

Thinking outside the box

At a time of increasing financial pressure, service commissioners may be tempted to play safe with design – but **Ruth Keeling** finds that trying new approaches can produce better results and, ultimately, save public cash



The playground at Villiers High School, Southall: design helped turn their tarmac playground into somewhere pupils wanted to use, while reducing fighting and improving teachers' lines of sight across the area

After years of efficiency programmes, the state of public finances is such that departments are being asked to cut expenditure again. How will they do that? One answer may be a radical rethink of the way services are designed – at least, that is the idea behind the Design Council's 'Public Service by Design' programme.

Launched last November, and backed by then innovation secretary, John Denham, the project is still in development, but is to be modelled on the Design Council's already-running 'Design by Demand' programme for business. This saw, for example, Yorkshire clay pipe-makers helped to diversify into flower pots.

"Everybody is going to face financial challenges in the public sector," says Emily Thomas, a former government special adviser now working as a consultant for the Design Council, "and they're going to have to look for efficiencies. There are programmes like LEAN – which tackle processes, and are great – but what do you do when you're asked for a further five or ten per cent of efficiencies? If you want to fund transformational public services, you have to look at services from an individual's or a family's perspective."

Because of the public sector's fractured nature, she says, there is vast duplication of effort. By focusing on the users' experiences and thinking across organisational divides, the public sector could deliver services far more efficiently. Why, asks Thomas, do people getting married have to have five separate interactions with different government agencies?

"From each of the service provider's perspectives, they've all done LEAN, they've all made their services as efficient as possible," explains Thomas – but the person dealing with five different interfaces might not feel the system is efficient at all. "Where you find your efficiencies," says Thomas, "is in being able to aggregate your own services, being able to bring them together around the customers and understanding how

and when they use them – and then being able to save money that way, which you can't do in silos."

So design has the potential to help with the holy grail of joined-up services; but it can also be applied to the simplest and most innocuous processes. A recent example was a redesign of the reception areas in the two London offices of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Design mentors were brought in, and reception staff and managers, as well as the BIS officials who used the reception, came together to discuss what they wanted and give their views on the current set-up. Simple changes, including the installation of a water cooler and the removal of some furniture to provide more room for people to mill around, are to be followed up with new electronic gates and a physical redesign of the reception desk.

Robin Stephens, commission manager for EC Harris, the company that runs the receptions, is unequivocal in his enthusiasm for the process and the way it introduces an outsider's eye – through the design mentors – as well as giving users and frontline staff a say. "We'd do it again and we'd recommend it to others," he says. "There's been a clear reduction in complaints; we've gone from about four or five a month to none in the last three months."

The importance of 'co-design' – involving the people who use and deliver the service, rather than issuing directions from the top – is vital in all this. Andrea Koerselman, a service-design practice lead at design firm IDEO, says co-design "is really critical to the success of services": "The people who are providing the service are really the service themselves, and they have to be engaged to ensure a successful service."

Engaging with the recipients of the service can have the added benefit of increasing people's awareness of and interest in a problem, says Thomas. For example, a low-carbon initiative run in the North-East used a real-time energy dashboard that could

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Case study: Designing Out Crime

Launched in November last year, Designing Out Crime is backed by £1.6m of Home Office money and has been divided into tackling five areas of crime: bullying, fighting and petty theft in schools; personal electronic products such as music players and mobile phones; crime-reduction through the better design and construction of housing; alcohol-related crime; and business crimes such as shoplifting.

The first competition is a £400,000 Mobile Phone Security Challenge, which asks designers to use new technology to make phones more secure and less desirable to thieves (the British Crime Survey shows that a mobile is stolen in half of all robberies). In June this year the Home Office announced four shortlisted designs, and prototypes are to be ready early next year.

Thomas says that the important thing about design is that "it gets into how it feels for the customer". For example, Thomas says, the Designing Out Crime initiative has just launched the alcohol-related crime competition, calling for "unbreakable glasses that people want to use – because of course the thing is that everyone wants the glass, because it feels nice"

An example of where users' input has helped to reduce violence is Villiers High School, pictured above. Teachers, pupils and designer Clara Gaggero turned an empty tarmac playground – which saw regular fights – into a space that more pupils wanted to use, while improving lines of sight to ensure that staff can quickly spot any trouble. The headteacher has directly linked the new design to a fall in the number of pupils roaming around in large, intimidating groups.



Photography: Photoshot/Gary Lee

be viewed on a television to galvanise previously uninterested tenants into doing something about their energy usage. “You can’t engage a community through a 20-page consultation paper, nor through a questionnaire,” says Thomas. “Design, because it is really visual, has the ability to get communities to start coming up with some great solutions.” And to produce financial savings, adds Koerselman: “By engaging with the people that the service is intended for, you’re going to be designing a better service which will save money.”

A pipe dream?

It all sounds like common sense – but isn’t it hopelessly optimistic to believe that the public sector is really going to spend money on a radical new way of planning and designing services when it is going to have less money overall? For a start, these ideas – involving frontline deliverers and users in policymaking; devolution of powers – have been around for a long time, but still haven’t become the mainstream system.



The Prison Service’s ‘cheap’ mattresses were... deemed to be clinical waste”

Thomas, who says she left her special adviser role in order to get out of Whitehall and see “what the real problems are, rather than [looking down] from a very high level”, admits that the conversation has been going on “for a very long time”. But she believes the initial focus of public sector reform was on additional capacity, investment and structural improvements rather than changing underlying systems. Now, she believes, the financial situation has “made people sit up” and consider a more radical rethink.

She does accept that there is a risk that, under financial pressure, commissioners will revert to type rather than experiment with an entirely new approach. “It is a real difficulty because, by its very nature, if you don’t know what you’re commissioning, there is a bit of risk – you’re not just commissioning the same thing you’ve always commissioned,” she says.

Still, Thomas is optimistic. The civil service’s focus on improving procurement skills will help, she argues – citing the Treasury’s insistence that ‘whole-life costing’ be adopted by commissioners when considering their options. Thomas points out that this exercise made the Prison Service realise that its ‘cheap’ mattresses were costing it hundreds of pounds in disposal costs, because they were deemed to be clinical waste.

It is also important to remember that financial constraints are not a preserve of the public sector, says

Bottom line benefits:
Good design saves money, insists Emily Thomas – pictured outside the Design Council’s London office

Koerselman. In the private sector, she says, there are plenty of examples of financial constraints producing radical thinking and ground-breaking designs. And the design process does not necessarily need to be expensive: work Koerselman carried out with local authorities and the sustainability charity Forum for the Future was prototyped and tested with a small number of people. “Design doesn’t need the full technology or the polished graphic brochure to get feedback,” she explains. “You save an enormous amount of investment by ironing out the kinks very early in the process.”

Designers insist that the public sector does have an appetite for their work, at least when officials become aware of the possibilities. Talking about the same sustainability project, Koerselman describes the local authority officials as “super-engaged and really inspired – they felt much more connected with why they got into public service in the first place”.

Deborah Szebeko, director of Thinkpublic – a design consultancy that works exclusively with the public and third sectors – says she has noticed a growing interest in design since she set up her company five years ago. “Because it is not a tangible [product], it is hard to understand,” she says. “But once someone has been through the design process they become a better commissioner because they understand what they’re asking for.”

Szebeko says “it feels like councils are squeezing the spending available for design”, but she believes the industry can overcome that if it clearly articulates the value that design can bring. “People working with designers get more than they would with a management consultant: designers create a solution, make it visual, engage with people and help them through the process; management consultants create massive reports but don’t actually help them do it.”

Thomas agrees that the use of design in public services is on the rise: “It is something that has been bubbling up for a while – four or five years – and as people see [its value] they bring it into their own systems of transformation and change”. She points to “hotbeds” of activity – such as the NHS’s Innovation Institute, the ‘Future Focus’ unit in BIS, and The Pension Service, part of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). There “is not a month that goes by that we don’t have some international delegation wanting to find out what is taking place”, she adds.

It is also important, she adds, that when something works, people hear about it; hence the Design Council’s demonstration projects in crime and health (see boxes), and its commitment to measuring the effectiveness of such initiatives. Scrutiny organisations such as the National Audit Office (NAO) and select committees also have a role here, she says, although it can be hard to ensure that good news gets the coverage it deserves; she cites last year’s widely ignored NAO report on innovations in central government.

The most important thing, says Thomas, is that the cuts that must be made to budgets are made wisely and not blindly: “The message from the centre

Case Study: Designing Bugs Out



A collaboration between the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (PASA) and the Design Council, the Designing Bugs Out competition was launched at the same time as Public Service by Design, and called for designers to come up with prototypes that would help the Health Service reduce levels of infection. (A June 2009 report from the National Audit Office stated that an MRSA or C.difficile infection was an underlying cause or contributory factor in 9,000 deaths in 2007. Auditors also estimated the cost of treating healthcare-associated infections to be £1bn a year.)

The ideas that came out include a cannula (a needle that remains in the vein and allows drips to be inserted) which changes colour to notify nurses when it should be changed; a mattress that changes colour if its waterproof cover has been punctured, alerting staff that it is prone to infection and needs to be thrown out; and porters’ chairs (pictured above) and bedside furniture that are easier to clean.

From the entries submitted, PASA has picked a handful of winners, who have been given £25,000 each to develop their ideas. Those designs have now been prototyped and are currently being tested in hospitals before the NHS decides which ones will be adopted.

Thomas describes the design world’s response to the competition as “wonderful”, pointing out that it is not just the NHS that gets the benefits: “C.difficile and MRSA are not just UK problems. These manufacturers and designers have an opportunity to test their products and then look for international opportunities to sell those innovations.”

is really, really important. There is a real risk that if they put too much pressure on local budgets to find those savings too quickly, they’ll just revert to cutting services,” she warns. “Then we will have a repeat of the 1980s, where they cut services and saved money in certain budgets, but all it did was increase exponentially the money needed in other services.” She gives the example of the ill-fated migration of people from unemployment benefit to incapacity benefit – a process that has proved hard to reverse.

The current financial pressures present “a huge risk”, Thomas concludes, “but some of the things that are being trialled now are quite encouraging, and I am hoping that people are willing to look at things differently. You don’t know what is going to happen over the next 12 to 18 months, or how courageous people are going to feel.” ■

Emily Thomas will be speaking at the Delivering More for Less conference on 26 November. For details see www.moreforlessconference.co.uk