

Moving Beyond the Consultancy Model: Strengthening Design Approaches for Public Good

In recent years there has been a development of high profile organisations within both the public and private sector ‘embedding design’ within their organisations¹. However, design is still largely commissioned under the consultancy model.

This paper considers both the positive and negative implications of this business model from the perspective of both the public sector client and a design agency while proposing new forms of partnership models for design to be used as a catalyst for the development of new products and services that may arise from a co-creative process.

We consider the need for new forms of partnerships and processes to evolve between commissioned design agencies and statutory public bodies that allow the space for design driven innovation to flourish, and explore what skill sets are needed to maximise the impact of partnerships working.

This paper is a collaborative piece between the public body client and appointed design team centered around the appointment to work on a six month mental health project. The project utilised service design methodologies to co-design future services that young people would like to see in the Greater Glasgow area.

In this paper we articulate both the pre-project warm up period and the follow up stages of the commissioned work.

In the conclusion, proposals are made for new models specifically derived from the experiences of the six month commissioned project and a criteria of conditions for the commissioning of design teams from experience of both embedding design inside organisations and commissioning design teams from the perspective of a statutory public authority.

Our core intention is to inform the reader and develop debate and insight around the management of design within the public sector, crucially, from both the client and design agency perspective.

The Consultancy Model

Typically in today’s procurement landscape, although there are shifts taking place, procurement calls are largely focused on the delivery of pre-articulated outputs from a public body or local authority institution. This often means calls are weighted on cost and the process to tender can often leave design teams without a full understanding of what is required for a successful outcome.

In many circumstances within procurement, relationship building can take place before a call to tender and this process can be seen as a formality with a consultancy, however, the personnel who will be closely involved in the project, in many cases, are not able to make the final procurement decision or have an in-depth input to the design-brief set for public tender processes.

There remains today, despite calls for more open forms of procurement and support of SMEs², a large focus on the ‘solution’ in procurement. This often takes the form of design briefs asking for service or product developments in the form of new apps or websites to

¹ Government Digital Services, blog. (2014). About the Government Digital Service. [Online] (<https://gds.blog.gov.uk/about/>)

² NESTA. (2007). *Driving Innovation through public procurement*. London: NESTA.

counter modern developments and not considering the full series of service needs from users and providers throughout the whole system.

Particularly in the case of digital development for service re-design, there is more focus needed towards developing platform standards, data streamlining and business processes developed to continue to implement a service proposition over time than a quick fix 'solution'.

We are now seeing the design brief evolve³ to allow for more open, participatory forms of design. However even this progression to commissioned problem identification and articulation is often considered as research. Further development is still required to consider how to procure expert skills from the private sector to drive forward work streams post commissioned work.

The consultancy model, considered as an 'outside' approach usually takes the form of a design consultancy delivering solutions and insight to public sector bodies commissioned by public tender. In many circumstances this brings obvious benefits including kudos, specialist expertise, i.e. technical knowledge and a fresh perspective.

However, this approach is not without barriers for both the commissioner and public authority and the design consultancy. The core issue is in moving from insight and proposed design solutions into working prototypes and usable products. This brings frustration not only for the design team, but also the client who has commissioned the original work and cannot create the budget or remit for the work to be continued by the team who has developed the knowledge from the initial research.

Commissioning Design

There is growing interest within the public sector in adopting design approaches to service change⁴, driven by the need to address complex societal challenges within the constraints of highly pressured public finances. Well-recognised drivers such as an ageing population and the growing burden of chronic diseases mean that methodologies that yield deeper insights into the experiences of service users, help shift inefficient practices, redesign key service elements and capitalise on new opportunities have a vital role to play. A number of key aspects of public policy discourse have in recent years also added to the impetus for a more people-focused approach to public service delivery, including in Scotland the Christie Commission⁵ and NESTA's People Powered Health Programme.

However, adoption of such techniques is still relatively novel and there are significant hurdles to overcome in seeing their effective utilisation in the public sector. The most powerful of these is that they represent a positive challenge to traditional power balances that have governed the delivery of public sector services for some considerable time, by placing the experience of service users at the heart of redesigns and innovations. At its best, service design gives voice to protagonists whose experiences may have been fairly marginal to-date. Linked to this is a set of expectations built up around commissioning processes that tend towards setting out in advance what the deliverables will be, and specifying this with some precision in the contract specification. With the level of public scrutiny that all public sector spending attracts, being prepared to go with the flow of open-ended processes, and being primed to respond to potentially significant critiques of current practices takes a degree of confidence and courage. There's a chicken-and-egg dimension in addition, in that

³ Hands, D and Murphy, E. (2012). *Wisdom of the crowd: how participatory design has evolved design briefing*. Sweden: Swedish Design Research Journal. Volume 2.

⁴ Mulgin, G. (2013). *By Us, For Us: The power of co-design and co-delivery*. [Online]. (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/us-us-power-co-design-and-co-delivery>). (Accessed on 25th May 2014).

⁵ Scottish Government. (2011). *Christie Commission on the future delivery of Public Services*. [Online]. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/352649/0118638.pdf>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

an in-depth understanding of the strengths and limitations of service design approaches is only likely to be generated by hands-on involvement. As Geoff Mulgan notes:

*'...few signs of public services building up the capacities needed to be good commissioners of design.'*⁶

The commissioned Mental Health Project

An emerging understanding of commissioning Service Design can be seen in Project 99⁷, focused on exploring internet based approaches to support youth mental health in the Greater Glasgow area. The project undertook a co-productive approach to research and develop future strategies, products and services focusing on young people, social media and how this impacts on their mental health and well-being. This was undertaken by a prominent design agency, leading youth charity, foremost mental health charity and the client, a statutory public body.

The public statutory body and its local partners were looking to establish a time-limited development project to explore the potential of the internet, social media and mobile technologies to promote better mental health and wellbeing for young people. A commissioned partner or consortium of partners was sought to collaborate with GGCNHS and its local partner agencies in developing a collaborative programme with local young people, aged between 15-21. A focus was put on participatory methods with young people, with an intention to co-produce a number of multimedia resources and guides to the internet and mental wellbeing. The project was aimed to guide longer term developments in the youth mental health sphere in the wider health board area.

The origins of this work span several years, and grew out of two linked processes. The first of these was a formal Health Board led policy development process, drawing in multi-agency partners, that created an overall strategic framework for addressing the preventative and early intervention aspects of child and youth mental health. One particular priority to emerge from this process was the need to expand the range of communication and dialogue approaches being utilised. The second strand was a more informal exploration, conducted via the professional networking activities of a small number of colleagues - often using social media channels - to discover and connect with an international body of innovative practice in mental health fields. This latter activity provided sufficient evidence of digital innovation in the health sphere to build a case developed to attract Health Board investment in a programme of exploration.

The commissioning method adopted was the traditional model of competitive tender, in line with the Board's Standing Financial Instructions (SFIs), which are designed to ensure compliance with relevant national and European procurement legislation. The Health Board's Procurement Team played a crucial role in this stage and remained an active partner throughout the tender, selection and award stages.

Several aspects of the contract specification, however, lent themselves to a more collaborative approach from the outset; a co-production approach with young people was an integral element of the specification, as was a requirement to draw on the resources and expertise of a network of local partners. These were brought together in the form of a project steering group, including colleagues from health, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

⁶ Mulgan, G. (2013). By Us, For Us: The power of co-design and co-delivery. [Online]. (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/us-us-power-co-design-and-co-delivery>). (Accessed on 25th May 2014)

⁷ Project99. (2013). Project 99. [Online] (<http://wegot99.com>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

Drawing in the knowledge and connections of this network of local partners was a crucial element of the approach - for example being instrumental in identifying within a relatively short timescale a shortlist of potential youth agencies, then continuing to support young people's participation, for example via the network of youth workers already in place in the participating youth projects and initiatives.

Above all, upon award of contract to the successful three-agency consortium, significant early work was put in to build up relationships among the commissioners, contract holders and the multi-agency steering group partners, in the testing of expectations and assumptions and to establish ground rules and share insights. Some key elements of the eventual suite of final outputs were shaped collaboratively through this kind of dialogue, such as the concept and overall outline of the "digital assets map".⁸

The project process and outcomes

Across 2013 the consortium worked with youth agencies across Glasgow undertaking a series of co-design workshops with young people, providing them with bespoke design tools that allowed them to visualise and put forward a range of ideas on how to improve mental health services.

As a dual process, the interaction with these groups of young people was analysed for insights on the various types of support needed and the preferred format for communication and form of services.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's needs, one-to-one interviews were undertaken where their journey was mapped through a variety of health and youth services they had interacted with in order to understand points in their lives where more support was needed and in what format.

In addition to field work, desk research was undertaken to build a service map of existing resources and platforms (both specifically designed to support mental health and existing digital tools) which were later aligned to a service map. The objective of this service map was to support health professionals and relevant stakeholders working in the mental health sphere on how to use these tools in the support young people's mental well-being. In addition to this qualitative work, a survey of young people's social media habits was produced collating over 600 responses and the results later analysed to understand how young people were accessing the internet, (how, when and what for) to inform design solutions.

The process was a blend of researching existing needs and then presenting these needs back to young people in a safely designed space to develop early stage ideas and directions for improving the Health Board and wider stakeholders' ability to support young people's mental health both inside and outside of the health care system.

Through this open innovation process, the groups of young people were always given the freedom to develop elements of the project as they wished. This resulted in a non-commissioned piece which became part of the wider report. This took the form of a self-developed manifesto for mental health by young people, which the design team developed into a series of visuals for final presentation back to the health board.

From the tender process, outputs also included the development of a youth guide to mental health and well-being. This took the form of an animated GIF youth guide which included animations of advice regarding to stay mentally well and recommendations by young people on what to avoid online.

⁸ Project99. (2013). Project 99. [Online] (<http://wegot99.com/service-map>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

The final report contained all of the above and an overview of wider insights gained during this research and development project, outlining potential opportunities for future exploration.

The final outputs (report, service map, wider research) were presented back by the commissioner, appointed consortium, the design team and the group of young people. These outputs and presentation have been re-presented at various mental health conferences in Scotland and released online. It is important to make a distinction between outputs and outcomes at this stage. The wider outcomes included transferral of knowledge and engagement of the young people, giving the groups the opportunity to have a voice. Often the commissioning process focuses on outputs with these as tangible deliverables. In this process, outcomes are left to the side and are a affordance of the core delivery of outputs.

The report and supporting work highlighted the importance to recognise the need for the health sector to build both new and adopt existing digital platforms to work with young people in managing their mental well-being at all stages of their journey.

The outputs from this project are both hard and soft. Solid service proposals are contained within the report but the issue remains that to reach this stage to develop ideas a series of concurrent workstreams require development to make this a reality.

These include social media and data governance developed to allow for the solutions to exist, an education in the possibility of internet-based tools for the wider health sector and a change in mindset that digital and internet-based tools can be used positively to support young people.

Beyond Project 99

A consideration for highly innovative programmes such as Project 99 is that in order to achieve impact and forward momentum, it is necessary to undertake significant internal development work within the commissioning organisation, as there are often major barriers to overcome. These can be a combination of technical, cultural, financial and political. Even if such negotiations are fruitful, they can typically be very human resource intensive, time consuming and requiring of compromise. It may also be necessary to conduct negotiations with a range of additional key partners - increasingly important given the drive towards further integration of public services, such as with health and social care.

The time taken on internal processes, and the necessary semi-visible nature of much of this effort, can in turn place strains on the positive dynamic with external service designers, participating service users and wider stakeholders. In the case of Project 99, the focus on digital communication technology, and particularly social media presents particular challenges, given the need for the NHS to work through issues such as information governance, data security, patient confidentiality, staff conduct and management of organisational reputation issues. The concept of co-designing health services directly with young people is also a far from commonplace practice, despite many years of policy imperatives focused on patient involvement.

What greatly assists in working all these issues through, and in preparing and securing resources for follow-on stages of development is the ability to connect with like-minded colleagues in other public sector agencies, to be able to share experiences and resources, and to be able to illustrate the potential benefits that can accrue from adopting a service design ethos. Also crucial, but very challenging, is the need to maintain a dynamic link with representatives of service users and involved communities throughout any negotiation of next steps and 'mainstreaming'. The challenge comes particularly from a potential disparity

of expectations around the pace of change, and from lack of investment in the practical requirements of such on-going involvement.

Finally, the ability to explore and select from a wider palette of options in terms of investment and commissioning arrangements needs to be taken on board, if the maximum benefit of service design is to be harnessed for the benefit of more effective public services. Initiatives such as the Scottish Government's support for use of Public Social Partnerships is one example among many that needs to be given more widespread consideration.⁹

New Models of procurement and partnership in design

*"...A design team should be involved at the earliest stage of commissioned work with internal teams using design tools to help explore and shape the requirement prior to any procurement being established. This avoids the risk of 'getting the right answer to the wrong problem'."*¹⁰

This project highlights the benefits of an open research approach which allowed for the use of co-creation tools to steer the direction of the outcomes and open up wider work streams that may need taken forward in alignment to produce 'outcomes' that were not recognised at the commissioning process.

In order to commission projects of this type that adopt an open innovation approach, we need to extend the knowledge of open innovation approaches within the public sector and set up the proper conditions for both internal and external understanding of potential outcomes.

There are several models we outline that we do not intend to be taken as isolated solutions but should be recognised, if adopted, as complementary to one another.

*"Social labs bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, not to create yet more five-year plans, but to develop a portfolio of prototype solutions, test those solutions in the real world, use the data to further refine them, and test them again. Their orientation is systemic—they are designed to go beyond dealing with symptoms and parts to get at the root cause of why things are not working."*¹¹

There has been an increase and general recognition of Social Labs that utilise elements of design (co-design, visualisation, prototyping methods) and social science, and the collaboration of stakeholders to explore solutions to problems facing society. We believe an embedded form of social labs could begin to extend the understanding and create the framework for open investigation into procuring scaled solutions and multiple work streams that align to tackle systemic issues.

It could be said that embedding design tools and capacity into an organisation could support the development of smart procurement that allows open investigation of a subject domain and guides articulation of procurement documentation. As NPRU¹² points out, this could combine early supplier involvement with outcome-based specifications allowing suppliers to learn more about the underlying problems that procurement is attempting to address.

⁹ Scottish Government. (2011). Public-social partnerships. [Online]. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/07/08133636>) (Accessed 25th May 2014)

¹⁰ Policy Connect. (2013). Restarting Britain 2: Design and public services. [Online]. (<http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/apdig/research/report-restarting-britain-2-design-public-services>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

¹¹ Hassan, Z. (2014) *The Social Lab Revolution*. [Online]. (<http://social-labs.org/>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

¹² NESTA. (2007). Driving Innovation through public procurement. [Online] (http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/public_procurement.pdf). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

Following on from this a wider recognition and development of policy around Innovation Partnerships¹³ could be adopted. This would allow the commissioning authority and supplier to work closely together to develop iterative work plans, with the authority purchasing the results or entering into a formal partnership with the organisation to develop proposed projects post investigation period.

Design focusing beyond solutionism and towards platforms for co-production

A fundamental shift in the way needs are met and services are delivered requires a fundamental realignment of the relationship between the community and the services they use. Co-production and co-design approaches can play an important part in this shift of approach, but to succeed, significant attention must be focused on the practicalities of enabling community participation. Public services and their partners, including service design agencies, need to actively work to address perceptions, capacities, potential barriers and above all to invest in the time and energy required to make community participation a serious part of the mainstream effort.

For example, as the recent Royal Society of Edinburgh investigation of digital inclusion in Scotland¹⁴ revealed, there are still many people in Scotland - and elsewhere in the UK - who are not digitally connected. Almost one in five Scots live in postcode areas where most of their neighbours are unlikely to be online. As this report, and allied work shows, digital exclusion is not simply about lack of access to connection or equipment, it is as much about skills, confidence, cultural norms and whether one perceives a net benefit to the effort of getting online.

In the instance of the project we discussed, recommendations highlighted a need to develop co-production based platforms and forums for continuing knowledge between commissioner, design team and service user. The design team recommended that the Service Map be turned into a live site for knowledge curation and a series of recommendations on where and how internet based tools are being used to support young people by the whole community. In addition, an ongoing networking and content building role for the site on and offline was specified. This form of output considers not only 'service users' but a multitude of needs for the health sector that may have not been articulated in the original tender specification.

Supporting communities through practical initiatives that build skills and confidence is therefore crucial, as is designing engagement processes that are responsive to the needs of respective communities, such as addressing potential financial or childcare barriers to participation, and avoiding off-putting jargon. Above all the biggest shift is attitudinal, from commissioners and service providers - moving decisively away from viewing communities only as passive consumers and instead seeing them as bringing a huge wealth of experience, aspiration and ideas that can drive change.

Blend a range of skills and approaches

"Good designers recognise that their skills only become useful when combined with other complementary skills."¹⁵

¹³ Taylorwessing. (2014). Public Procurement Directives. [Online]. (http://www.taylorwessing.com/fileadmin/files/docs/EU-New-Public-Procurement-Directives_Feb14.pdf). (Accessed 25th May 2014)

¹⁴ The Royal Society of Edinburgh. (2014). Spreading the benefits of digital participation. [Online] (http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/1136_FinalReport.html). (Accessed 25th May 2014).

¹⁵ Mulgin, G. (2013). By Us, For Us: The power of co-design and co-delivery. [Online]. (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/us-us-power-co-design-and-co-delivery>). (Accessed on 25th May 2014).

Extension of knowledge and understanding by designers and commissioners is needed through education and case studies to highlight new forms of design processes from service design and open innovation to work with authorities to consider the complexity of building new services and products. This a movement from focusing on the solution to the development of knowledge across an innovation process. In addition to this, larger consortiums of both internal and external expertise are required to complement knowledge of past research and existing infrastructure. The building of multi-disciplinary teams is needed to develop work streams and solutions that can be continuously developed over time and fit within the existing system infrastructure and recognising where there may be need for training or capacity building.

Conclusion

While there is a growing body of work using co-production principles across many facets of the public sector, this still represents a small proportion of the overall effort of service commissioning and development activity. Moving from innovative case studies through to creating a more mainstreamed approach will take considerable effort. However, there are positive initiatives underway to boost this approach, such as the Scottish Co-production Practitioners Network, and the wider UK network.

A successful design-client relationship works when other systemic issues are identified as part of a larger work package and are carried through in procurement. Therefore, we recommend that statutory authorities invest further in the development of co-production based commissioning and work closely with service users, communities and design teams in the initial stages to specify clearly the desired outcomes from a commissioned piece of work.

A strong focus on outcomes can set the compass points to a clear destination for a project, while allowing the client, service users and design teams to adopt an iterative and exploratory approach to determining how they reach the desired destination. Use of such an open and creative procurement process, also allows the design team and service user to develop their own maps and guides, producing the type of outputs they feel best articulate the most important focal points of the project. This avoids the constraints of pre-determined route maps.

To set the framework for such an approach, a preliminary investment, recognising the benefits of design-led approach to innovation, should fund a foundational procurement exercise which allows identification and co-production of this set of outcomes. This may also identify the need for the procurement of a wider range of work packages that not only explore how the desired outcomes might be achieved, but then provide the funding for communities to be engaged in co-producing the services developed, ensuring momentum is maintained post project and that knowledge is embedded in the system.

This is no easy task and further research is needed into what practices and systems might embed the design approach and maximise the benefits of the social lab. However, this paper highlights the need for commissioners to think beyond setting specifications for the procurement of narrowly defined and specified work packages and projects, with prescriptive emphasis on output over outcome. A wider perspective allows consideration of the range of supporting workstreams and future developments required within the organisation, to embed project learnings and the transferral of knowledge. It is our hope that this open approach to producing design briefs, with service users and designers involved earlier in the commissioning process, will help the procurement and tender process to evolve, increasingly leading to a systems-led model with a focus on the best outcomes for communities and service providers.

The project discussed in this paper might be considered a 'breaching experiment'¹⁶ in that it has tested the ground for the development of these theories in practice. The value of the approach and the potential impact, both in terms of outputs and outcomes, has been recognised at a senior level in the client organisation who are now considering the development of new workstreams to take the project to the next level.

¹⁶ Sniggle.net. *Breaching Experiments*. [Online]. (<http://sniggle.net/breaching.php>). (Accessed 25th May 2014).