



# An Introduction to Co-design

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# Co-designing for Social Good: The Role of Citizens in Designing and Delivering Social Services, Part One

By Dr. Ingrid Burkett, Social Design Fellow, Centre for Social Impact, University of NSW

“Participatory experience is not simply a method or set of methodologies, it is a mindset and an attitude about people. It is the belief that all people have something to offer to the design process and that they can be both articulate and creative when given appropriate tools with which to express themselves” (Liz Sanders, MakeTools, 2002).

## Can social services actually be ‘designed’?

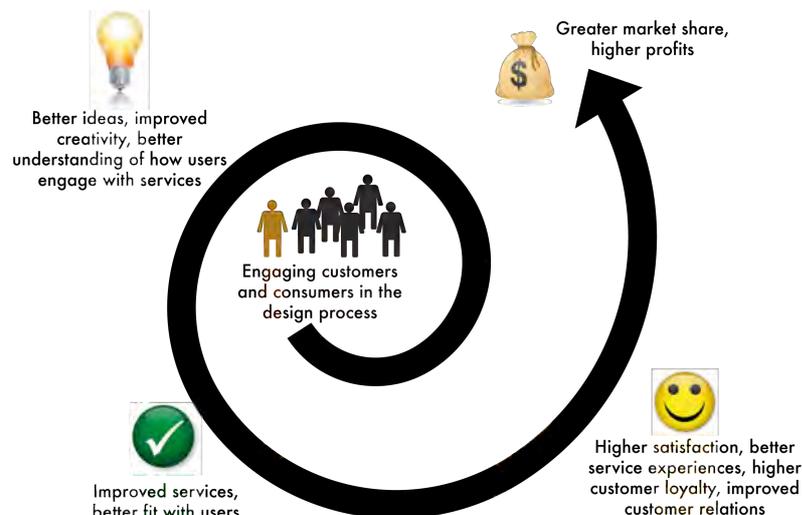
The design process is about finding solutions to address problems, practical innovations that open up possibilities and improvements that enhance people’s lives. In recent years the design process has been applied to improving services rather than only focussing on material goods and products - this is often referred to as ‘service design’. Service design is also increasingly applied to social services, in an attempt to improve the ways in which these services generate social impact. Social services can indeed be ‘designed’. In fact most social services are subject to some very intentional and deliberate thought processes and design adds another framework around which such processes can be structured.

## What is co-design?

Co-design is about engaging consumers and users of products and services in the design process, with the idea that this will ultimately lead to improvements and innovation. In this blog I’m going to reflect a little on what co-design of social services means and whether it can lead to greater social impact. In my next blog I’ll explore some key principles of co-designing social services and highlight a few methods and tools.

## The growing recognition of co-design in business:

In the design profession there is a growing interest in the ideas of co-design - that is, engaging customers and consumers in the design process and harnessing their ‘expertise’ as users of products and services. This is said to create benefits both for consumers but also for companies. In addition, ‘customer’ is now much more recognised and valued as a co-designer of innovation in the business world (see for example, Patricia Seybold’s books from 2001 and 2006). Many of the arguments presented about the value of co-design for business go something like this:



## The place of co-design in social services:

In the social services, there is a long and rich tradition of participatory engagement with so called ‘clients’, ‘consumers’, ‘beneficiaries’ and ‘constituents’ \*. Indeed many social and community organisations in Australia were actually originally designed and started by or with ‘consumers’. Many organisations have also promoted the importance of working in partnership with service users - adopting, for example, ‘person-centred’ or ‘people-centred’ practices where citizens become active partners in the change process. There are many other examples of ‘consumer led’ or ‘service user led’ movements or organisations where citizens take the initiative and the lead for finding or advocating for solutions to their own issues (for example, those started from the independent living movement in the disability sector). Participation of citizens has been core to many social services and to many traditions of work aligned with social services - particularly community development. Most people working in social

\*As you can guess from all these inverted commas, one of the issues at the heart of these traditions is the language we use to describe different stakeholders in the process of creating social good. I personally prefer active terms such as ‘citizens’ or ‘constituents’, but even these create problems on the other side of the coin if we refer to ‘providers’ as though they are not themselves citizens! For consistency, I’m going to refer to ‘citizens’ or ‘service-users’; and to ‘professionals’ or ‘providers’ for those people delivering services. Some readers may vehemently disagree with this terminology, but I hope we can look beyond language to the spirit of the argument too!

services will be familiar with ladders and other models of participation - from providing information on the low end to citizen control at the other end of the continuum (see for example, Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation). Co-design builds from these frameworks and adds both new approaches and a new imperative for engaging citizens in the design of social services.

### **Co-design, Co-creation and Co-production - co-operative approaches to service development, design and delivery:**

In recent times there has been a renewed interest from citizens, service providers and policy makers in how all these stakeholders can participate in the design and production of social services. This is generally referred to as 'co-design' but has also been called 'co-creation' and 'co-production' (though some argue that there are definitional differences between these concepts despite sharing the common prefix 'co-', meaning together or with). The terms certainly have different histories and have come from different disciplines to be applied to the social sector. However, underpinning all the terms is the idea that collaborative, cooperative and community-centred approaches to creating social good will lead to more effective services and greater social impact. The differences between the terms really centre on the stages of the process at which providers and citizens work together - as is highlighted in the definitions below.

Co-Creation	Co-Design	Co-Production
<p><i>"The systematic process of creating new solutions with people not for them; involving citizens and communities in policy and service <b>development</b>" (Christian Bason, 2010)</i></p>	<p><i>"The process of <b>designing</b> with people that will use or deliver a product or service" (Design Council, UK).</i></p>	<p><i>"Co-production means <b>delivering</b> public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours" (David Boyle and Michael Harris, 2009).</i></p>

While it's important to recognise the different histories and trajectories of the movements associated with these terms, it's also important to appreciate the interconnections between them, and to recognise the much longer histories that concepts behind these terms have both in Australia and internationally. Citizen participation in social services is not new - think about the long history of self-reliance, self-determination, self-help and mutual aid, then think of cooperatives, friendly societies, credit unions and a whole raft of other movements, activism and organisations - to get a sense of the history of these concepts. As well as engaging with the 'new' forms of citizen participation that co-design brings, we would do well to explore the many learnings that come from these 'older' forms.

### **Why is co-design of interest to people concerned with social impact?**

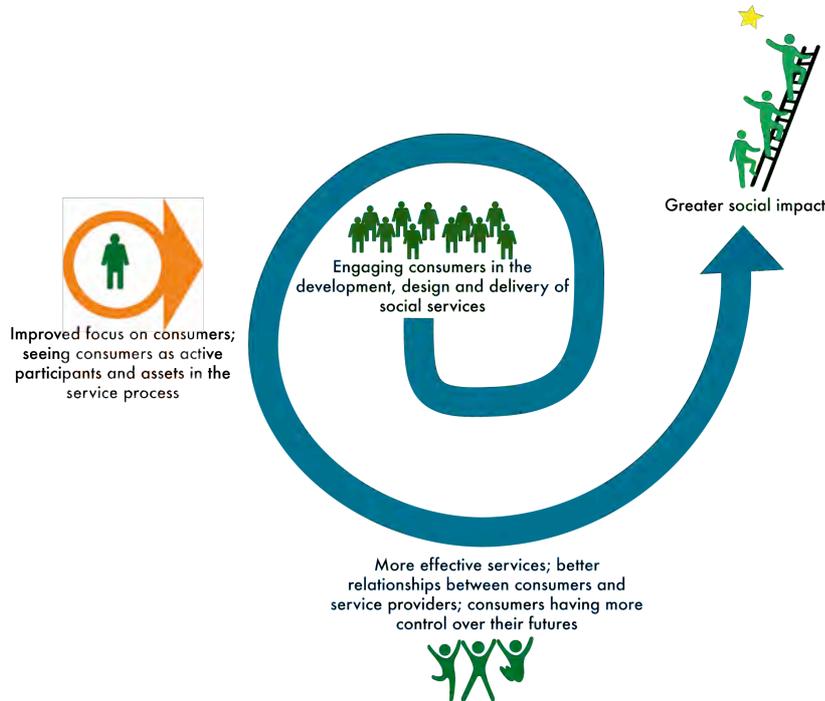
The increased interest in citizen participation in the development, design and delivery of social services is, I believe, both interesting and important for two key reasons.

1. Internationally there is growing recognition of 'user-led' services and advocacy, where people directly experiencing exclusion are taking action and organising responses to their own situations. From this perspective, there is a growing demand by consumers for direct involvement in all aspects of service design and delivery (as can be seen in peer-to-peer initiatives (see for example P2P foundation); and various consumer movements (for example, the carers movement; consumers in various health and mental health arenas; self-determination movements and independent living movements, to name just a few). The growth of social media is likely to lead to further developments of citizen led advocacy and service design, and citizens may indeed more actively engage in communicating their experiences of social services over time.
2. The professionalisation of the social sector over recent decades has meant that citizen participation has sometimes become tokenistic, and terms such as 'partnership' are used without real engagement of people experiencing exclusion. Citizens are more likely to be 'serviced' rather than being active co-creators, let alone co-designers or co-producers, in the process. Co-design can potentially form a foundation in social services for exploring a re-engagement of citizens.

Of course it is also the case that in various international contexts the ideals and ideas of greater citizen participation are being widely adopted (as is the terminology of co-design and co-production) alongside the dismantling of public and civic services. There are some important debates to enter into here to highlight the differences between *self-service* and co-production or co-design.

## Does co-design lead to greater social impact?

This is, of course, the million dollar question. Does involving and engaging people in developing, designing and delivering social services actually create better services and thus lead to great social impacts? Does the scenario for co-design in social services look similar to that indicated by design research in business (with greater social impact replacing greater market share and profits, as indicated in the diagram below)?



My own experience working in the social sector, stories and case studies from around the world, and the amount of literature focussed on the benefits of citizen participation in social services would certainly suggest that this is the case. And of course, in my heart of hearts I believe that the proposed benefits of cooperative approaches to service development, design and delivery ring true - I mean, it just makes a great deal of sense when we think of how important it can be for each of us to have a feeling of control and choice in making decisions about our own futures to suggest that the same would apply to people experiencing social exclusion.

However, as I have been examining the research I am struck by two things. First, there is a real gap in research that tracks outcomes and impacts of involving users in the design and delivery of services. Second, and partly due to the lack of research, the literature offers less certainty than I had hoped for. Generally there is support for co-design, but there are also some mixed results.

Most research in this space seems to focus on uncovering processes (ie. *how* to build citizen participation) rather than outcomes and, as a result:

“The true effectiveness of these processes to promote user-led change and impact on service improvement remains largely untested” (See Sarah Carr’s work on user-led services in the UK, 2004 and 2008).

In addition, research in this space comes from widely differing parts of the social sector - health; crime; poverty; aid and development to name just a few - and it is well nigh impossible to say that citizen participation is *always* more effective across *all* these disparate parts of the social sector. Finally, there seems to be little focus in the research on the effects of the depth, quality or nature of citizen participation in social services - meaning for example, that there is little evidence about whether participation by *more* people, or *deeper* participation by a *few* key people, is more effective.

It is, of course, a complex picture. While I am a firm believer in the power of case studies and stories to support change, I also wonder whether we should, in engaging with agendas of co-design, support some further research into whether and if so, how, it actually drives greater social impacts. This would, I believe, not only help to create a foundation for broader applications of such processes, but also help us to better understand whether, how and why professionals and users of social services should work together in the change process.

## Co-designing for Social Good: The radical potential of co-design for civil society organisations

By: Dr. Ingrid Burkett, Social Design Fellow, Centre for Social Impact, University of NSW

There is growing interest in and discussion of co-design in relation to social and community services, not only in the public sector (see for example Lenihan and Briggs, 2011), but increasingly in civil society organisations. But what does it actually mean, and how is it different from consulting clients / constituents or seeking their feedback about services? In this blog I'll outline some of the key features of co-design and highlight some of the questions we should ask ourselves before we embark on this path.

Co-design literally means collaboratively designing services, products or processes. Following on from a previous blog, in this context when I talk of co-design I am particularly referring to a collaborative design process between service providers and service users (clients/constituents). It can, however, also apply to collaborations between professional designers, service-providers and/or service users, and I'll speak more about this in future blogs.

Features of Co-Design	
	Co-design is <b>person-centred</b> , using ethnographic methods to understand the experience of a service from the clients point of view. Co-design asks service providers and service users to walk in the shoes of each other and to use these experiences as the basis of designing changes.
	Co-design <b>starts with a desired end</b> rather than with what is wrong with the present service. In the process we look for ways to build backwards from the outcomes we are seeking. This not only stops us from getting bogged down in what's wrong, it also potentially leads to realisations that the problems we thought we were facing were not the 'real' problems!
	Co-design is focussed on developing <b>practical, real-world solutions</b> to issues facing individuals, families and communities. In co-design processes, prototyping is a method of testing whether ideas work in practice, and then refining ideas until solutions that work for service users and providers alike are developed.
	Co-design <b>makes ideas, experiences and possibilities visible and tangible</b> using a variety of media, graphic, kinesthetic and experiential methods. This helps to make solutions tangible and to make complex systems accessible across a range of people who may have different perspectives and knowledges about the system.
	Co-design processes are <b>inclusive and draw on many perspectives, people, experts, disciplines and sectors</b> . The idea is to find real, workable solutions to complex issues, so it is important to draw on many perspectives, to challenge orthodoxies, to question assumptions, and to draw in other possibilities. Co-design processes thrive when boundaries are flexible and silos are broken down, when real listening and dialogue can occur across unlikely alliances.

Source: Based on the transformative design model developed by RED, UK Design Council, and also influences by Bate and Robert, 2007; and the work of Liz Sanders from Make Tools.

The key features of co-design processes are outlined in the table below.

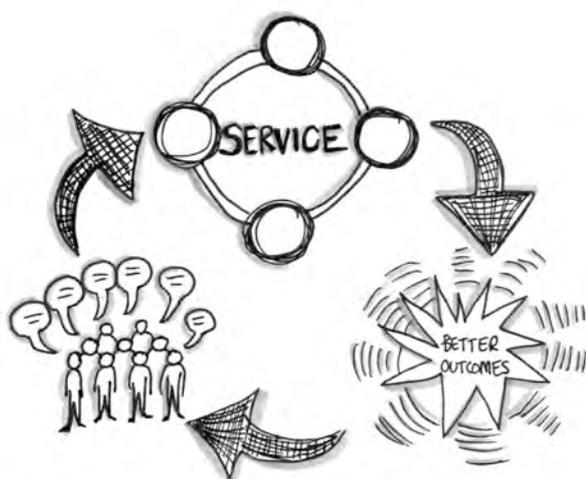
### **Co-design means collaboratively designing services**

Co-designing social services involves more than seeking the views of service users or researching their needs. It means involving people in generating ideas, testing them and making decisions about how these ideas could shape projects, relationships, and indeed the nature of services offered. If services are truly to be 'co-designed' - collaboratively designed by both service providers and service users - then we need to be clear about what is involved in the process. Because the language of design is new and potentially exciting for many working to address social issues, co-design is in danger of being applied to any client engagement activities and this in turn dilutes its potentially radical contribution. We're standing at the threshold of some major changes in the way we design, deliver and resource social services. It would be more than a shame if we think we can just 'add design and stir' or use design terminology to shine up old systems and models, without some of the fundamental rethinking and reframing that needs to happen.

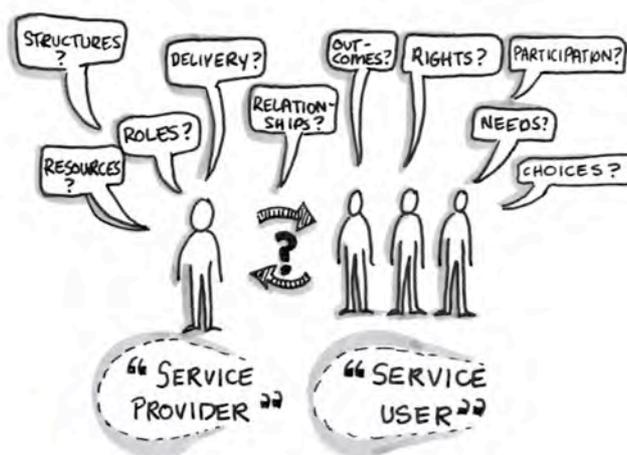
### **Co-design means different things - from minor change to radical revisioning**

In practice, co-design will inevitably mean different things to different people. A relatively simple version may mean incorporating the voices and experiences of service users in improving outcomes - and this may indeed result in some positive changes in the way things are done. A more radical version may mean seriously challenging traditional roles and relationships between service providers and citizens. This in turn may lead to some profound changes in the approaches, structures and impacts of service delivery organisations.

Either way, co-design involves a shift in the locus of responsibility and control so that 'clients' or users of services become active partners in designing, shaping and resourcing services, rather than being passive recipients of pre-determined services. Some see this as part of a wider move towards 'open welfare' whereby the distinction between service providers and clients are "transformed into networks of self-acting citizens, with flexible degrees of involvement, supported in a range of ways by professionals" (Murray et al, 2006 p.9). It is not about devolution of responsibility away from service providers to more self-reliant service users. It is about developing more genuine partnerships so that service provision achieves greater impacts and has the potential to be a transformative experience for all involved. This may seem like a very lofty ideal - but perhaps we need some ideals and visions



***'Simple' or conservative co-design***



***Radical co-design of social services***

when it comes to designing more effective social services. I for one am not shy of lofty ideals so long as there are practical methods and commitments to back them up with real action.

### **New opportunities for co-design in open welfare systems**

In many ways the move towards open welfare systems is filled with possibilities and opportunities for all citizens. Yet it also presents some real challenges to traditional models of organising and structuring service provision.

As I highlighted in the last blog, person-centred services are not new in the social sector, however they are taking new forms - as can be seen in consumer directed service models in aged care and disability support in Australia currently. In some of these models, resources are allocated to citizens themselves to begin to co-design and jointly plan personalised services catering to their own needs and well-being. There is, of course, still the big question about whether the resources allocated to individuals will be adequate to effectively meet their needs, and there are questions about whether this model will actually result in greater choice and more personalised services. Notwithstanding these questions, such models have the potential to lead to much greater and even some radical opportunities for citizens to work alongside service providers to co-design more effective services.

### **Realising opportunities for radical co-design requires more than good intentions**

Allocating resources to consumers and service users certainly represents an important step in shifting the locus of control and for opening some possibilities for co-design of services. If these possibilities are to be realised, however, we also need to ensure that service users have access to the information, skills, capacities and support to participate effectively in co-designing services. Merely opening up possibilities for choice and participation will not necessarily lead to more personalised or effective services if this just means more one-size-fits-all services to choose from, or if participation remains restricted to consultation. Realising the radical potential for co-design may mean that we need to revisit more established concepts such as 'empowerment' and 'self-determination' to explore what they could offer in an open welfare context. Co-design advocates do not have to reinvent everything about how to work effectively WITH people to create positive and lasting change!

### **Building a culture of co-design in social services**

Co-design is not just a set of new methods and approaches to add to our toolboxes. In my experience it potentially represents a cultural shift in service provision - that is, it changes what we mean by 'service', and it changes the roles and relationships between providers and users. Any radical conceptions of co-design are built around a fundamental belief in the potential for positive change in even the most dire situations, and an equal faith that people have the capacity to participate in and direct change in their lives. Design processes themselves require an openness to and a belief in limitless possibilities. If service providers ultimately do not believe that change is possible, or they do not believe in the capacity of people to participate in change, then any attempts at co-design will just represent hollow activity. Equally, if service users believe that things cannot or will not change, or if dependencies on the status quo represent the limit of people's vision, then there is much work to do before real co-design of services will be possible.

There is much potential for co-design of social services in the current environment. Sure, some may say, it's just one more thing we need to take note of in the social sector - but I suggest that it's much more than this. There are opportunities for profound shifts in the way we design and deliver services ahead, and if we are able to openly explore, share, debate and discuss the ideas, methods and frameworks of co-design, we may even transform some of our social systems for good!

In an attachment here, I have summarised some of the questions we could ask ourselves within social service organisations as we explore how radical we are prepared to be in co-designing our futures. I'd love to hear from anyone else who is working in this space.

*References and further reading:*

Bate, S. and Robert, G. (2007) **Bringing user experience to health care improvement : the concepts, methods and practices of experience-based design** Radcliffe Publishing , London

Lenihan D. and Briggs, L. (2011) *Co-Design: Towards a New Service Vision for Australia*, in **Public Administration Today**, January-February, pp. 35-47

available at: <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/corporate/publications-and-resources/co-design>

Murray, R., Vanstone, C., and Winhall, J. (2006) RED Report 01 Open Health, Design Council, London, UK, available from: <http://www.designcouncil.info/mt/RED/health/>

The work of Liz Sanders can be viewed at: <http://www.maketools.com/papers.html>

You may also be interested in the following:

TACSI (The Australian Centre for Social Innovation) has some great resources on co-design: <http://www.tacsi.org.au/co-design/our-approach/>

Penny Hagen, a NZ participatory designer writes an interesting blog and has collected together some great co-design resources: <http://www.smallfire.co.nz/2012/07/04/co-design-workshop-resources-techniques-and-methods/>

Katherine William-Powlett writes an interesting blog for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in the UK, and has recently explored the use of co-design in community organisations: <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/networking-discussions/blogs/194>

# HOW RADICAL CAN CO-DESIGN GO?

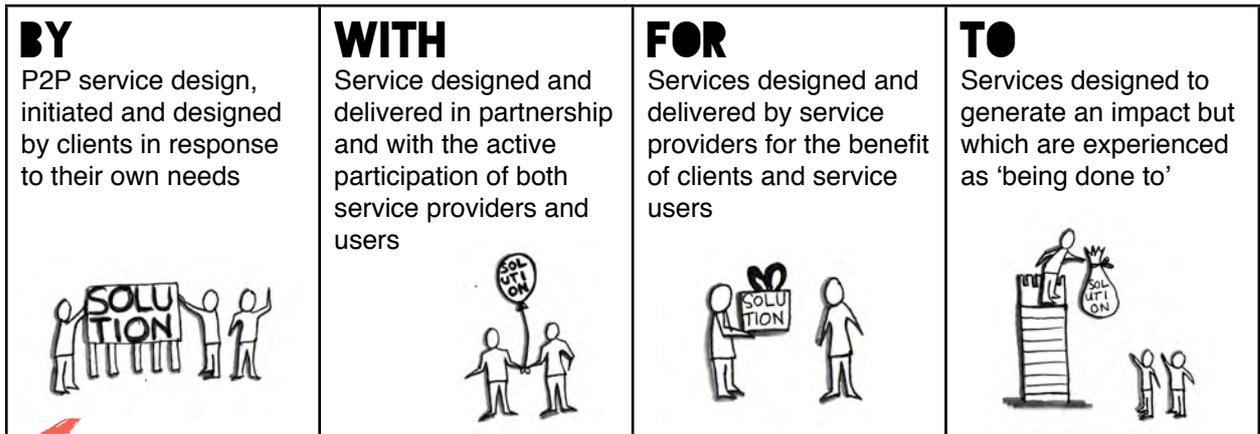
## 5 QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICES EXPLORING CO-DESIGN

1

**What opportunities could we open up to work WITH clients and service users?**

In what ways are we currently working WITH service users? What opportunities do we open up for recognising and supporting user-led initiatives and innovations BY clients?

How much of our service is doing things FOR people, and what are the limitations of this for creating genuine positive change in people's lives? Are there parts of our service that is doing things TO people (or that is perceived or experienced by clients as such)?



*Co-design opportunities are more likely to emerge at this end of the continuum*

2

**How are we positioning and engaging with service users in the design process?**

When we work WITH people, how much control do they have in relation to the service design and delivery? If people are participating in a co-design process, do we engage them as subjects of our ultimate design? As partners in the design process? As leaders in the design process? What is appropriate in our particular context? What assumptions underpin how services users are positioned in relation to the design process? Are we prepared to be open to a future that is not the one we are currently imagining, and that may not be of our making alone?

### CITIZENS AS SUBJECTS

Service users are involved in early stages of the design process so that designers can better understand their needs and contexts and thereby design more effective services. Other service users may be involved in testing prototypes developed by designers.



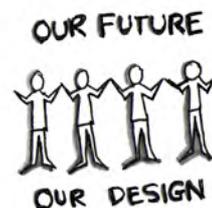
### CITIZENS AS PARTNERS

Service users participate across the design process, from early stages around understanding the contexts and idea generation, and also in decision-making throughout the process.



### CITIZENS AS LEADERS

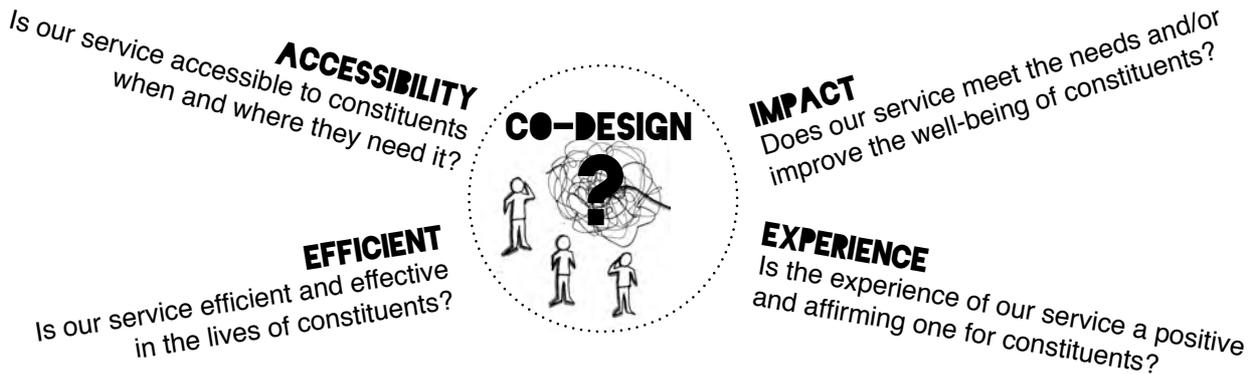
Service users do not only participate in the design process, they lead it. Citizens are resourced (in terms of information, skills, knowledge, funding) to lead the design of social services that meet their needs and contribute to their well-being.



3

**What is the point of embarking on a co-design process?**

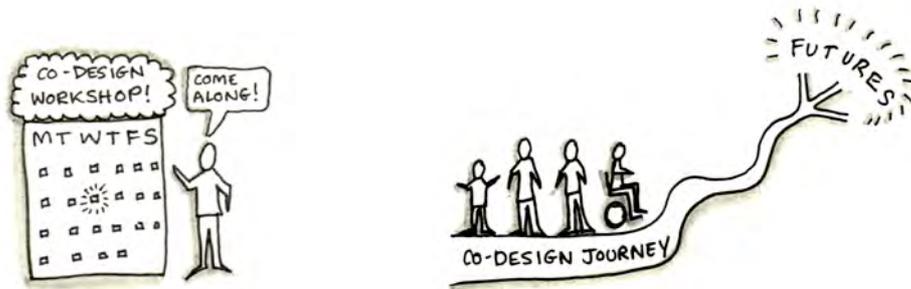
Why do you want to engage your constituents in a co-design process? If it is about lower-order change such as reducing complaints, improving feedback, or building closer relationships with constituents, what other ways could you do this, or how do you think a design process will help you achieve these aims? Is the overall aim of the co-design process specifically to improve one aspect of the service (impact, accessibility, experience, efficiency), or to transform the service across all these dimensions? Who decides what the aim of a co-design process is? How much are constituents involved in the decision resulting from the process? What do the constituents wish to achieve in the process?



4

**Is co-design an ongoing commitment for us, or a one-off 'event'?**

Is there commitment to follow-through and implement the outcomes of a co-design process? Is this a structured commitment or is it dependent on certain personalities? Is there a timeframe for the co-design process, or is the commitment more ongoing than this? If co-design is seen as more of an 'event' or a project, what commitment is offered to service users to ensure that their participation leads to improvements? Is there leadership commitment to embark on and commit to a co-design process?



5

**Is our organisational culture reflective of the principles of co-design?**

How are our constituents regarded in the organisation as a whole? Is there an organisational culture that supports the democratisation of design processes? How do we actively support the ideal that constituents become the designers of their futures? How do we engage with and resource our constituents as though they are designers of their futures? What else needs to happen to ensure that the co-design process is a success in the eyes of our constituents, staff, funders and other stakeholders?





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