Enhancing service development and service delivery through co-design

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1 Abstract

Co-design has potential to help voluntary organisations deliver better services, since it encourages users to co-create services that will be delivered to them. However, the extent of co-design practice in the voluntary sector is unknown. Thus, our research investigated current state of knowledge of co-design in this sector. A mixed-method approach including an online survey and interviews was employed. The results showed that levels of understanding of co-design among respondents varied greatly. Whilst some participants have successfully applied co-design, others have not heard of it. Iterative prototyping, which is a central feature of most design approaches, was rarely applied by voluntary organisations when designing services. Where organisations were making use of designers, this tended to be in specialist domains, e.g. web design, but emerging disciplines, e.g. service design, were unfamiliar to most respondents. Lack of awareness and understanding may be a major reason of the slow adoption of this approach.

2 Introduction

The UK government is keen to get charities and voluntary organisations more involved in delivering and reforming public services (HM Treasury, 2002). The arguments for involving service users and voluntary organisations in reforming services include not only democratic arguments about the accountability of public services to service users but also pragmatic arguments about the contribution that service users and voluntary organisations can make to improving service quality (Martin, 2008; Barnes & Cotterrell, 2012)[1]. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the democratic issues, and the potential tensions for organisations between advocacy, governance and the role of subcontractors in service delivery (see Martin 2011 for a discussion), this paper is primarily concerned with pragmatic issues of enabling creative participation by service users in developing and improving services.

A recent study revealed that many charities and voluntary organisations did not have appropriate skills and resources (or capacity) to deliver public services to the extent that the government wanted (Public Accounts Committee, 2009). The lack of capacity appears critical among small organisations with an income of £10,000 or less. Although small charities make up nearly two-thirds of the whole voluntary sector, they are not heavily engaged in public service delivery (see Table 1) because of several barriers caused by their size (Charity Commission, 2007). Evidently, there is a need to help small locally-based low-income charities and voluntary organisations that are interested in delivering public services to develop capacity in order to compete effectively, and programmes, such as Change Up, and more recently Capacity Builders, have attempted to address these challenges.

[1] These dual pragmatic and political motivations for participation have similarly been recognised in the field of participatory design and co-design, see Carroll & Rosson (1987).

Table 1 here

A comprehensive review (Macmillan, 2010) revealed that overemphasis on delivery and capacity building could have negative impacts on the independence and identity of individual charities and voluntary organisations. A more coherent and clearer approach to commissioning and procuring was considered a more effective way to support small charities and voluntary organisations in bidding, planning and delivering public services. As a result, practices such as intelligent commissioning, were recommended as a way forward.

The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) explained that intelligent commissioning practices *"enable the best outcomes for service users and local communities"*, since key stakeholders, namely local voluntary organisations, community groups and service users, are involved in planning the service to be commissioned and the commissioning process (NAVCA, 2010). According to NAVCA, this process includes: 1) analysing local needs, 2) planning, 3) delivering/procurement and 4) monitoring and review. It was suggested that community groups and voluntary organisations (who are the main service providers), and service users have an important role to play in all four stages, as they can help identify real needs, plan suitable services, evaluate the procurement process and provide feedback about service quality.

Service design promotes the idea of getting service providers and service users to work together to achieve better outcomes. In this study, we explore how the design approaches, especially co-design, could help enhance user participation in the service planning process.

3 Design, Co-design and Service Design

Charities and voluntary organisations may not think of themselves as involved in *'design'*. People may associate the word *'design'* primarily with issues of aesthetics in fashion, technology or products. However, most designers see design as a process or a way of thinking. For example, Simmons (2008) defined design as *"the way we decide how we want things to be."* As leading design consultant Richard Seymour puts it, design is about *"making things better for people"*[2], suggesting close alignments between design and the voluntary sector. Besides, HM Treasury (2005) describe design as a process which *"links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers"*.

Designing is not that same as planning. According to Brown (2008), designing requires: 1) *empathy* or an ability to imagine the world from different stakeholders' perspectives; 2) *integrative thinking* which means going beyond an analytical process and see interrelationships of all factors; 3) *optimism* which refers to a firm belief that things could be better and none of current constraints should be taken as given; 4) *experimentalism* which encourages exploration and evaluation of novel ideas; and 5) *collaboration* which encourages collective creativity from all key stakeholders of a project. The characteristics of empathy, optimism and collaboration, appear to match the *'pro-people'* nature of small community-based charities and voluntary organisations described by Kamat (2006). What distinguishes a design approach, however, is the

[2] http://www.mech.hku.hk/bse/interdisciplinary/what_is_design.pdf

emphasis on integrative thinking and experimentalism. A key feature of any design process is prototyping, evaluating and iteratively revising proposals (Brown, 2008; Gould & Lewis, 1985; Von Stamm, 2008). Whenever charities and voluntary organisations organise campaigns, devise new services, develop advocacy strategies, plan activities, or write bids for contracts, they could be designing.

Within the field of design there have been a number of important shifts in recent decades. The 1980s saw the rise of *'User-centred Design'*, much of which was driven by efforts in computing to develop interactive products that were more usable and accessible. As its name suggests, user-centred design placed the end user of products or services at the centre of the design process, so that all decisions were informed by careful consideration of the user's perspective.

In the late 80s and 90s, researchers critiqued these user-centred approaches for positioning the user as a passive beneficiary of the designers' expertise. In response, a movement developed exploring more participatory approaches to designing computer systems, citing both political and pragmatic arguments that parallel those that currently inform debate about public service reform (see Carroll & Rosson, 1987). Subsequently, significant research effort has gone into moving user involvement beyond political (tokenistic) participation and engaging people meaningfully (see Tritter & McCallum, 2006; Morrison & Dearden, 2013). Co-design, an umbrella term describing the methods and discourses of participation in design, could help promote meaningful participation, as it goes beyond assuring that the users' voices are heard, to engaging service users in developing and deciding on solutions that will affect them.

The prefix *'co'* in co-design connotes collaborative or cooperative, since the practice promotes *'collective creativity as it is applied across the whole span of a design process'* (Sanders, 2006). Co-design practice encourages active participation of all key stakeholders (e.g. service users and providers) throughout the whole design process including 1) conducting research to gain insights, 2) interpreting findings to identify real needs/opportunities, 3) developing ideas to address the goals set out, and 4) testing and implementing ideas into reality (Design Council, 2007). This approach helps a development team to address the needs of all parties, and to make good use of collective creativity, hopefully leading to better outcomes. Co-design is widely used in the private sector for both products and services to accelerate user acceptance and reduce potential failure. Co-design is also becoming widespread in the public sector as a way of engaging citizens in improving public services (see NHS Wales's Tools of Improvements: Co-producing services – Co-creating health[3] for an example).

In the new millennium the development of the World Wide Web as a two way communications medium, the rise of the service economy, and commercial pressures for producers to distinguish their products, have given rise to a range of new trends, e.g. *'open innovation'* (von Hippel, 2005) in which companies encourage users of their products to feed their own ideas and feedback into the company's design processes; and *'crowdsourcing'* (Howe, 2006) in which organisations and groups obtain services, ideas or content by inviting contributions from large numbers of individuals (major websites, e.g. YouTube, can be understood as crowdsourced). These changes have also seen the development of a new field of specialisation in design, namely *'service design'*. The process of developing a service or service design is defined as "*the design*

[3] http://www.1000livesplus.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/1011/T4I%20%288%29%20Co-production.pdf

of the overall experience of a service as well as the design of the process and strategy to provide that service" (Moritz, 2005). Saco & Goncalves (2008) argue that good use of service design in all points of contact with the service[4] can deliver positive experiences while reducing negative ones.

These developments and trends have had a major impact on the way that private sector organisations are managing their design activities and the services they deliver. The public sector is increasingly looking for ways that these new techniques can be adopted and used to improve service quality and reduce costs (e.g. HM Government, 2012). In the voluntary sector, there are many innovative examples of co-design – see Aids for Artisan (www.aidtoartisans.org), and WWF's Open Planet Ideas for examples, and recent work by the authors and collaborators, has explored ways of expanding voluntary organisations' capabilities in co-design (Dearden *et al*, 2014). However, there is a lack of information about the overall capability of the sector in these important areas. The work reported in this paper is drawn from a 10 month project that aimed to understand and develop the capacity of the voluntary sector in the UK to apply co-design to services.

4 Research Methods

In order to investigate the current state of knowledge and usage of co-design of the voluntary sector, especially in small-and-medium-sized organisations, we used a mixed methods approach involving: an online survey, a set of semi-structured follow-up interviews with willing survey respondents, a series of case studies, and a collaborative workshop. In this paper, the principal findings from the survey and interviews will be discussed.

4.1 Online Survey

The survey assessed existing knowledge and practices for service development and perceptions of the benefits and risks associated with using co-design approaches.

The term *'participation'* has multiple meanings (Arnstein, 1969; Oakley, 1989; Dearden and Rizvi, 2008) and can be used to conceal the exercise of coercive power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). When investigating how people are actually involved in decisions that affect their lives, it is important to critically assess both: *the extent of involvement*, i.e. in what stage or stages of a decision process are participants included (or excluded); and *the level of involvement*, i.e. how decision making influence and power are distributed between stakeholders. For this reason, the design of the survey sections dealing with current practices in co-design considered these two dimensions.

Truly participatory practice needs to consider at what stage participants are drawn into the process, and the degree to which participants are able to frame project priorities and how the project is conducted (Oakley, 1989). Thus, we required some way of representing the different stages that are typical of a design project. The diversity of design practice means that there are multiple models that could be used for inspiration. The Design Council provides the *'Double Diamond'* model with stages of *'Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver'* (Design Council, 2007);

[4] Saco and Goncalves use the term touchpoint, which is also commonly used in reference to service design. However, we prefer to avoid the term because of the lack of a consistent agreed definition (Khambete, 2011).

the Experience Based Design (ebd) method that is widely used in the NHS involves phases of *'Capture, Understand, Improve, Measure*'(Bate & Robert, 2007; NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, 2010). This study employed the widely used Design Thinking model developed by IDEO, a leading consultancy, which describes the design process as an iterative cycle, with three main phases (Brown, 2008). The first phase (*Inspiration*) focuses on exploring the context of the service and setting out priorities for developments. The second phase *(Ideation)* concentrates on generating (multiple) ideas about possible ways to develop new services, and trying out these ideas until all key stakeholders are satisfied with outcomes. The final phase *(Implementation)* focuses on the detailed development (e.g. planning all the different points of contact with the service), service production and evaluation with potential users. The iteration could help improve the quality of the outcomes while eliminate potential problems.

Drawing on IDEO's model, and adapting the language of our description in consultation with The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), we arrived at a description of the stages of service design that included the following steps:

- Inspiration
    - Reviewing the performance and quality of existing services
    - Identifying new services or services that need to be improved
    - Assessing priorities for new / improved services
- Ideation
    - Generating ideas about how the service could operate
    - Planning main points of contact in the service, e.g. help lines
    - Simulating how users may experience the service, e.g. role playing
    - Reviewing new service proposals
- Implementation
    - Conducting user trials to test the new service
    - Exploring potential financial arrangements to support the service
    - Defining budgets for operating the new service
    - Collecting and analysing feedback about the new services
- Other (please specify)

For each stage of this prototypical service design process, we then asked respondents about the degree to which service users (or their carers or other representatives) were involved at each stage of the process, with the following range of answers:

- Users are the primary decision makers
- Users are co-decision makers
- Users are involved in carrying out this activity
- Users are consulted about decisions
- Users are not involved
- This is not a stage we go through

The same set of questions was also asked in relation to the involvement of experienced specialist designers in service design activities.

The online survey was promoted and distributed to charities and voluntary organisations nationwide using various mailing lists and discussion forums operated by NCVO. The sample was self-selecting, as the participants made informed decisions, based on the project information, whether or not to take part in this study. The survey ran from June 2012 to the end of August 2012. 49 individuals responded to the survey.

4.2 In-depth Follow up Interview

From the survey respondents, 13 organisations were approached for follow up interviews, and three agreed to take part. The interview sought to clarify their answers in the questionnaire and discuss key issues emerged from the survey.

The same set of questions was used with all interviewees.

1. Do voluntary sector organisations actually involve users in design activities?
2. Do they adopt an iterative approach to develop, test and refine their ideas?
3. What do they think about their current process?
4. Which are the main areas for improvement?
5. Are they interested in working with trained designers?

Three phone interviews were carried out with one chief executive of a well-established charity, one co-ordinator of a new community-interest company (CIC) and one frontline staff who has work experience with a wide range of not-for-profit organisations. The interviews took between 20 minutes to half an hour to complete. The conversations were recorded with permission from interviewees, transcribed and later compared to gain a clearer picture of current practices.

5 Principal Findings from the Survey

5.1 Organisation Profile

The majority of respondents were local/community-based (61.7%) followed by national (25.5%) and regional (8.5%). Most (90%) provided some services to their beneficiaries, with 74.5% describing most, all or nearly all of their activities as service provision. The domains of the respondents covered most of the voluntary sector activity areas (following a breakdown suggested by NCVO researchers) from concern with animals to social services and included some umbrella bodies – see Table 2.

Table 2 here

None of our respondents focused on people of a particular ethnic or racial origin, none described themselves as grant-making foundations, and none described themselves as working in the domain *'international'*, although one respondent worked in overseas aid / famine relief. In most cases, their main sources of income were grants (28%) followed by contracts (26%) and donation/bequest (21.3%). According to the charity size classification provided by Charity Commission (2012), the small charities are those with annual income less than £10,000 and the medium-size charities are those with annual income £10,000 – £249,999. The majority of respondents represented small-and-medium-sized groups. 36% had annual incomes below £100,000, 25.5% had incomes over £1million. 42.5% had fewer than 3 full time equivalent staff.

17% had more than 25 full time equivalent staff. Nevertheless, most services were delivered by paid staff (44.7%) followed by a mixture of paid staff and volunteers (31.9%).

5.2 Current State of Knowledge

Many respondents had heard the term co-design (61.4%) before and some had used this approach in their organisations (15.9%), or in other settings (9.1%). The terms participatory design and user-centred design were slightly more familiar to respondents than co-design, but other emerging ideas such as open innovation and crowdsourcing were generally unfamiliar (see Table 3).

Table 3 here

When these results were cross-tabulated against the scale of the organisation (comparing local and/or community-based, regional, and national organisations), the respondents from smaller local organisations were generally less familiar and less experienced in using these approaches. For example, whilst 25% of local and/or community based organisations had experience applying service design, this figure rose to 41.7% for national organisations.

5.3 User participation in Service Design

Table 4 shows the responses to the questions about user participation at each stage of service design, from the initial stage of selecting a focus and identifying areas for improvement, through the middle stage of exploring multiple ideas then testing and refining them, to the final stages of evaluating detailed proposals and collecting feedback after deployment.

Table 4 here

The survey results show moderately high levels of user participation in the initial ('inspiration') stages of reviewing existing services, identifying areas for improvement or new service development, and setting priorities. Over 48% of respondents reported active user participation in reviewing performance of existing services and identifying areas for development or improvement, with a further 20.5% consulting with service users to review performance. This figure falls to 33.3% involving users in assessing priorities with a further 28.2% consulting users to set priorities.

The second stage of the service design ('ideation') is focused on developing and testing ideas to address problems/opportunities identified by the first phase. Whilst user participation in generating ideas was high (51.2% reported active user participation and 20.5% consulted users), the majority of respondents did not recognise planning points of interaction between users and service providers (e.g. websites and help lines), as part of the service development process – 46.2% reported that it was not a stage that they went through. The figure rose to 64.1% in relation to the stage of simulating service design ideas before moving towards implementation.

The last stage of service development ('implementation') is focussed on testing ideas with users and exploring practical factors, e.g. staffing. Whilst user participation in trials was quite high (30.8% of respondents reported active user participation and 10.3% of participants consulted users), users were less often involved or consulted on issues related to budgeting or resource

allocation (only 18% of respondents reported active user participation at this stage). 41% reported that they did not conduct user trials to test the new service, and finally 30.8% reported that they did not collect and analyse feedback about new services.

These results suggest that the majority of charities and voluntary organisations are adopting participatory processes. However, the low frequency of exploring point of contact with the service and testing out ideas through simulation, suggests that charities and voluntary organisations may be neglecting some steps that designers would view as essential for creating high quality services.

5.4 Benefits and Risks of Involving Users

The survey reveals that most respondents valued user inputs (see Table 5). They believed that involving users in the service design process could lead to many benefits, e.g. save time and money, enhance creativity and competitiveness, and accelerate the uptake within communities. Involving users in the creative activities, e.g. service developments, could help enhance users' confidence (e.g. expressing themselves and making decisions), learn useful life skills (e.g. negotiation and teamwork) and strengthen relationships between beneficiaries and organisations.

Table 5 here

In general, the risks of involving users in service development were perceived as quite low (see Table 6). The main concern of most organisations was that it requires a lot of resources (e.g. staff time). Moreover, involving users could lead to conflicts of interest and unrealistic expectations and it might slow down the decision making process. However, few participants were worried by risks of leaking intellectual property or confidential data.

Table 6 here

5.5 Experience of Working with Trained Designers

Because co-design has been defined as *"the (collective) creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process"* (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), we also explored collaborations between voluntary organisations and designers. Most respondents (56.8%) had carried out design works before (e.g. brochures), and the majority of participants (56.8%) had experience working with trained designers. Most of them (52%) hired trained designers to work on a consultancy basis. 36% of respondents received support from trained designers as volunteers. Only 16% of participants had in-house designers.

To complement the assessment of the user participation, respondents were asked to describe how trained designers were involved at each step of service design. The survey revealed that trained designers were rarely involved in any activities of service development (see Table 7).

Table 7 here

Comparing Table 7 and Table 4 reveals that the response *'this is not a stage we go through'* is much more common for this question than for the equivalent question regarding user participation in stages of service designing. This discrepancy is difficult to account for. However,

in an open question where participants were asked to describe recent design activities, out of 20 projects that designers were involved in, 11 were website design; five were communication design (e.g. logos); three were one-off jobs; and one was ambiguous (e.g. attending meetings). Hence, when answering this question, some respondents may have been thinking about these kinds of design projects, rather than service design. These responses suggest that respondents may recognise the value of designers' specialist technical abilities (e.g. web design) rather than their broader knowledge of design processes, e.g. co-design.

5.6 Benefits and Risk of Involving Designers

Comparing perceived benefits of user participation (see Table 5) with those of designer involvement (see Table 8) it appears that respondents view the input of service users as more important than that of designers. However, participants did see some potential benefits of designers in the area of generating creative ideas and in developing high quality service designs that had a higher chance of being funded.

Table 8 here

Perceived risks of involving designers were also significantly higher than those of involving users (see Table 9). Many respondents were concerned that designers might bring their own agendas which might conflict with their interests, with 59.5% seeing this as having at least a moderate chance of occurrence. Moreover, respondents expressed a concern that designers might not have the experience and skills needed to work with specific groups of service users. However, the most significant concern about involving designers was around the cost of employing designers, with 48.5% regarding this as having a high or very high chance of occurrence.

Table 9 here

6 Findings from the Interviews

All the interviewees reported that their service users were consulted or involved when developing and/or evaluating services. However, design practices, especially co-design, were hardly mentioned. In some cases, collecting users' opinions already presented a challenge for their organisations:

"I think that getting feedback from users is where most of the charities are struggling with. People can be quite 'raw' when they start the programme. The feelings make them not as objective as they might be. To get them to be objective, you have to wait until the end and ask them to reflect on the process. It is quite difficult to get that feedback and suggestions after the programme is completed."

The use of co-design was rare in respondents' organisations. One interviewee who had worked for a wide range of not-for-profit organisations reported that, based on her experiences, most charities give service users choices and let them select one rather than allow them to design due to limited resources and capacity:

"Users are coming here because it is part of the (IT) training programme. They can discuss options with tutors. There are limitations to what can be provided as well. A charity relies on funding and it can be quite restrictive at a time. What somebody wants might not be possible to deliver or need a higher level of support that we don't have capacity to deliver. A charity has a decision to make what is their priority. What people really want is perhaps not appropriate. It's about what the objective is. Give people a choice, but not a free choice."

It was observed that a good use of co-design could provide a systematic way of engaging and collaborating with users. One interviewee reported that creative activities, e.g. co-designing a new service, are considerably more appealing to users than business planning exercises, e.g. SWOT Analysis. The respondent pointed out that, in order to get service users to give up their own time to work with a charity, the activities must be engaging, relevant and meaningful.

Although several organisations would like to get users more involved in the service development process, it was observed that using co-design is *'not easy'*. One interviewee observed that some users might not be interested in engaging with co-design, thinking that: *"It is your job to develop and deliver services. I already told you what I want. Now you just get on with developing it."* Another respondent suggested that if an organisation asks users how it should deliver services too often, it could appear lacking in confidence and service users may question the organisation's ability to deliver services. Consulting users too frequently might also undermine staff's confidence in their own expertise and affect morale.

Recruiting users was considered a delicate issue. Many service-users were in difficult situations and would not be interested in being involved in the creative activities. The whole process must be perceived as democratic – *"you can't always choose the same persons. Otherwise, users may think that the charity values certain groups more than others."* Managing user expectations was also considered challenging. Since co-design is not easy and has serious resource implications, organisations are likely to use it only for important tasks, e.g. making significant changes at the organisational level or addressing serious issues raised by users (e.g. dissatisfaction).

In respondents' opinions, iterative processes are not widely adopted although a pilot test and consultation is commonly used. One interviewee stated that if the consultation received negative feedback, some organisations might decide to kill the project rather than trying to solve the problems. However, in most cases, organisations are likely to make minor changes. One interviewee explained that her organisation did not run a pilot test due to time and resource constraints. In her opinion, running a pilot test properly would require external funding. Hence, her organisation rarely ran a pilot test unless the business model and services were significantly changed.

The interviews confirmed that the current level of designer involvement is very limited. While cost is a major perceived barrier, the idea of involving trained designers in service development is not common. Interviewees were not aware of service design discipline and unsure what designers could contribute. One interviewee was keen to involve designers in the service development process. However, he found it difficult to involve designers because his partners did not understand the value of design and, thus, were not interested in working with designers.

7 Discussion

The pattern of the results shows that, in general, respondents are actively promoting user participation in at least some aspects of their service design and development decisions. The size of organisation did not appear to impose significant barriers to understanding and using co-design. Several small-and-medium-sized organisations successfully applied co-design principles. However, respondents were conscious of both the costs in terms of timely decision making, staff time and resources in conducting truly participatory service design activities, and were concerned to manage users' expectations.

The responses show that the majority of voluntary organisations were both committed to service user participation as a principle, and recognised the pragmatic advantages of user participation to improve both the quality of outcomes as well as the quality of the process. Nevertheless, it appears that these perceived benefits of user collaboration alone did not lead to organisations fully adopting the co-design concept. The slow adoption of co-design within this sector might not be purely because of perceived risks of user participation, since many respondents did not display serious concerns about user collaboration. However, respondents were concerned with the potential implications of co-design for resources and staff time. The approach might be applied for important tasks where users' inputs are vital, e.g. making significant changes at the organisational level.

Most respondents were not aware of emerging design disciplines, e.g. service design. Moreover, they had limited access to volunteer designers and could not afford to hire design consultants on an on-going basis. According to the survey, designers are valued for their creative input and their potential contribution to the quality of service designs. Nevertheless, the results suggest that many respondents perceive involving designers as being associated with considerable cost, and some risks. Particularly concerns were that contributions may be compromised by designers having their own agenda, or designers not being able to work effectively with specific user groups. These perceptions suggest that, to increase the trust of voluntary organisations in their potential contribution, designers and design educators need to review their existing skills development and orientation, and how this is being communicated to the sector.

Co-design and service design could provide a systematic way of engaging and collaborating with users. However, it was noted that many respondents apparently did not engage in key stages of service design, e.g. identifying key points of contact with the service, and conducting iterative prototyping of services during their development. Von Stamm (2008) argues that prototyping and simulation of service ideas is essential because it 1) allows ideas to be materialised and communicated to all parties, 2) help different stakeholders developed a shared vision of the new service, 3) identify potential problems/risks at the early stage of the development, and 4) facilitate the collective learning process. Charities and voluntary organisations could gain considerable benefits by engaging more with these activities, as they allow service ideas to be tested and optimised before putting them into practice which can have serious implications on both cost and staff.

A possible explanation for the low level of iteration in the service development process reported may lie in the nature of the processes for awarding/obtaining funding for such services. In a

commercial context, a cyclic process of testing and refining ideas with service users will have a direct impact on their brand loyalty. Where public service contracts or grants from foundations are awarded primarily on the basis of written submissions or presented descriptions of services (rather than the quality of user involvement), iterating and exploring ideas to ensure the highest possible service quality may have less direct impact. Alternatively, charities and voluntary organisations may be choosing to defer this iterative improvement activity until *after* funding has been secured. Following up on the intelligent commissioning practices, policy makers and funders could encourage more involvement and inputs from service users by looking more closely at the nature and depth of service user participation in developing service proposals.

7.1 Limitations

This short study, conducted using online survey methods naturally suffers from the normal limitations of such approaches, not least the low response rates, and the fact that respondents both to the online survey and the follow up interviews were always self-selecting. A number of small-and-medium-sized organisations that we approached declined to take part in the study due to their time constraints. However, if those who did respond are assumed to be relatively familiar with ideas of service design and collaborative approaches to design, then the policy implications suggested above are likely to be even more relevant for organisations that did not respond.

8 Recommendations

According to principal findings, it can be concluded that most respondents from the voluntary sector have the right mind-set for adopting the co-design practice, as they are keen to listen to users' feedback and ideas. Moreover, they perceive user participation as beneficial and have developed good relationships with service users. However, many organisations still lack knowledge, processes, resources and organisational support to apply co-design and service design effectively. To develop knowledge to apply co-design and service design effectively, organisations could start by engaging with trained designers.

Apparently, there is a need to point voluntary sector organisations to existing channels where they can have access to volunteer designers, pro-bono design services and other creative professionals, e.g. www.pimpmycause.org and www.prohelp.org.uk. Since design fees are considered unaffordable for many small-and-medium-sized organisations, it might be more cost-effective for design services to be acquired and provided by local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) whose job is to work behind the scenes to make sure that charities and voluntary organisations get the support they need. If voluntary sector organisations in the same area could share design resources, design services could be made more accessible.

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