Design Council

Design in the public sector

Lessons from applying design approaches in the public sector

COSTA

Introduction

The role of design has changed, beyond an aesthetic extra to a methodology equally applicable to services or policies as it is to products. In the Design Commission's 2013 report Restarting Britain II, they identified a need for support to ensure decision-makers have the understanding, willingness and skills to design cost-effective, user-led public services. In response, building on Design Council's work that catalysed the agenda of including design in public sector reform in 2008, we developed the 'Design in the public sector' programme. It was launched in January 2014 to provide support to public sector staff to apply design approaches to tackling complex challenges. In parallel the process also introduces and embeds new skills and capabilities. In this report, we explore the experiences of UK public sector staff using design approaches to develop, improve or recommission the services they provide.

Public sector staff are facing similar challenges across the country. Changing structural pressures, emerging technology, commercialisation and devolution have driven a growing appetite for change and innovation in the way public services are delivered. In addition, the demographics of UK society are vastly different from when the welfare state first came into formation in the 1940s. An ageing society is increasing the complexity of providing health and social care, there is pressure to cut costs while simultaneously increasing the quality of service and real terms earnings remain at pre-recession levels, a key driver of poverty according to the Chief Economist at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. At a time when budgets are tight and resources are stretched, design is increasingly recognised as a vital tool to transform public services. The growing movement of design thinking and innovation provides the skills and capabilities to explore radically different solutions to the challenges faced by the public sector and a growing number of practitioners have adopted design methods as they attempt to tackle these so-called 'wicked problems', in which ambiguity and complexity (a need for personalisation and systems thinking) requisite the use of more creative approaches.

This is a developing field of research, and while numerous researchers have paid attention to innovation in public services and policymaking (Bason 2010; Design Council 2012) the evidence base is weaker in terms of practical examples of services developed using design approaches and their impact (Mulgan 2014). To address this, we aim to provide evidence about how design approaches can be used to design public services, from the experience of public sector staff from two recent cohorts of the Design in the Public Sector programme (in the East Midlands and London).

February 2018

About the design in the public sector programme

Design Council, for over 70 years, has been a pioneer in advocating and supporting the value of design to the UK economy and to society. Having catalysed the agenda of including design in public sector reform in 2008, Design Council has worked widely to demonstrate the value of design, and build the skills and capabilities of policy makers, service commissioners, and delivery teams to use it to tackle the challenges they need to overcome.

The breadth and depth of our experience cuts across multiple policy and service areas and across local and central government. We have been instrumental in informing and leading debates and reviews as well as delivering key reports such as 'Design for Public Good' with our EU partners, which brought together insights from our work at local and community level, to set out very clearly, and for the first time, the value design brings to policy development and service transformation. We have also demonstrated this in numerous projects, including our hands-on work with Whittington Hospital to create a better pharmacy service, and our work with the Department of Health to Reduce Violence and Aggression in A&E.

Throughout this work Design Council has developed and refined an adopted approach to enable organisations to use design strategically to tackle real-life challenges, generate fresh insight and develop ideas that lead to radical innovation. As part of this, learning-by-doing approaches are used with teams to build the skills and capabilities they need to apply these design methods on other projects and more widely within their organisations.

Recently our design in the public sector programme has focused on supporting local authorities across the UK to apply this adopted approach to a specific 'live' challenge that they want to tackle; from homelessness to domestic violence, ageing populations to childhood obesity – and most recently with a focus on public health. This will enable us to develop deeper insights into the role of design in tackling systemic health and wellbeing issues and in developing models for prevention.

Since 2014, we have supported 54 teams from local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and other public services to tackle critical challenges. The programme has been delivered to nine regional cohorts with a tenth cohort, comprising 13 teams, in progress at the time of writing. This will bring the total number of teams supported to 67 by the end of May 2018.

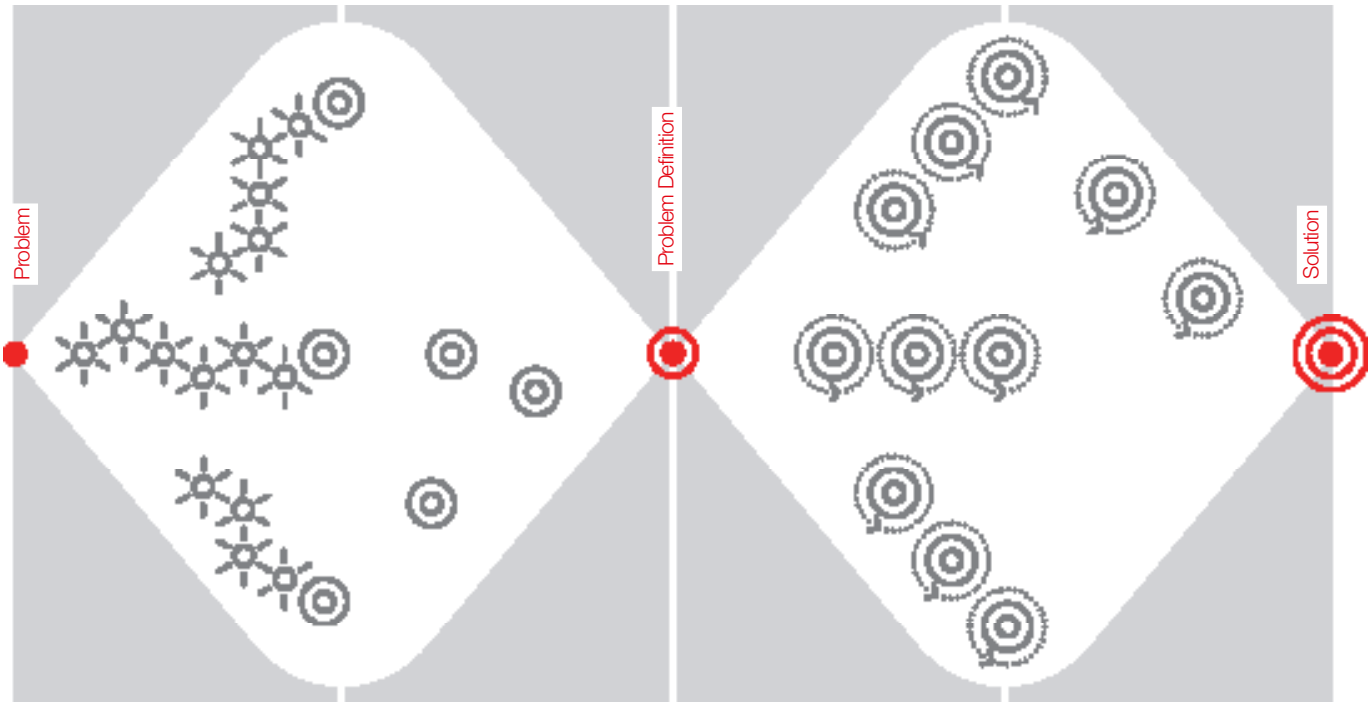
The programme was initially funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) who enabled us to pilot the approach. A cohort funded by Capita helped us take the programme to Scotland. Most recently, the last six cohorts have been funded and supported by the Local Government Association (LGA), allowing the programme to scale across all regions of England.

About the design in the public sector programme

Through five one-day workshop sessions held over a 16-week period, the teams are facilitated through a structured design process to collaboratively explore and reframe the challenge they need to tackle, conduct research with users and stakeholders to generate new insight and evidence, and identify opportunities for new models, services or solutions.

One of the programme's distinguishing features is the use of Design Council's Framework for Innovation, which provides organisations with a robust and proven process to use design to explore, reframe and define scalable innovation opportunities. Within our Framework for Innovation sits Design Council's globally recognised Double Diamond: a design process that supports a structured design approach to tackling challenges in four phases and which has become the foundation for design language and application.

Figure 1 – The Design Council Double Diamond (2004)



Discover
Gaining new insights into the challenge

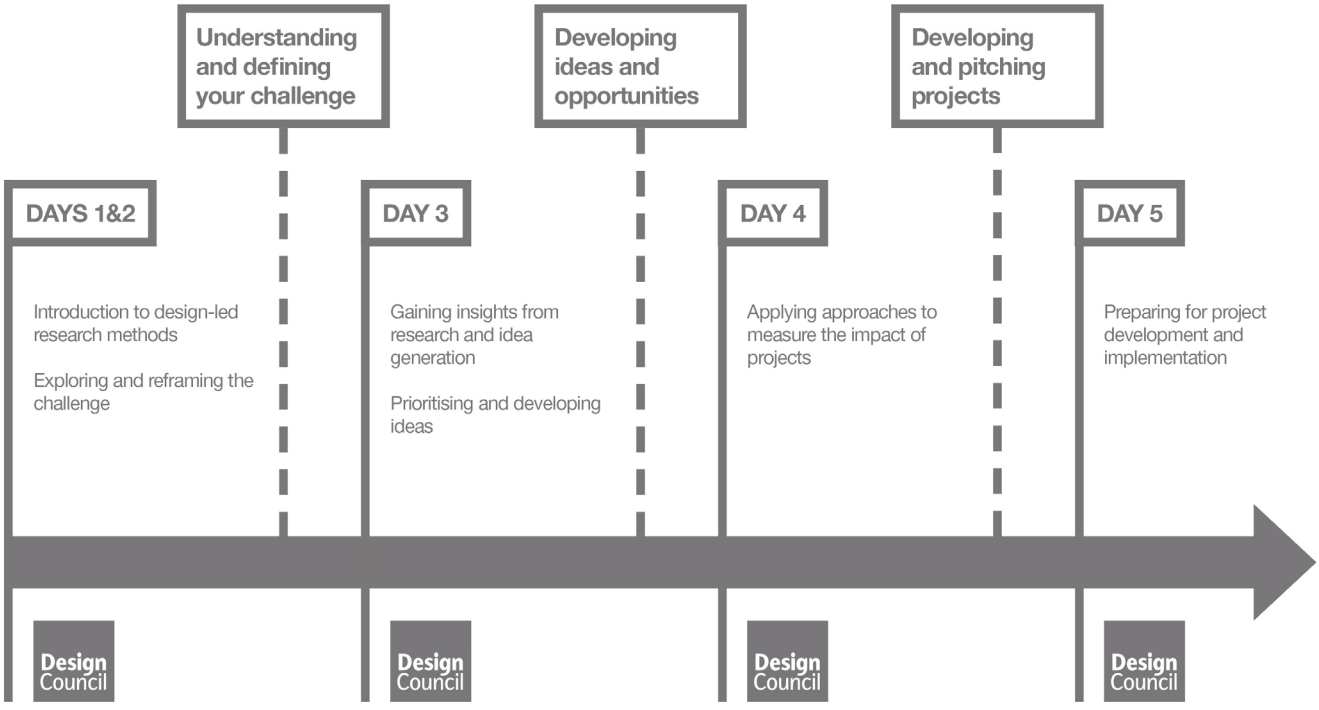
Define
Reframing and defining the challenge

Develop
Exploring and testing potential solutions

Deliver
Identifying solutions that work and preparing for launch

The design in the public sector journey

Figure 2 – The design in the public sector journey



Key findings

01 The programme supports participating teams to ‘reframe’ challenges

02 Design methods enable greater participation and different conversations

03 The programme helps improve awareness of design and enables skills transfer

01 The programme supports participating teams to 'reframe' challenges

The programme supported participating teams in working towards a fundamental reframing of the challenge they were trying to address. The way a question is framed begins to determine the answers you get, therefore exploring the question can be a powerful way of widening or narrowing further the challenge being addressed and also the range of ideas that could overcome it.

Initially, this stage was consistently hard for participants as the challenges they are seeking to tackle are all highly complex. Although the project teams were excited about doing something innovative, it was often more difficult to envisage larger changes to the way a service or policy works, than focus on incremental improvements to existing services. However, the design methods and activities gave them the freedom to think about those wider opportunities, so that by the end of the programme, 88% of the respondents felt the programme had helped them to fundamentally reframe their original challenge. For example, one team from South Kesteven District Council realised a major driver behind their housing supply challenge was economic development. The focus of their project therefore shifted to consider how to ensure South Kesteven is an attractive place for businesses and families to locate and stay.

For the London Borough of Brent Council, the team transformed their focus from one single project to redesign their planning process, to focusing instead on improving the process specifically for first time users. Using a Customer Journey Map to detail the customer experience across a number of touchpoints in the service, Brent were better able to navigate through the planning system and highlighted several potential problems facing first time users. They concluded that, if they were able to reduce the amount of invalid applications they would be able to dedicate more resources towards larger projects.

For many, major shifts in focus were achieved by applying user research methods. Gathering multiple perspectives from stakeholders, service users, colleagues and co-participants helped them to address their challenge from different perspectives. For Westminster City Council, the team's initial challenge began by trying to improve the lives of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Holding workshops with parents helped them to understand the vital role Children's Services plays in family life and therefore the need to focus equally on parents and their children. This important insight has helped them to shift how they design services that cater equally for the needs of both children and parents.

> *"We've realised this is not a housing supply challenge, but one that revolves around Economic Development – making South Kesteven a place that allows – and encourages – investment by residents and businesses"*
>
> – Tracey Blackwell (South Kesteven District Council)

02 Design methods enable greater participation and different conversations

A pre-requisite of the programme is that local authorities must collaborate with other organisations who have an important role to play in addressing the same challenge. In East Midlands and London, collaborations were mostly between local authorities, voluntary services, clinical commissioning groups, housing associations and private providers of services. In the London Borough of Redbridge, the team comprised Citizens Advice Redbridge as well as the local authority to explore how to support people making choices about their housing situation, to reduce homelessness.

The teams, across all the cohorts, were also formed from a variety of different professions, ranging from officers to therapists to health and care professionals. Some local authorities also included service users and 'citizen champions' within their teams; one group even included a care leaver who was able to provide invaluable insights into the challenges of the system. Many teams reported co-design approaches helped them to better understand how and where their problems fitted into the wider local authority context and resulted in a more extensive collaboration within and between organisations working together to deliver services to their communities.

Peer review and constructive feedback is a critical part of the design process. In one feedback session, participants found that getting constructive critique from their peers with different perspectives was invaluable. The team from the London Borough of Brent, whose challenge focused on looked-after-children, found commonalities with a team from Haringey Council, whose challenge focused on care leavers, helping both teams explore what could be improved in the transition phases between these services.

The opportunity to practice 'pitching' is built into the programme design, with Day 5 dedicated to refining these pitches. This is an important skill for project teams to develop to 'sell' their projects back into their organisation, and enhance the chances of their innovations being implemented. An early exercise involves rapid critique from peers, organised so that one spokesperson stays to explain their project, whilst their peers rotate around the projects to offer critique. In the London cohort, those who had acted as spokesperson found that having to repeat the pitch helped them to rehearse getting the key information across succinctly and tighten their pitch.

Participants also reflected how being introduced to design principles reinforced the opportunity to see the commonalities across different local authority challenges and the applicability of these across other projects they were working on.

> *"Listening to others and how they were tackling their challenges was incredibly powerful"*
>
> – Jon Wells (Blaby District Council)

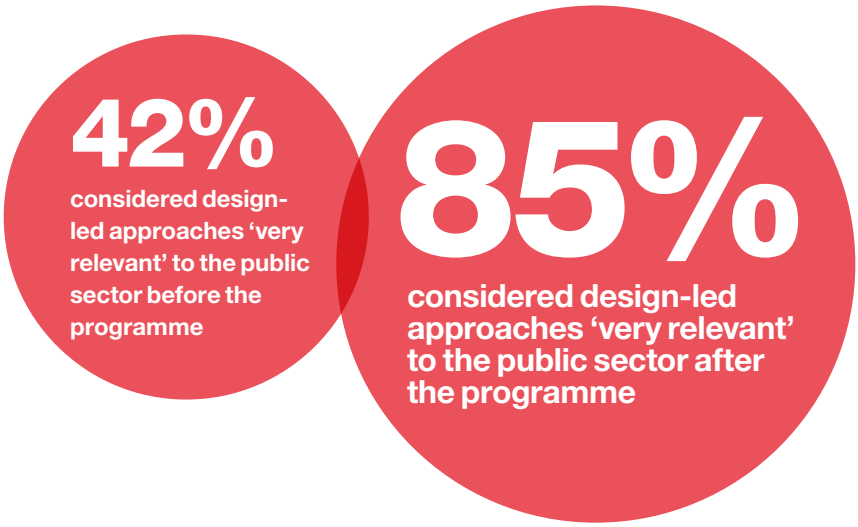
03 The programme helps improve awareness of design and enables skills transfer

The extent to which local authorities are familiar with design approaches varies widely. In a survey before the programme, only 4% of respondents rated their knowledge of design-led approaches as 'high' or 'very high'. After completing the programme, this rose to 53%[1]. In addition, prior to joining the programme, 42% of respondents said they believed design-led approaches were 'very relevant' to the public sector, compared to 85% of all respondents following completion.

As the focus of the programme is about transforming public services, by empowering staff and developing the skills and capabilities they require to do so, participants become ambassadors and pioneers of design approaches within their own organisations, as well as with partner organisations. At the end of the programme, 93% of respondents had shared the approaches they learnt with immediate colleagues. In addition, 77% had shared them with other teams in their organisation and 37% with other organisations.

In evaluating the extent to which design approaches have become embedded by the local authorities, six months after the programme, respondents felt their organisation was more aware of design principles, methods and tools. These approaches needed 'permission' to allow projects time to deliver. Stepping back to consider the real problem at hand, and the user perspective, is at odds with the pressures on the public sector. This is why buy-in from senior management is so important – and the programme includes this as a pre-requisite, requiring a senior project 'sponsor'.

Gaining acceptance of new approaches is a difficult task when you are just learning how to use them yourself, but six months later, participants are demonstrating design methods, holding 'discovery' sessions with users, getting feedback early on from colleagues or integrating design approaches in strategy planning for new projects.



[1]Base size of 26 respondents from the East Midlands and London cohorts at baseline, and 32 at endline.

Next steps

The LGA and Design Council continue to work together. This year, we are excited the programme has evolved significantly to focus on tackling public health challenges. A new cohort started the programme in the north of England in November 2017.

1 **Focus on public health**
Local authorities join the programme with a 'live' challenge. Since 2014, these have covered housing, children's services, adult social care, parking, criminal justice and public health. For the current cohort, the programme has focused on public health challenges, to develop alternative prevention based models and build skills and capabilities to use design to improve health outcomes. The participating local authorities are detailed in Appendix 2. They are addressing a range of public health challenges including reducing teenage pregnancy, reducing obesity and increasing the uptake of NHS health checks. This focus in the cohort facilitates collaboration between the local authorities, as many themes will be applicable across the whole cohort and teams may be engaging with similar stakeholder groups.

2 **Coaching**
Alongside the five workshops delivered in the programme, there is also additional coaching available to support teams to make sense of the insights they are capturing using design approaches. These are run as 'clinic' sessions with Design Council's Design Associates to troubleshoot any issues that local authorities face between workshops.

3 **Following up with previous cohorts**
Understanding how participants get on when they return to their day jobs is an important part of measuring the impact of the programme, as this is where the teams really develop and implement their solutions. To do this, we are undertaking a research programme to follow up with a sample of participants across the different cohorts. We will explore how participants have used the tools they learnt on the programme to develop their solutions, as well as challenges that they have faced.

References

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Appendix 1:

Map of participating organisations by region

Appendix 2:

Full table of cohorts and participating organisations. Links to case studies.

Information	Organisations
Cohort No: 1 **Sponsor:** AHRC **Region:** North West **Year:** 2014	**Lead organisations involved:** East Lancashire Clinical Commissioning Group Lancashire County Council Liverpool City Council Salford City Council Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council
Cohort No: 2 **Sponsor:** AHRC **Region:** Yorkshire and the Humber **Year:** 2014	**Lead organisations involved:** Leeds City Council North East Lincolnshire Council North Yorkshire County Council Selby District Council Sheffield City Council Wakefield Council West Yorkshire Police
Cohort No: 3 **Sponsor:** AHRC **Region:** South East **Year:** 2015	**Lead organisations involved:** Brighton and Hove City Council East Sussex County Council Hanover Housing Association West Sussex County Council Hart District Council
Cohort No: 4 **Sponsor:** Capita **Region:** Edinburgh **Year:** 2015	**Lead organisations involved:** Dumfries and Galloway Council City of Edinburgh Council Education Scotland Falkirk Council

Information	Organisations
Cohort No: 5 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** East of England **Year:** 2015	**Lead organisations involved:** Dacorum Borough Council Cambridgeshire County Council West Suffolk Council Braintree District Council Chelmsford City Council South Norfolk Council
Cohort No: 6 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** South West **Year:** 2015	**Lead organisations involved:** North Somerset Council Tewkesbury Borough Council South Somerset District Council Devon County Council Mendip District Council Teignbridge District Council
Cohort No: 7 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** West Midlands **Year:** 2016	**Lead organisations involved:** Coventry City Council Herefordshire Council Shropshire Council Staffordshire County Council South Staffordshire Council City of Wolverhampton Council
Cohort No: 8 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** East Midlands **Year:** 2016	**Lead organisations involved:** Ashfield District Council Northamptonshire County Council Blaby District Council Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council South Kesteven District Council

Information	Organisations
Cohort No: 9 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** London **Year:** 2017	**Lead organisations involved:** London Borough of Islington London Borough of Haringey London Borough of Hackney London Borough of Redbridge London Borough of Brent London Borough of Westminster
Cohort No: 10 **Sponsor:** LGA **Region:** Northern/Southern **Year:** 2017/18	**Lead organisations involved:** Barnsley Council Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council Doncaster Council North Tyneside Council Sheffield City Council Stockport Council Camden and Islington Public Health Epping Forest District Council Huntingdonshire District Council London Borough of Bexley Southwark Council West Sussex County Council

Design Council has worked extensively on service and policy challenges in government and public bodies. Our aim is to build design capabilities in the public sector by introducing new tools into policy development and creating more effective, people-centred services.

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About Design Council

Design Council is an enterprising charity which improves people's lives through the use of design. Our work places design at the heart of stimulating business growth, helps to transform our public services and enhances places and cities to ensure a sustainable future for everyone. We advance new design thinking, encourage debate and inform government policy.

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