

The Paradox of Service Design in the Community Voluntary Sector

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Service design continues to extend its remit into the design of services for social good with Third Sector (CVS) organisations, intended for public sector service delivery. However, in this context of social innovation, the socio-economic paradigm is paradoxical in terms of the inverse relationship of increasing demand versus decreasing public funding. This piece explores how sustainable is the role of service design practice and research in building knowledge and capacity in the Third Sector.

The use of Service Design in the Public Sector is well-documented with a 'design thinking approach' being employed in healthcare, social and government services. As Public Sector funding has diminished, a heavier reliance is being placed on the Third Sector or Community Voluntary Sector (CVS) to pick up the slack.

Over the last decade, there has been a shift from focusing on service innovation for businesses, to encouraging social change in public contexts (Manzini 2011; Wetter Edman 2011). Social innovation with the CVS is an emerging area of socially responsible service design practice, where Kimbell (2011) proposed that the design profession should no longer consider themselves 'service designers', but instead 'designers for service', recognising the thing being designed is not so much a product or service, but rather a platform for action, which diverse actors engage with over time. This raises ontological and methodological research questions such as; what does design offer the CVS compared to other disciplines and what is distinctive about its approach.

Universities are currently building capacity in service design for social innovation with an increasing volume of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral projects (see SDR Network web resources and DESIS International Labs and activities web resources).

The knowledge and tools of service design: understanding complex contexts and engaging the people who use, run and commission services through co-design (Sanders) to understand their needs, is as valuable to the CVS as is service design to business and public sectors. However, the infrastructure is not yet established and financial support is at best, patchy. In this short piece, we focus on the research questions concerning, how we develop support for service design with the CVS.

CVS organisations deliver services to address specific needs, for example; the needs of families caring for relatives with life-limiting conditions, supporting refugees or enabling older people to be supported to continue living in their own homes. However, the scope and focus of funders and funding initiatives is ever changing, meaning that CVS organisations often dance to the funders tune, rather than truly meeting the needs of their users. Service Design offers the opportunity for CVS organisations, funders and wider society to hold a mirror up to current activity, to see what is currently being offered, to engage service users and providers in looking at the big picture. Iterative cycles of prototyping and testing help users and providers to reconfigure activity to give the maximum benefit and value. This can be done with the simple tools of service design: mapping how activity is currently undertaken, gathering people's stories and experiences, making connections between seemingly disparate activities and organisations and identifying opportunities for innovative ways of working.

An example of this is the Big Lottery funded Better by Design programme run by the Young Foundation and Taylor Haig with fifteen CVS organisations in Scotland to embed a service design approach within their organisations: putting service users at the centre to improve their outcomes.

Similarly, the move in urban, regional and national settings towards so-called New Public Management (NPM), an approach to governance that applies private sector methods and metrics to deliver public services, is another important factor in design's engagement with CVS (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Business and government leaders themselves are increasingly encouraged to absorb lessons from the world of design. The ways in which work was deemed to be "creative" are increasingly being incorporated into economic systems and public projects, however the paradigm for this is borrowed from past commissioning practices that do not work effectively in the context of CVS organisations developing and delivering public services for social good.

In the UK during the 1990s 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). Yet, following the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010, the CVS suffered a significant contraction in state funding leaving the sector in a fragile state (New Philanthropy Capital 2010). This volatile economic climate has had a considerable impact on CVS organisations' capacity, yet the CVS is also trying to respond to a sizeable increase in service demand (VONNE 2011) and is 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 these conditions, it is uncertain if the sector has the capacity to innovate at pace to respond effectively to the needs of their client groups (New Philanthropy Capital 2010). Despite this, the CVS is continually referred to as a site of best practice and a leader in social innovation (Macmillan 2010; McLaughlin 2011). However, the evidence to support the perception that the CVS can deliver services in a distinctive way that improves outcomes for service users is slight, with some concluding that CVS 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, supported by a reliable infrastructure and paradigm of engagement.

How can we make desirable social far futures near futures through the development of appropriate design for service methodologies to support the CVS?

How should we reconceptualise the role of the designer in the CVS context?

How could we develop a sustainable socio-economic paradigm to support service design innovation practices?

How do we get business, public and CVS to mutually support each other in this context?