In improving public services and social innovation, the design world has vital insights to offer. But designers must go beyond evangelism to show greater rigour about methods and limits

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For about ten years now designers have been saying that their professional approach holds vital insights for public services. In the run-up to a lecture by David Willets to an LSE-Design Council event on innovating in public service design, **Geoff Mulgan** *argues that recent research shows that it is not enough to be enthusiastic about this change. Designers do have useful methods to add, but they need to change their way of working for these to have more impact. A debate about how to do this has now started in earnest within the design community, both in the UK and overseas.*

A flood of initiatives are using design methods to advance social innovation. The EMUDE programme (Emerging User Demands for Sustainable Solutions) is a set of activities funded by the European Commission. Amongst the pioneers in this area have been the design partnership IDEO , Thinkpublic, which terms itself a 'social design agency', and Participle which is 'working to design the next generation of public services'.

There is growing interest in social design in its widest sense, not least in the context of the coalition government's 'big society' theme. A number of fairly well-funded initiatives (such as EMUDE, the earlier RED initiative at the Design Council, the ongoing 'Accelerating Innovation for Development' programme at the Rockefeller Foundation) and the Social Innovation Exchange have applied design methods to improving the delivery of publicly funded services, with varying degrees of success.

And on 27 January a keynote talk by David Willets, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, and Lord Michael Bichard, Chairman of the Design Council, is a central event in a joint seminar series by the LSE Public Policy Group and the Design Council on 'Innovating Through Design in Public Services' that runs through to July with sessions every month.

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Strong advocacy by the design community for involving their expertise has paid off in recent years in terms of increasing interest in what designers can offer to stimulate social innovation. But it has also led to serious criticisms. Now is a good moment to take stock of what is working and what could be working better. Here I suggest some of the strengths of current models, some of their weaknesses, and what might be the way forward.

This blog is intended chiefly a prompt for discussion – drawing on inputs from partners in the SIX network, drawn from around the world. It is not based on formal evaluations – the field has been surprisingly resistant to external measurement and evaluation, although several studies have been done within foundations and other funders, often with quite critical results.

Some key strengths of involving design in social innovation

The design method has many strengths in tackling public service problems and spurring social innovation, including:

- *Freshness and clarity*, sharpening understanding of problems, seeing in new ways.

- *Novel insights*. Designers bring a different perspective that stems from not being a regular part of the field already, not being implicated in the profession or bureaucracy already handling implementation, etc.

- *Visualization techniques* can be a vital complement to the dominant text-based or prose-based methods of public policy. And visualizing issues and possible solutions can be very good for involving a wider range of the public in the design process.

- *Seeing the user perspective as central* is a vital complement to conventional, top- down methods.

- *Following service journeys* often reveals new patterns, where blockages occur, and how experiences vary

- *Fast prototyping* is a superior method for testing models and possible solutions rapidly in practice

- *Some good tools for thinking systemically* exist, such as following through food systems, energy flows, or care components.

- *Catalytic effects* can flow from designers' involvement, helping to energise change, and especially to strengthen the innovators within the public services and in outside groups and NGOs.

Some characteristic weaknesses of design projects

At the same time there are some recurring issues that tend to sap the positive impacts of designers' involvement, including:

- *Cost*. Bringing highly paid consultants into poor communities for a brief time can create resentment, both in the UK and the wider world. It often entails high unit costs for projects in developed countries, especially compared to parallel ventures that are organized bottom-up or in civil society.

- *Lack of commitment*. The design experts move quickly in and out in some of the projects.

- *Designers are good at creativity, but poor at implementation*. Often, however, the devil is in the detail and projects need to be hard fought through at all stages, especially implementation, if innovations are to be realized.

- *Reinventing the wheel* is a risk. As a corollary of taking a fresh view, designers have a tendency to ignore past evidence and learning from the field. Sometimes designers even present this as a virtue.

- *Lack of economics and numeracy* amongst designers can undermine the prospects for implementation, because at root everything in public services needs to live within a budget. There are also risks of gold-plating models of provision.

- *Lack of organisational knowledge* amongst designer can again undermine the prospects for new solutions being 'owned' by the agencies that must undertake implementation.

- *The need for much more rigour in systems thinking* also shows through. Designers currently make little use of the best systems tools.

- *Specialization.* The great majority of service design activity is not actually being done by service design organizations, but by generalist designers.

- *Lack of learning*. Often designers need to learn more from other organizations and other fields with claims to insight into service design – including especially social entrepreneurs, public service professions, consultancies, IT firms, and policy makers.

Four key challenges for designers

If the design industry and service designers are to genuinely maximize the contribution they can make to boosting social innovation and improving public services they need to address some critical issues in how the education, socialization and formation of designers as professionals takes place:

1. *Formation* – involves issues around how to train and develop people with an appropriate combination of design skills along with other key skills, such as knowledge of economics, policy-making, and social knowledge. In the SIX project (the Social Innovation Exchange) we have proposed a new approach to 'T' shaped skills for designers to reduce the risks identified above.

2. *Method* – how to develop design methods so as to improve the prospects for achieving impacts and maximizing implementation. This is an area now being taken forward in the Global Innovation Academy programme.

3. *Cost* – we need to develop methods for involving designers that create and leave behind more skills in the organizations or communities that we are helping, and that have lower unit costs.

4. *Conversations* with related fields are critical. Just as bureaucracies, public managers and professionals need to learn from design, so designers and design approaches need to learn from related fields.

This blog was originally a note prepared for the Social Innovation Exchange, *whose excellent blogsites is at* http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org/sixblog.

To learn more about the joint seminar series run by the LSE Public Policy group and the Design Council on 'Innovating Through Design in Public Services' *please click the link. To attend, please e-mail* j.tinkler@lse.ac.uk

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