findings from two case studies where a designer worked within the organisation using a Design for Service approach over a 2 month period. This comparison forms the basis of an on-going doctoral programme aiming to establish the value of a Design for Service approach to effect transformational

change in the development of public services in the Community Voluntary Sector.

## **Methodology**

Following a Research-through-Design (RtD) approach, action research conducted through case studies has been used for this research study.

Action Research proposes a sequence of planning, acting, observing, and then reflecting (Lewin 1946; McNiff and Whitehead 2006). The iterative nature of the methodology reflects the RtD inquiry approach, which advocates similar stages (Swann 2002; Zimmerman, et al. 2010). Reason and Bradbury (2001) describe the aim of Action Research as generating knowledge for worthwhile purposes; to help improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001, 2). It is therefore widely employed in research projects that have a collective commitment to investigate and tackle an issue or problem for the benefit of the organisation or community (McIntyre 2008). Furthermore, it is seen as helping to both understand, and simultaneously improve practice in social contexts (Gray 2009), making it a relevant approach to use with organisations providing services to address seemingly intractable social issues. In the Third Sector, where contextual factors such as funding and commissioning have proven to be problematic for existing change models, action research has been considered an appropriate approach because it is context-specific (Kellock Hay, et al. 2001).

To produce generalisable data, action-reflection cycles (Lewin 1946:38; McNiff and Whitehead 2006) have been used in multiple sites. Each project forms part of a single exploratory case study (Robson 2002:181), where common features are studied and compared to provide a more general overview, in order to give a greater understanding of the value of design in developing public services in the CVS.

Theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Eisenhardt 1989) has been used so that cases 'replicate previous cases or extend emergent theory' (Eisenhardt 1989, 533). Each organisation chosen as an action research site had to be a registered charity or other formally constituted voluntary sector organisation with revenues between £200,000 and £500,000 per year, who from research are considered to be some of the organisations most at risk (Community Foundation 2011). They also had to be currently offering, or have a contract to offer, public services, and looking to evaluate, change or expand these in some way in the future. To measure the benefits of creating more customer-focused policy, the organisations also needed a local or accessible client group in order to conduct such user research.

This paper reports on the review of two case studies, referred to as Charity A and B, however further case studies will be conducted in order to complete the action research process with sufficiently robust, qualified data. Charity A is a local organisation that is part of a UK federation. They provide mental health and wellbeing services across three boroughs in North East England, many of which are on behalf of a local council. Charity B is also a local charity registered with a national federation. Operating in one borough in North East England, they provide a variety of community education services to all ages. In both cases, the designer worked within the organisation full-time for a period of 8 weeks, in order to introduce and employ the design for service approach in an appropriate and meaningful way for each organisation.

## **Data Collection**

In each case, a combination of qualitative data collection methods was used to capture stakeholders' opinions of the approach throughout the engagement. The focus on qualitative data helped to elicit 'well-grounded, rich descriptions and

explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts' (Miles and Huberman 1994, 3), which is very much aligned to the exploratory case study methodology that has been adopted (Yin 2003).

The qualitative research involved methods to collect data from project stakeholders who held the knowledge of the projects and their inherent value. As part of the design practice, it is advocated that a designer gains feedback about the tools, methods and practices they employ in a timely manner (Design Council 2005; Sanders and Stappers 2008). These methods of feedback can be both formal and informal, and include emails, questionnaires or a more visual feedback mechanism. A portfolio of written and visual records was created relating to each case study, adding to the richness of the data available for analysis. Furthermore, stakeholders were asked to capture their thoughts about the process over the 8-week period in a diary, prompting them to make more reflective notes about the process.

To underpin this data collection, reflection-on-practice documentation was also made, which allowed the designer to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schön 1983). The designer produced a daily reflective diary on the actions and observations made during the action research cycle. These served to capture unseen and unrecorded conversations with the project stakeholders, as well as note the designer's activities, process and personal thoughts and feelings.

To address the question of reliability, generalisability and repeatability of the data the method of 'triangulation' was adopted (Silverman 2006, 290). The term 'triangulation' is broadly defined by Denzin (1988, 291) as; 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon.' Following the basic principles of geometry, multiple viewpoints allow for greater accuracy, and in an organisational context, collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same happening can improve accuracy (Jick 1979, 602).

Denzin and Lincoln (cited in, Silverman 2006, 292) termed triangulation as a strategy that 'adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to an inquiry'. Triangulation was conducted across both data sources, i.e. chief officers and project stakeholders, as well as different methods, i.e. reflection diaries and semi-structured interviews, to establish if the viewpoints corroborated or countered each other (Silverman 2006, 307). This holistic form of triangulation may also uncover some unique variance which otherwise may have been neglected by single methods (Jick 1979, 603). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the stakeholders by an independent researcher after each case study engagement was completed by the designer, however, these have not been analysed and reported in this paper.

## **Data Analysis**

The case-study data has been analysed using a general inductive approach to note the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data, independent of guidance from a pre-determined hypothesis (Patton 1990, 55). To compliment this, and help to identify the key data to be analysed, critical incident analysis (Flanagan 1954; Crisp, Green Lister and Dutton 2005) was used as a complimentary technique. This technique allows the authors to isolate the events or issues that, although not necessarily dramatic or obvious, are critical as 'they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures' (Tripp 1993).

Firstly, all raw data files were converted into a common format (e.g., font size, margins, questions or interviewer comments highlighted) (Miles and Huberman 1994, 51); also known as data-cleaning (Rahm and Do 2000). Once the data-cleaning was completed, the raw text was read in detail so that the researcher became familiar

with the content, themes and events described, in order to establish the critical incidences (Crisp, Green Lister and Dutton, 2005). Manual coding of these incidences and the figurative language used to describe them allowed the authors to group responses by meaning and include them in multiple coding collections (Tan 2012, 79). The codes aimed to capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis 1998, 1).

From these codes, the researcher created categories derived from actual phrases or meanings in specific text segments (Thomas 2006). The category comprised of four components: a title, generally a word or short phrase, used to refer to the category; a description of the inherent meaning of the category; key text or data associated with the category; and finally, relationships to other categories or data (Thomas 2006).

The second stage was to read the raw data again using these categories to reduce the overlap and redundancy among the categories, and re-examine un-coded text based on this new understanding (Boyatzis 1998). The numerous readings allowed for continuing revision and refinement of the system of categories, reducing the field down to an amount of categories recommended by Thomas (2006). It is only following this that there was a process of interpretation, which resulted in a small number of summary categories that capture the crucial aspects of the themes identified (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

## **Findings**

### **Challenging existing stakeholder viewpoints**

In both case studies, the data described critical incidents where the designer challenged the stakeholders' views about established issues. In each case, stakeholders had said that this was something that attracted them to engaging with the process, as they felt they needed a 'new way of looking at things'.

In Charity A, the designer worked alongside staff to develop a mental health and wellbeing service to be offered in a new geographical area. In initial meetings, the designer stressed the importance of establishing what was needed in the area, rather than moving what they offered in one current geographical area and assuming it would be well received. A critical incident was identified within this activity, when the designer worked with staff to plan a research event to discuss existing provision and priorities with potential customers in the new area. When recording this incident in their stakeholder diary, the participant said that this event 'helped to gain as much information as possible to help us develop the service'.

Data from the designer's reflective diary also identifies this event as a critical incident, recording that the research had shown that it would be important to manage expectations in this new geographical area, as there was very little existing provision. As a result, the designer also noted that the challenge presented by the short-term nature of the funding being provided in the new area led her to ask about deliberately time-limited services. This challenged staff members' existing views that they should be offering long-term provision. Referring to this incident, a stakeholder diary noted that '[the designer] is not afraid to ask those awkward questions that sometimes we lose sight of - we sometimes work in a particular way because that's the way we've always done it!' As a result of helping the staff to consider alternative ways of offering a service, stakeholders began to understand the breadth of possibilities. This follows English (2006), who suggests that innovation is a result of understanding what is possible. Where before, staff had been viewing the transient nature of state funding as a barrier, they began to see that they could offer a service in a way that capitalised on the short-term-ness in order to benefit service users by focusing on re-equipping them rather than aiming to provide their usual long-term support.

In Charity B, the designer's main activity involved working with staff to develop an offer for the organisation's membership. To do this effectively, the designer argued that the organisation needed to understand its current customer experience, so that they could develop the service in a way that strengthened the core offer and did not dilute brand value. Data drawn from both the designer's reflective diary and the meeting summary sheets shows that, initially, stakeholders felt that this was not necessary, as they had recently conducted a customer survey. Analysis of the data suggests that a critical incident occurred when the designer asked a 'mystery shopper'<sup>1</sup> to try out the Charity's services and to capture their thoughts and feelings at each stage of their journey, from travelling to the building, to arriving home again. The designer then captured that journey visually and communicated the mystery shopper's thoughts using a traffic light system, which was shared with the staff team. The designer describes this incident in her reflective diary as 'helping to break down the walls', and one stakeholder noted in their diary that 'the photographs... really made me see just how 'worn out' our building really is and how users/members perceive it'. It was evident from the subsequent actions of the stakeholders involved that this work had changed viewpoints, and had helped stakeholders to recognise the value of their current offer, as well as the issues with the existing system.

In each case study, diary entries reflecting on the critical incidents described, indicate that stakeholders felt a key value of using a design for service approach was that it challenged their preconceptions. In each case, by focusing on a dimension of customer experience, they were able to recognise that their capacity to think strategically was being coloured by their long-established viewpoints. The ability of a Design for Service approach to produce tangible artifacts, such as visualised customer journeys, enabled stakeholders to view issues from alternative perspectives and discuss possibilities in a way that they had not done previously.

### **Visualisation**

The value of the designer's visualisation techniques was also strongly apparent in the critical incident data in both case studies.

One of the six most commonly used visualisation techniques in a design for service approach is a customer journey (Segelström 2010), and the designer used this method in both case studies. In Charity B, the previously described visualisation of the customer journey helped to communicate the issues to the stakeholders in a powerful way. The photographs had a clear impact on stakeholders. Bailey and Warwick (2010) similarly found that a photographic journey could help staff to look beyond their immediate activities and see the service more holistically. Furthermore, the stakeholders found that using a recognisable traffic light system (red stops the journey, green means they move forward) helped to clearly communicate any barriers in the journey, with one stakeholder saying in a project meeting that 'the layout was excellent'. Similarly, in Charity A, the designer created a customer journey diagram for a service proposition that had been developed with staff. A stakeholder noted in their diary that this was, 'an excellent way to help me visualise how this service would 'look'. Analysis showed this also to be a critical incident in helping to improve understanding of the proposed service and its supporting system simultaneously.

In the context of Design for Service, visuals and prototypes are considered to be

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mystery shopper' is a tool used to measure quality of service or compliance to regulation. A person samples the service and reports on their experience in order to understand where there may be issues in a customer's journey. It is used in a variety of industries including retail, health and tourism.





diagram to show how different projects connected together and how learning should be transferred between the different service sites. Several stakeholders felt that this critical incident was particularly valuable, with one noting in their stakeholder diary that a key 'benefit of design so far- [is] visual representation of project ideas'. They then went on to write 'I wish my brain worked visually!! I find it really helpful to have graphical representation of ideas but struggle to produce clear diagrams myself.'

In such a context where the aim of the engagement is a potential transformation, it seems that visuals can provide opportunities for people to interpret and discuss an idea (Blyth and Kimbell 2011). In both critical incidents, the visual representation helped to improve stakeholders' understanding of an idea or issue, and resulted in a tangible progression in the project plan.

### **Systematic inquiry**

Analysis of critical incidents in both case studies showed that a design for service approach provided a useful, systematic process to develop services.

In Charity A, there was a perception that design for service had provided the organisation with a process with which to develop services. The designer worked with staff to understand the support that would need to be provided in order for a customer to benefit from time-limited support and it not diminish their mental health when that support was removed. A critical incident of this activity was when the designer introduced a persona (Pruitt and Adlin 2006) to the service users in the established borough and asked them how that character could be supported through their difficulties in a limited time period. By consulting with current customers, the team was able to gain useful information about how customers would respond to the idea of a time-limited offer, and the type of support that could be provided. One stakeholder diary described this as 'an excellent creative way of obtaining clients' thoughts and feelings' and it had 'reinforced the importance of the research process that is essential to the success of any service'. In a project meeting, another stakeholder stated that 'time spent initially will pay off in the long run as we will develop necessary appropriate services which will, in turn, ensure more positive outcomes for our clients and therefore our reputation'.

As well as providing a useful service development process, staff in case study A also said that the engagement had helped them to recognise the importance of research. In their stakeholder diaries, one stakeholder wrote '[the activity] reinforced the need to consult with our stakeholders before putting in funding applications'. Another stakeholder wrote in their diary that they have recognised that they must 'always consider the 'end user' no matter whether thinking of new leaflets or new services'. The data suggests that a design for service approach had helped to reposition customers at the centre of this process.

In Charity B, the data suggested that the stakeholders felt the design for service approach had improved the organisation's existing process. In a project meeting, one stakeholder said they thought 'the process of Service Design is key to understanding and selling services, and one that I wish to continue.' Furthermore, in both project meetings and stakeholder diaries, staff also commented that the approach had helped to 'solve' an issue that had been looked at repeatedly over the last two years, but had previously not gained any traction. Similarly, in case study A, the designer helped capture and describe a project idea for a funding bid, working with staff to discuss their current ideas, and feeding in findings from the research they had conducted. One stakeholder commented in their stakeholder diary that they had previously made 'numerous attempts to pin down a theme, shed some real light on the direction we should take', and that; 'using idea generation and synthesis allowed



them to shape the idea, which then 'dictated the wording for the first stage bid'. Furthermore, the stakeholder wrote in their diary that 'without [the designer's] invaluable assistance, I would probably still be grappling with the main concept'.

These critical incidents suggest that in both charities, a design for service approach had resulted in several aspects of perceived value where existing organisational practice had failed because there was no systematic process of inquiry to develop new service provision.

## **Transformation**

Recent research asserts that a Design for Service approach has the ability to create value and incite transformation (Kimbell 2011; Wetter-Edman 2011; Warwick et al. 2012). The data analysis showed clearly that there were several aspects of value creation in each case study, so it is appropriate to consider if the designer's engagement resulted in any transformation in either case. Sangiorgi (2011) purports that for Service Design to be used in a transformational way; a design team cannot just produce design interventions, but must seek to challenge the fundamentals of an organisation's behaviour. A designer must therefore uncover and question core assumptions and organisational standpoints to action fundamental change (Junginger and Sangiorgi 2009).

Warwick, Young and Lievesley (2012) summarised four key characteristics that indicate a transformational change has occurred: evidence of awareness, evidence of community, evidence of capacity and evidence of new organisational standards. It is only in Charity A that there is data that corresponds to any of these characteristics. In one stakeholder diary, a staff member at Charity A summarised their future intention to 'develop and deliver services that meet our aims/vision'. Similarly, in Charity A, one member of staff stated in their stakeholder diary their intention to be 'recovery focused as opposed to creating a dependency on us'. Corresponding data derived from diaries and project meetings also suggest the organisation's intention to become more recovery focused across all of their services, suggesting a new organisational standard. Although the data shows that both charities suggested that they would use the approach in the future, it was only Charity A that tried to form the foundation for a legacy in the organisation. In a project meeting, a stakeholder asked for a 'how to' guide with tools and methods so that they could continue to use the approach after the engagement ended, which would suggest evidence of capacity and a design community.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from the data in this study that the Design for Service approach has generated value for the CVS case-study organisations in several key ways: challenging established stakeholder viewpoints; visualisation; and systematic inquiry. The first two in particular correlate with existing research that discusses the value of Design for Service (Han 2010; Wetter-Edman 2011).

In CVS in particular however, there are other organisational factors such as moral, self-reflective and democratic structures, which create a unique context within which to instigate change. In organisational change discourse, research suggests that CVS staff members' personal commitment to charity values can often act as a barrier to change (Tassie, et al. 1996; Johnson and Scholes 1997). Similarly, Kellock et al., (2001) argue that relationships with the state, or indeed other voluntary organisations, could limit an organisation's ability to examine and pursue all strategic

alternatives. This was evident in case study B, where the close relationships between individual employees and some customers sometimes acted as barriers to strategic models of working (after Robinson 1994).

In both case studies, the Design for Service approach acted as a catalyst for value creation and the potential for both long-term personal and organisational behaviour transformation. The extent of this transformation appears to be directly affected by a range of contextual factors, but in particular the level of permission afforded to the designer and the point at which it is granted. It is likely that this would also be true of using the design for service approach in other (non-CVS) organisations (Han, 2010).

Although there were positive perceptions resulting from the engagement in each case in this study, both the designer and some stakeholders reported difficulty gaining permission for change in Charity B.

The designer's reflective diary data for Charity B reports senior managers seeming reluctant to consider ideas that challenged existing relationships with customers, as this was seen as a threat to income. As a result, much of the designer's activity recorded in the period had become focused on demonstrating the income potential from alternative offers in order to encourage managers to consider new service configurations. This led on to a critical incident being identified in the data (perceived by the designer as a breakthrough) when managers agreed to a re-modelled membership scheme that represented a reduction in price for people receiving state benefits, which they had previously resisted. Both stakeholder diaries and project meeting summaries directly attribute this to the designer's engagement, and no other external factors. Whilst this reinforces the potential of design for service to challenge existing perceptions and change viewpoints, it also indicates the importance of organisational permission in allowing this to happen. Gaining permission to act therefore seems to be the critical factor to enabling transformational change in the cases studied.

### **Further work**

To fully establish the extent of design for services as an approach to the creation of value for transformational change in both charities, the authors intend to complete the analysis of the semi-structured interviews that have already been conducted with the stakeholders immediately after each case study was completed, also to conduct further interviews at 6 and 12 months intervals. Findings from these interviews will help us to understand if there is a legacy from the initial introduction of Design for Service approach, and the role that the design outcomes have played at the organisation since the designer left.

Following the findings presented in this paper, the interviews will focus particularly on the idea of organisational permission, how this can be granted, and its influence on the designer's engagements. These findings will be analysed against the transformational design characteristics described by Warwick, Young and Lievesley (2012) to establish the level of any transformation achieved, and how this aligns with the transformation required by the sector as a whole.

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