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# Knee High Design Challenge

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OUR VISION FOR CHANGE  
TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND  
WELLBEING



THE KNEE HIGH DESIGN CHALLENGE HAS BROUGHT INNOVATION, EXPERIMENTATION AND EVALUATION TO PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THAT AIM TO MAKE A LASTING DIFFERENCE TO CHILDREN UNDER FIVE.

## OUR VISION FOR CHANGE

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THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION, ITS COMPARATIVE BENEFITS AND COST SAVINGS ARE WELL UNDERSTOOD, YET DESPITE CONSIDERABLE INVESTMENT IN RECENT YEARS, THE IMPROVEMENTS THAT HAD BEEN HOPE FOR HAVE NOT BEEN ACHIEVED.

There is also evidence to show that the inequalities between children's development when they start school can make a lasting impact on the rest of their adult lives.

In Southwark and Lambeth the associated risk of rising health inequalities for children in their early years is high. Design Council, in partnership with Guy's and St Thomas' Charity and the London boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth, felt it was time for a new approach.

In partnership with



In September 2012, we asked:

**WHAT IF FAMILIES ACROSS SOUTHWARK AND LAMBETH WERE MORE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE DESIGN AND CREATION OF SERVICES THEY USED?**

**WHAT IF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS OF ALL KINDS WERE GIVEN THE TOOLS AND SUPPORT THEY REQUIRED TO INCREASE THE SOCIAL VALUE OF THEIR WORK?**

**WHAT IF PUBLIC SECTOR COMMISSIONING SUPPORTED MORE INNOVATION, EXPERIMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT BEFORE MAKING BIGGER INVESTMENTS OF TIME AND MONEY?**

We created a programme to find, support and invest in entrepreneurial ideas and people that would make a real difference to the lives of children in these two London boroughs. The collaboration was formed amid growing recognition of the benefits of early intervention, the importance of 'getting it right' for children in their early years and a reduction in universal provision of services for families.

The Knee High Design Challenge called for:

- 1 New ways of looking at public health problems.**  
Asking new questions and reframing the challenges by looking at them from new perspectives.
- 2 Families, children and practitioners to be at the heart of early years services.**  
The real experts are the people dealing with the everyday realities of bringing up children, so we made these lived experiences central to the making, testing and delivery of new approaches.
- 3 More experimentation with new approaches.**  
Finding time and resources to try something new even if you do not know if it will work.
- 4 Bringing people together to investigate and invent.**  
No single solution will create universal change and only through collaboration with different people working towards a shared goal can change happen.
- 5 Ambitions that respond to families' differing needs and aspirations.**  
This means prevention not reaction; choice not prescription; networks not silos and aspiration not stigmatisation.

Families, businesses, charities, early years professionals and council employees all joined the Challenge to create and develop new ideas. Through a four-stage process, the Challenge has supported entrepreneurial teams to transform good ideas into lasting and effective products and services. After three years, three new ventures have been launched and supported to develop at scale and a further 22 ideas have developed as part of the training and support throughout. An evaluation by NEF Consulting conducted between December 2014 and December 2015 details the impact this work is having on families in the area.

**THE KNEE HIGH DESIGN CHALLENGE HAS SOUGHT TO DEMONSTRATE IMPACT IN TWO MAIN AREAS:**

- 1. THE IMPACT OF THE CHALLENGE ON ITS PARTICIPANTS (ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO RECEIVED FUNDING) INCLUDING THE ABILITIES AND SKILLS OF PRACTITIONERS IN MAKING THEIR IDEAS A REALITY**
- 2. THE IMPACT ON HEALTH AND FAMILY WELLBEING OUTCOMES FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN UNDER FIVE IN LAMBETH AND SOUTHWARK AS A RESULT OF THE NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES CREATED THROUGH THE CHALLENGE.**

Design Council, Guy's and St Thomas' Charity and the London boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth wish to share our insights from this programme and our view on the opportunity of design-led innovative practice to see lasting change in tackling complex health and social issues. We would like to see a greater range of imaginative, diverse and ambitious ideas developed that are responsive to users' differing needs and aspirations.

This paper sets out what we have learned from the approach we took in the Knee High Design Challenge and the opportunity to apply aspects of this approach to tackle other complex challenges and to improve people's health and wellbeing. We look forward and outline our vision for how models of practice such as this might be adopted more widely.

This paper accompanies a Solutions Paper (authored by evaluation consultants NEF Consulting) which provides a summary of the impacts achieved by the final teams participating in the Knee High Design Challenge, reflecting on what they have been able to achieve and the impact that their products and services are having on child health. There is also material available on the ventures established during the project, and the story of the Knee High Design Challenge from the outset available on Design Council's website: [designcouncil.org.uk](http://designcouncil.org.uk)

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE KNEE HIGH APPROACH

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**Change can only be built on a genuine understanding of the lived experience of end users.**

Users must be at the heart of the work and it's vital to understand day-to-day lives, not simply to consult and ask questions. Spending time with families, observing their activities and interactions, and talking with them about what matters is the best way to understand issues. This type of 'design research' often leads to a reframing of the questions. The Knee High Design Challenge was built upon a solid foundation of in-depth research gathered from families, children and professionals.

**An open call for ideas from anyone can enable a breadth of solutions.** We have worked with childminders wanting to start their own businesses, dads wanting to redesign maternity services and charities with a desire to branch out with new service offers. We may need to re-evaluate who we consider to be an entrepreneur and fine-tune the support available to founders of early-stage social ventures.

**New approaches and channels are needed to reach new people.** With the Knee High Design Challenge, we wanted to meet people who did and did not engage with existing services,

for instance by working with connectors in the community to recruit and interest families who were less confident in putting themselves forward. We worked hard to build personal connections between people and the project's goals by building a local presence for the project, for example through the Knee High 'pop up shop' created to build interest and awareness of the project, positioned near to the Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre which is well-used by local families.

**It's vital to support individuals as well as ideas.**

A very open call comes with a responsibility to support those people who might be less confident in themselves and their idea and may be at the beginning of their journey as a social entrepreneur. The Knee High programme was flexible enough to fit around existing life commitments, and responsive enough to help to fill gaps in ventures' skills and capabilities.

**A staged structure helps to manage risk and opportunity with early stage ideas.** One approach advocated in supporting early innovations is the notion of 'let a thousand flowers bloom': allowing a thousand seeds of ideas to grow for a greater chance of success.



We know, however, that in reality not all ideas will grow to achieve impact and so we structured the Knee High Design Challenge in stages, with four funding gateways, enabling us to start with lots of ideas to achieve a small number of successful solutions. As an idea develops, it should be able to withstand greater scrutiny and the Knee High ventures were judged against five criteria as the programme developed: innovation, impact, relevance, growth and capability.

**Advice and support is as valuable as financial investment.** Turning innovative ideas into services or products that create real social change is a complex and turbulent journey. Support that the Knee High Design Challenge teams particularly valued was advice in running research experiments and measuring impact, business modelling, service design methods and prototyping tools.

**Change needs the skills and commitment of a range of people and is best enabled where support is spread across a team.** There are a great many innovative thinkers who want to make change happen though feel unable to operate against the flow. Support programmes tend to focus on building the capability of the lead entrepreneur, however we believe in the need to see equal support for a wider team of collaborators. There need to be opportunities for people's development that account for these different models of making positive social change.

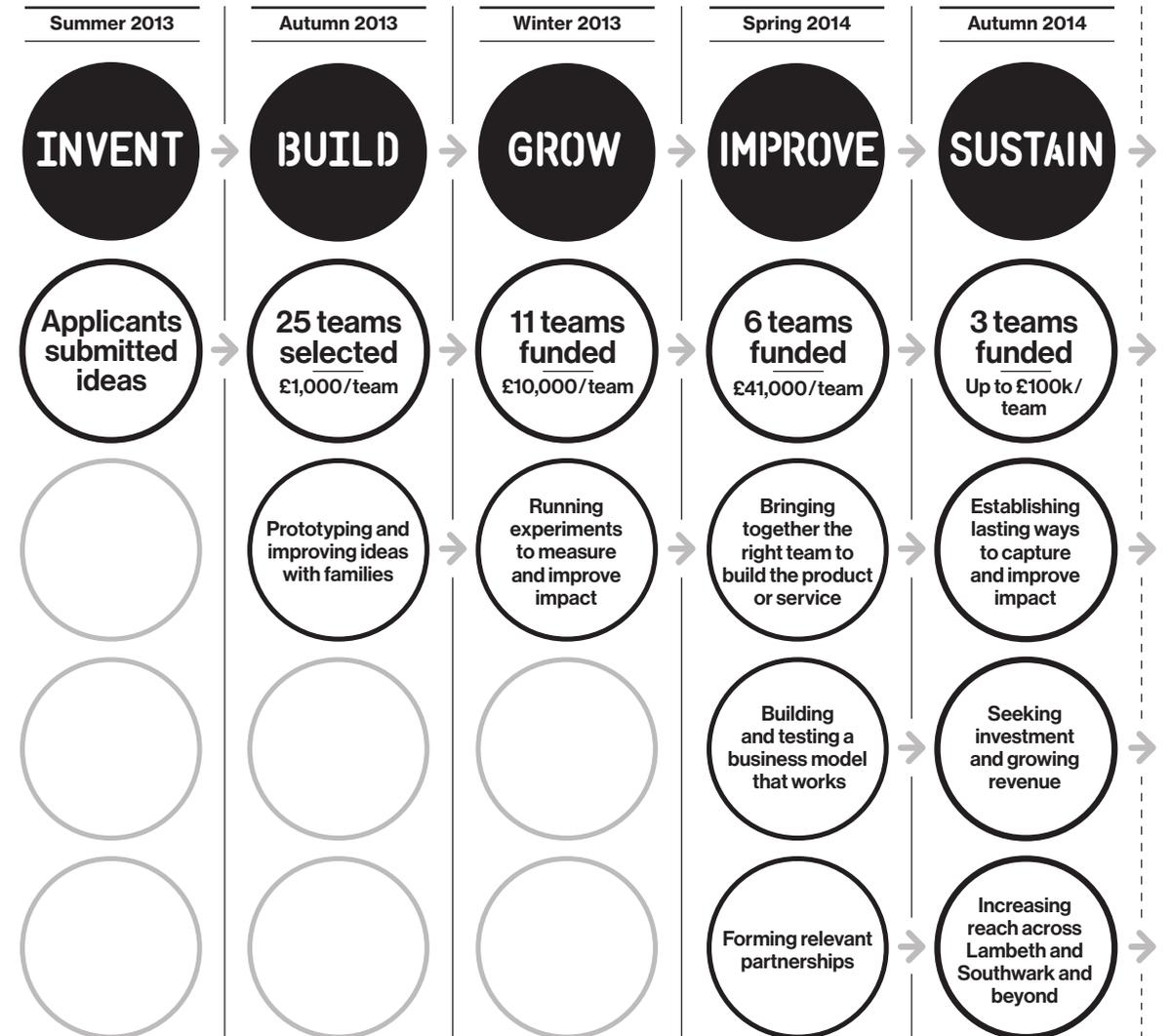
**Rapid prototyping enables entrepreneurs to learn quickly, especially when dealing with ideas that are new and under-developed.**

We made early prototyping and testing an essential part of selection criteria for the latter stages of the programme. We were looking for ideas that stood up to iterative user-testing and the people with the capabilities to involve others openly in the design and development of their work.

**Experimental research in the development of a service allows for testing and improving as it develops.** Controlled studies help identify the crucial factors that determine people's judgements. Experiments reveal the 'basic principles' from which a service or product can be better designed and tested in the field. In the Knee High Design Challenge, we worked with funded teams to help them set up, run and analyse the results of simple experiments testing their ideas.

**Building a network of advisors who can champion the approach and set clear measures of success can support adoption and long term impact.** We need supportive leaders and solid evaluation to challenge and shape the culture of innovation and risk within public sector institutions and to reduce further the barriers that inhibit people's ability to try new approaches in their work. The Knee High Design Challenge assembled a diverse panel of expertise on an Advisory Board who kept in regular contact with the programme and provided direction and expertise, shared strategic leads and helped steer the gathering of evidence on social and financial returns on investment.

**The process**





# OUR VISION

**WE WANT TO BUILD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW CHANGE HAPPENS TO IMPROVE PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING.**

We need constantly to interrogate how interventions targeted at positive change are working in practice and ensure that they are underpinned by a clear Theory of Change.

**WE WANT TO CHALLENGE THE CONCEPT OF 'HARD TO REACH'.**

There needs to be less tolerance of work that fails to understand the real needs of people and fails to involve a range of people who are currently feeling marginalised or isolated.

**WE WANT TO SEE MORE BRIDGES BETWEEN PRACTICE AND DISCIPLINES TO TRIGGER THINKING BEYOND ONE'S OWN FIELD AND MODE OF PRACTICE.**

We want to see more cohorts of innovators coming together – networks building with a shared commitment to challenge each other, to learn from each other and to build impact together. When dealing with difficult and intractable public health issues, no one answer will achieve all the necessary outcomes. By bringing multiple ideas and ventures together, we start to see what a range of interventions can deliver.

**WE WANT MUCH MORE VISIBILITY ABOUT WHAT GREAT CO-PRODUCTION PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE.**

It is one thing to intend to develop work in collaboration with end users and another to do it well. There is increasing confidence with the narrative, though much less confidence with the action, leaving a continual divide between the work of the public and social sector and the needs of real people. We want to see work that is genuinely led by the people it aims to serve and builds directly on people's needs, experiences and motivations. A symbol of this shift would be a system in which public services agencies see themselves as facilitators rather than central providers.

**WE WANT TO SEE MORE SUPPORT GIVEN TO THOSE WITH IDEAS FOR CHANGING THE UK'S PUBLIC HEALTH WHICH PROVIDE THEM WITH THE CREDIBILITY, PERMISSION AND TIME TO PUT THEIR IDEAS INTO ACTION.**

It is not always money that is required – we also need to support the capabilities and the networks of those on the edge of making great change to allow them to gain the confidence and profile to take the next step.

**WE WANT CHANGE PROGRAMMES TO ENABLE SUPPORT FOR LOTS OF CONCEPTS AT AN EARLY STAGE BEFORE FUNNELLING DOWN TO THOSE WITH MOST PROMISE.**

Pacing the allocation of investment and support through stages, which see ideas develop from early concepts to implementation and scale in market, reduces the risk around investment and can allow for the right amount of support at the right time. This may start with a short engagement for early testing and co-design of an idea and progress through research and development for a Theory of Change to an intensive period of research, mentoring and the development of a lean startup.

‘This has given me faith that innovation processes do work and we can actually get to where we want to be which is really exciting.’

SAVE THE CHILDREN





‘I think you need a lot of commitment and leadership because it’s hard to implement new stuff and it’s not always going to work straight away.’

NSPCC

**WE WANT TO ENABLE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY OF HEALTHY RISK TAKING WITH INNOVATIVE IDEAS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH.**

Fear of failure is a significant inhibitor to change – for those developing new ideas and for those investing in them. We need more opportunities that welcome the need for experimentation, without tying ideas to rigid project plans, working with users in a safe way.

**WE WANT TO SEE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WHAT TO MEASURE AND HOW AND WHEN TO EVIDENCE IMPACT.**

We would like to see early-stage ideas supported to think about the behaviours they want to change and what successful outcomes would look like in the short, mid and long-term. Encouraging ventures to define their outcomes early and incorporate simple research experiments to test their practice ensures continual feedback on whether they are successfully influencing behaviour as their ideas develop.

**WE WANT TO SEE MORE EVIDENCE AND STORIES ABOUT HOW INNOVATIVE APPROACHES CAN TACKLE SOCIAL CHALLENGES EFFECTIVELY, INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC SECTOR.**

We want to celebrate innovative practice at its most gentle and hidden, alongside that which feels more disruptive and radical. We call for a new rhetoric around what innovation and change looks like for those making and benefiting from it so that a wider range of people and ideas are supported.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

More information about the  
Knee High Design Challenge:  
[designcouncil.org.uk/kneehigh](http://designcouncil.org.uk/kneehigh)

If you would like to find out more  
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