

making the most of collaboration an international survey of public service co-design

PETER BRADWELL
SARAH MARR

DEMOS REPORT 23

in association with
PwC's Public Sector Research Centre

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS 

DEMOS

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DEMOS

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foreword

[F]ocusing on the citizen and engagement with users in the design and delivery of services is at a relatively early stage for many departments and needs to move much further and faster.¹

Sir David Varney

Unless you have user input you can't design a good service.

Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

In 2006 Demos, working with PricewaterhouseCoopers, published the pamphlet, *Journey to the Interface*.² Its authors, Sophia Parker and Joe Heapy, set out an impassioned case for collaborative creation of public services. This, they argue, allows public service providers to 'connect intimately with their users and customers... listening and responding in ways that reassure us all that we are being understood'. In this way organisations can 'close the gap between what they do and what people want or need'.

Our current work seeks to focus on the design stage of public service provision, and the ways in which user and provider can work together to optimise the content, form and delivery of those services. At its most highly participative extreme, this process is referred to as co-design and entails service development driven by the equally respected voices of users, providers and professionals. Our work emphasises the need to reflect on when, where and to what extent this can happen, in the context of differing geographical regions and service sectors.

There is no doubt that many elements of co-design are being practised today, in a variety of sectors, across different countries. *Journey to the Interface*, for example, discusses several instances in the UK. In this study, we have sought to broaden the picture of global co-design practices, by carrying out an international survey of 466 public service practitioners³ across the UK, USA, Europe,⁴ Latin America and Asia-Pacific (Australia and New Zealand, Hong Kong and China).

In the remainder of this discussion paper we provide an overview of the advantages offered by co-design, its practical and political nature, and the high-level results of the survey. We also widen the discussion to include current thinking around public service reform and collaborative design and the problems faced as co-design becomes more mainstream and effective at larger scales.

executive summary

At its heart collaborative design seeks to make public services match the wants and needs of their beneficiaries. Policy makers and practitioners have increasingly embraced closer collaborations between users and designers, hoping to reinvigorate public services under pressure from a more demanding public, increasing social complexity and overstretched resources. The returns from this engagement are more responsive, fit-for-purpose, efficient public services. More broadly, co-design provides an avenue for addressing a disengagement from politics and democracy, and building social capital.⁵

This discussion paper outlines the results of a ground-breaking international survey of co-design, carried out in a collaboration between the UK think tank Demos and the PricewaterhouseCoopers Public Sector Research Centre. The research involved interviews with 466 public service practitioners in the transport, health, social welfare and education sectors, across the UK, USA, Europe, Latin America and Asia-Pacific.

Our key observations

- Public services and governments around the world face pressures from a more demanding public, increasing social complexity and diversity, and overstretched resources.
- Co-design is an international movement, happening across the globe with enthusiastic support from public service practitioners. Well over 90 per cent of our survey respondents claimed to have played some role in a project that involved the users of a public service in its design or development.
- It is clear that co-design is maturing from principle to practicality, and in doing so reaping some of the very real benefits that its proponents have long promised. However, the potential of co-design can too easily lead to one's asking simply, 'How can we do more of it?' In fact, the questions that we ought to be asking are more complex: 'What kind of co-design works, and where?' and 'How is that co-design best implemented within its specific context?'
- We have yet to see a consistent emergence of organisational cultures that support increases in collaborative service design. A commitment to the principles of collaborative processes can grate against existing methods of top-down service design. It is these cross-level and cross-perspective tensions that co-design practitioners are working towards resolving.
- The territorial influence over the development of collaborative design is strongly evident, shaping the successes and failures across sectors. The results underline the need to understand the territorial narratives that have shaped professional roles, policy processes and resource allocations. This has implications for the scaling of co-design practices in line with increasingly global case studies and literature.

1. why co-design?

I think it's meaningful work. We can get the feedback from the users. It helps enormously to improve the service.

Survey respondent, Hong Kong and China

The past few years have seen the emergence of a strong consensus around the promise of co-design in public services. There is little sign that this momentum around collaborative public services will wane in the near future.

In the UK, Prime Minister Gordon Brown again committed himself to reforms embodying, 'a new recognition that real and lasting change must come from empowering the users of public services themselves, with professionals and government playing a supporting role'.⁶ He has cast current plans for public services as a 'third wave' of reform, using greater citizen involvement to go beyond these traditional approaches, with their focus on efficiency, cost savings and measurement metrics. This meshes well with the UK government's aim of personalising public services. Co-design seems to meet the challenge of unshackling public services from a one-size-fits-all model of provision.

*This is the future for our public services. Accessible to all, personal to you. Not just a basic standard but the best quality tailored to your needs.*⁷ Gordon Brown

Public services and governments around the world face pressures from a more demanding public, increasing social complexity and diversity, and overstretched resources. The historical way of dealing with these issues has been a set of reforms offering diminishing returns: the restructuring and reorganisation of bureaucracies, the introduction of targets, and varied management initiatives. But the promise of co-design is that it will take reform in a new direction. Martha Dorris, Deputy Associate Administrator in the USA's General Service Administration Office of Citizen Services and Communications, draws collaborative design into a story about citizens' new expectations of public services:

*After automating basic services governments found a bigger challenge. In order to fully deliver on the e-government promise, they had to collaborate horizontally and vertically across boundaries. When they viewed government service delivery from the citizen's perspective, they found that citizens want more than simply automated service delivery.*⁸ Martha Dorris

*Today's challenges cannot be met via vertical lines of accountability for the delivery of clearly defined outputs within segmented portfolios and departments... [T]he complexity of challenges facing government requires more sophisticated solutions. Governments do not have an exclusive hold on all the levers to drive improvements within and across core areas of responsibility such as health, education, justice and environmental management. Rather, governments have to navigate common and conflicting interests across portfolios, business, communities and individual citizens.*⁹ Simon Parker and Jamie Bartlett

In the lasting connections and relationships that it encourages between individuals and institutions, co-design has the potential to help governments adapt to this new environment. It offers to make public services more efficient, to understand and better meet the needs of their users, and to build a sense of reciprocity between those users and service providers. Furthermore, as citizens' expectations of government continue to grow, there is an expectation that public services should be better attuned to people's requirements. If governments cannot fulfil this expectation they risk diminishing levels of public trust in their capacity to deliver.

Co-design promises to deliver direct, tangible results. For example, if people participate in public service design they are more likely to understand the difficulties in delivery, to sympathise with providers when things go wrong, and to complain in a more informed and constructive manner. Furthermore, user engagement at an early stage is likely to reduce design errors, and the costs associated with those errors.

Box 1 Participative governance

Skidmore, Bound and Lownsborough set out three primary reasons for participative governance, which extend to the practice of co-design:¹⁰

It leads to better, more responsive services. Services are more tailored to the needs of individuals, and are quicker to respond to changes in those needs.

It tackles disengagement from politics and democracy. Along with democratic renewal, participation enhances trust in and positive engagements with services.

It builds social capital. Participative governance enhances community cohesion, improves the quality of people's lives, and strengthens individual relationships.

Broadly, the first of these is the key reason why government agencies carry out participatory projects, and also the primary reason why people take part in them. However, theorists talk much more in terms of 'social capital' and about issues of empowerment.¹¹

Co-design involves opportunities for users both to alter the specification of the design problem being addressed and to volunteer relevant resources unknown to the provider and perhaps unrecognised by the user.¹² In other words, it stimulates innovation. UK Minister for the Cabinet Office, Ed Miliband, opens his foreword to the Demos collection *Unlocking Innovation* by stressing the importance of 'collaborative public services, which allow users and communities to work with professionals and institutions to shape and contribute to them'.¹³ This is reflected in the features typically found in co-design approaches: a trial-and-error style of working¹⁴ and 'emergent design' processes.¹⁵

Finally, it is worth noting that the improved relationships that emerge from a co-design approach have benefits that extend beyond the design problem in question. Most obvious are those improved relationships themselves. In education, the process has given an increased sense of self-worth to students and greater patience with the learning process.¹⁶ Might this lead to greater satisfaction with existing services? There is at least evidence that these strengthened relationships make public service provision easier: the Australian Tax Office claims that '[C]onsultation, collaboration and co-design has the potential to reduce compliance costs for the community'.¹⁷

The respondents to our survey detailed a range of benefits beyond just improving the end design (see table 1).

Table 1 Top 10 co-design survey responses, globally, to the question: 'What would you say were the main benefits or impacts of using the participative or co-design approach in this project?'

1	End product better reflects customer needs	29.1%
2	Generates useful information	18.8%
3	Creates a feeling of involvement and ownership	18.3%
4	Project is energised by user input	6.6%
5	Builds better relationships	5.9%
6	Pre-empts potential problems in the future	5.2%
7	Measurable results	4.9%
8	Speed of progress	4.7%
9	Wider understanding of the issues	2.6%
10	Consensus on the way forward	0.5%

It is easy to make the case for collaborative design. But why exactly is co-design seen as panacea by so many for such a wide range of global public services? And how does co-design differ from the other participative programmes towards which governments are aiming?

2 · defining co-design

Users are wonderful things to have, and not just because they demonstrate that you're serving a need, that you've done something right. Properly cultivated, they can become co-developers.¹⁸

Eric Raymond

We ended up with a more authentic, holistic result, which opened my eyes to barriers people face every day. We got down to practical, achievable outcomes.

Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

In September 2007 a workshop was held, attended by researchers, service designers and other interested parties, including members of the UK government's Transformational Government group. The workshop created a working definition of co-design, one that recognised the interplay of different factors which come together in the participative design process (see box 2).

Box 2 A working definition of co-design

Participation: Co-design is a collaboration. The collaborative nature of the process is enhanced and extended by several of its other features. There is a great deal of transparency involved in co-design: all participants are aware of the design methodology, its inputs and outputs, its goals and current status, etc. It is designing with people, not merely for people. This high level of participation requires continuity of participants, to ensure the development of a close working relationship. The breadth of input from all parties is wide-ranging, ensuring a multiplicity of viewpoints and building wider community relationships between those involved.

Development: Co-design is a developmental process. It involves the exchange of information and expertise relating to both the subject of the design process and the process itself. In this sense, co-design teaches co-design.

Ownership and power: Co-design shifts power to the process, creating a framework that defines and maintains the necessary balance of rights and freedoms between participants. There is equality of legitimacy and value in inputs from all those involved, whether suggestions entail large- or small-scale changes. This combination of controlled abrogation of power by those with whom it usually rests, and the concomitant empowerment of those in a traditional 'client' role, serves to create a sense of collective ownership.

Outcomes and intent: Co-design activities are outcome-based: they possess a practical focus, with clarity of vision and direction. Methodology and implementation seek to ensure a shared creative intent between all participants.

Writing in his editorial for the first edition of CoDesign, Scrivener stresses that the term 'co-design' manages to set out a framework for debate, without constraining thinking into too narrow a mould: it is an 'umbrella term' covering both 'community design' and 'participatory design'.¹⁹ As such, co-design broadly refers to the effort to combine the views, input and skills of people with many different perspectives to address a specific problem. It is unsurprising that Albinsson, Lind and Forsgren describe co-design as an answer to the need for 'constructive meetings between several stakeholders'.²⁰

Co-design covers and extends more traditionally used terms such as ‘participation’ or ‘engagement’. What, then, is it that marks co-design as different to other kinds of participation? Co-design places the involvement of users at the very heart of the design of a public service. Whereas engagement can simply involve getting people thinking and talking about a service or policy, co-design implies something more fundamental: it requires involvement in the design and delivery of the service itself. It is, ideally, ‘upstream’, meaning that it helps to identify the kinds of problems to which a service responds, rather than just giving people a say in the answers to pre-defined problems. It means that the voices of users are heard and given a position of influence over the development and application of the service. In its purest sense, co-design implies that no viewpoint is afforded greater legitimacy than another.

This evokes a spectrum of participation, from the minimal user input involved in answering a questionnaire, to significant investment in, and part ownership of, a project. In ‘A ladder of citizen participation’,²¹ Arnstein made an explicit link between participation and power: ‘citizen participation is citizen power’. She described an eight-rung ladder running from non-participation (and zero empowerment) to full participation (and citizen control). However, the spectrum of co-design is a more nuanced construction, lacking some of the linearity suggested by the ‘ladder’ of Arnstein. In this sense, the question to be asked is, ‘Which co-design elements are appropriate here?’ rather than a simple, ‘How can we do as much co-design as possible?’ when approaching a project.

The workshop went some way to mapping this methodological problem (see box 3). But answering this question, and deciding how to apply co-design principles, requires the taking into account of practical, as well as theoretical, considerations. It is this combination of methodological best practice and wider theory that our survey was designed to encompass.

Box 3 Co-design best practice

Methodology: Successful co-design requires a methodology that supports and actively encourages its core properties. This requires a well-defined process architecture to ensure process aims are met, both in regard to outcome and to the nature of the process itself.

Environment, communication and context: A co-design project creates a safe space for input, free from the possibility of negative consequences for those putting forward unfavourable or controversial suggestions. Effective and accessible communication (for example, models to assist in the visualisation of design proposals) is essential to ensure a successful project. The availability of participants is maximised through flexibility of scheduling and channels (eg online interactions, telephone, face-to-face discussions).

Checks and balances: It may be important to restrict scope to maintain focus on desired outcomes. Taken in conjunction with the foregoing discussion, one can see that this creates a ‘balancing act’ between a desire to hear all viewpoints and a need to maintain manageable and pertinent dialogues. Similarly, design remains a decision-making process and it may be necessary to set strict parameters on the flexibility of those decisions, or the nature of the inputs into them. In all these instances, ab initio limitations and modifications to the co-design process are minimised, and all such changes are undertaken with a high level of transparency, noted as a core property of co-design, above.

3. an international survey of co-design

Participation entails the access of people, as groups or individuals, to all stages of the policy process, including policy formulation, implementation, and review. Effective participation has positive implications for efficiency, resource allocation, and governance.²²

United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs

The input of the user was important because there were instances where they found problems that we didn't because we were concentrating on the more technical aspects. It's important to look at things from different points of view.

Survey respondent, Latin America

The United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs published Towards Participatory and Transparent Government in 2007,²³ drawing on the 2005 conference in South Korea of the same name. The paper speaks of a trend towards international innovations in collaboration, which has been termed the 'participatory associational deliberative' model. Participation is cast as a crucial aspect of development and, more broadly, good governance.

This viewpoint is mirrored in the emerging adoption of collaborative ideals in business. The PricewaterhouseCoopers Public Sector Research Centre's *Regulate and Collaborate: Government and the Global CEO* (2008) found increasing evidence of a desire to improve the ways in which businesses collaborate. There is a recognition that the use of collaborative networks will be an important part of navigating a complex, changeable environment.²⁴ Yet, although more than half of all CEOs interviewed believe that these networks will play a major role, most admit that they have not yet developed strategies to integrate them into everyday business.

Participation is, then, a globally recognised phenomenon. In such an environment the international survey of public sector officials carried out by Demos and PwC's Public Sector Research Centre is a step towards widening the view of co-design, drawing on, and informing, a global audience (see table 2). Additionally, the survey incorporates respondents across several public service sectors: health, education, social welfare and transport.

Table 2 Co-design survey - respondents by region and sector

	UK	Europe (not UK)	USA	Asia-Pacific	Latin America	Total
Health	34	14	36	40	6	130
Transport	17	11	31	31	8	99
Social Welfare	23	25	31	31	11	121
Education	30	13	38	30	5	116
Total	104	63	136	133	30	466

The survey was conducted by the PwC International Survey Unit, using a questionnaire based on the working definition of co-design set out previously. Each element of the definition was converted into a question, or set of questions, intended to gather information about the nature of participatory activities conducted by the respondent, without recourse to the ‘buzzwords’ surrounding co-design itself. In this way the survey provided detailed information, which went beyond a simple ‘sliding-scale’ of participation, to uncover the interplay of underlying elements that come together to construct the relationship between provider and user. So, for example, questions included ‘For how long did a particular user play a part in the design process?’, ‘How clear were the responsibilities of, and limitations on, the internal design team and users, during the design process?’ and ‘How concrete and practical was the focus of the detailed design effort?’ – all with appropriately coded possible responses. Additional questions placed respondents’ replies within the context of their various projects, and provided an opportunity for the collection of more general, free-form comments. A full set of survey questions can be found in the appendix at the end of this discussion paper.

Table 3 Co-design survey: top five respondents by job title

1	Departmental manager	27.3%
2	Director / Assistant director	22.5%
3	Administrator	11.2%
4	Technical role	6.4%
5	Head of service	5.2%

The data gathered enable us to make some general comments about the nature of co-design in the various territories.

The UK: ‘enthusiastic explorers’

We were pleased with not only how much the users were involved, but the enthusiasm of the clinical and other professional staff as well. Survey respondent, UK

There is an enthusiasm for co-design in the UK, connected as it is to the ‘third wave’ of reform envisaged by the UK government. The collaborative design projects described by the participants in our survey certainly seem to be meaningfully collaborative. Co-design involves real shifts of power towards the user, and a more equal balance of rights between provider and user. One would expect, therefore, that with all other factors being equal, the more collaborative projects would allow users to propose service design changes at all scales, including those that would be considered large and systemic. Sixty-three per cent of respondents said that no assumptions were made about the scale of possible changes, while a further 30 per cent claimed that large-scale changes would be considered if necessary. This adds weight to the responses in which 85 per cent of UK respondents described the design process as ‘collaborative’ or ‘completely collaborative’.

There is, however, a split between new and existing services. Nearly a quarter of respondents claimed that most or all of the co-design projects on which they worked involved new services, while 42 per cent of projects involved mostly or all existing services. Given the relatively mature public service infrastructure in the UK, one might expect a larger percentage of pre-existing services to be susceptible to collaborative design methods. The suggestion is that in the UK co-design still has a tendency to occur at the fringes of mainstream public service design and policy.

Europe

We have to speak in the language of our clients. Some are with mental disabilities so we have to make it simple so they can understand and make it visionable. We contacted them frequently; this all worked well. Survey respondent, Europe

We have not drawn any specific conclusions from the European data on individual countries, as the interviews were undertaken across several disparate regions. At an aggregate level, however, the data are broadly similar to the position in the UK with a tendency towards enthusiastic exploration. There is some reduction in the number of projects described as ‘collaborative’ or ‘completely collaborative’ (to 70 per cent), but more projects involve mostly or all existing services (58 per cent).

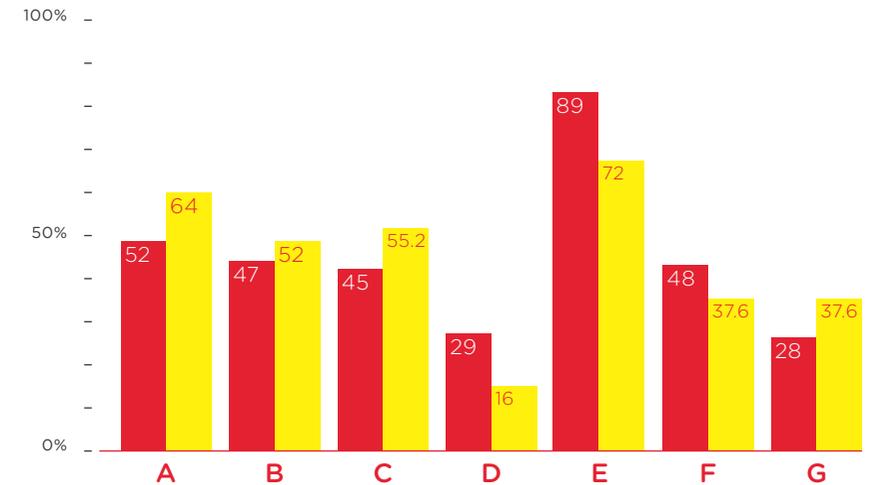
The USA: ‘consumer collaborators’

It was a collaborative effort that helped everything. The meetings were focused but people were free to talk about anything they wanted: the freedom to discuss and collaborate. Survey respondent, USA

In general, the USA survey tells a similar story to that in the UK. However, there is a slightly greater emphasis on what might be called a ‘consumerist’ approach (see figure 1). The data suggest that, compared with the UK, USA users are better known to the public service design teams, are involved earlier in the design process and have greater weight given to their comments. On the other hand, the UK data point to greater consultation, a more didactic approach to design in which users are educated during participation, and better communication of vision and direction.

Individually, the differences are small, but add up in such a way as to suggest that public service designers in the USA are working within a culture that is familiar with asking existing customers what they want, and listening to their comments. This would also explain why projects in the USA had more flexibility in the channels of communication available to participants. On the other hand, that culture may prevent practitioners in the USA from moving further towards the more challenging ‘deep collaboration’ towards which some UK designers are turning their attentions.

Figure 1 Co-design survey results: UK and USA comparative results



- A users were already known to the project team.
- B the user relationship began at the very start of the project.
- C user comments were given a great deal of weight.
- D user consultation was continuous.
- E users learnt about the services to some, or to a great, extent.
- F the vision and direction was very clearly communicated to users.
- G the ways in which participants could contact each other were very flexible

Australia and New Zealand: ‘long-distance co-designers’

The only way to represent the community is to collaborate with them and consult with them. Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

We built a partnership between council and the community, which helped rebuild trust in the council. Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

‘Geographical barriers’ were identified as an issue in implementing co-design by 10 per cent of survey respondents from Australia and New Zealand, second only to the conflicting views and opinions of participants (identified by 12 per cent of respondents) as a barrier to successful collaboration. The 10 per cent figure for ‘geographical barriers’ is considerably higher than other territories. Furthermore, Australia and New Zealand have the highest percentage of respondents identifying ‘weather’ and ‘technology’ as additional issues (7 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively). This suggests a region in which the environmental barriers of distance and climate, and the availability of technology to overcome them, are key factors in the delivery of co-design.

In other respects, the results for Australia and New Zealand are similar to those of the UK and USA. They suggest the projects involved are slightly more open to the views of the user, with 71 per cent of respondents claiming to make no assumptions about what scale of changes the process of collaboration could bring. Additionally, projects in Australia and New Zealand involved a slightly higher number of existing services (52 per cent, as opposed to 42 per cent for the UK), which suggest some move towards more mainstream practices.

On the other hand, while levels of engagement are high (78 per cent of respondents described the process as collaborative or completely collaborative) they are slightly lower than the reported results from the UK, and significantly lower than those of Latin America (see figure 2). In comparison with the UK, respondents claimed that users were more likely to have been consulted rarely, and for a shorter period of time than other territories.²⁵ Again, this may reflect difficulties caused by geographical distance.

Latin America: ‘participantes cotidianos’

The level of involvement and feedback from the users is the most important thing. It is because of them that this programme exists. It all started with them asking for and needing a system like this to be in place. Survey respondent, Latin America

Latin America is the territory with the most idiosyncratic results. They suggest that co-design is a more mainstreamed process than in other regions,²⁶ embedded in the everyday practice of public services. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents said that the relationship of public service designers with users was either collaborative or completely collaborative. The territory also has the highest number of projects described as ‘completely collaborative’. Furthermore, almost 67 per cent of respondents said that all or most of the services related to design projects where the services were already in existence.

Figure 2 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects described as completely collaborative (users were involved in all stages) by territory

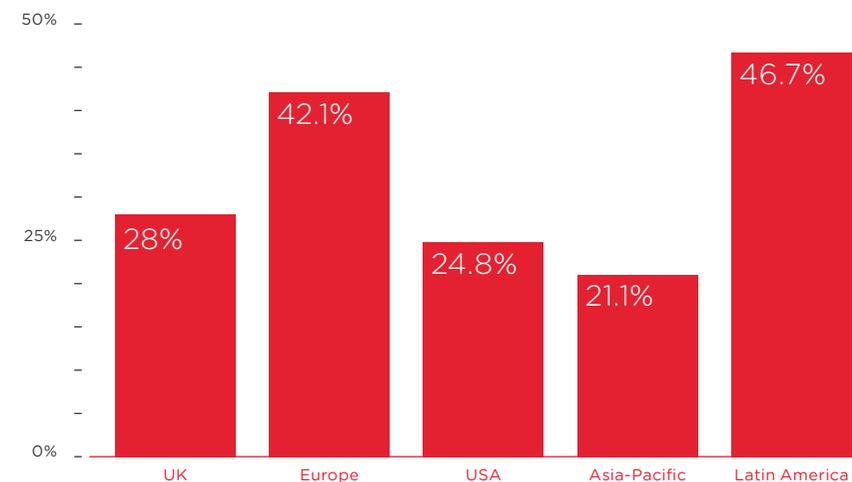
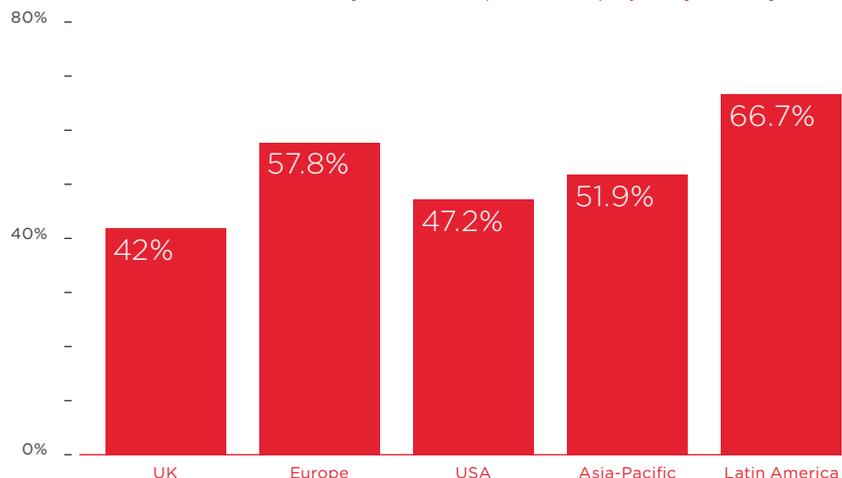


Figure 3 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects for which most or all of the services involved were already in existence prior to the project by territory



However, the results suggest that, in being so mainstreamed, less fundamental changes to services are possible. In health, for example, 50 per cent of respondents reported that there were no opportunities to make large-scale changes to services. There is everyday participation, but the effects and remit of co-design are limited in scope.

We would note, however, that these are preliminary observations, and that the particularly small sample size of the Latin American survey allows more scope for variations in analysis than other territories.

Hong Kong and China: a slow revolution

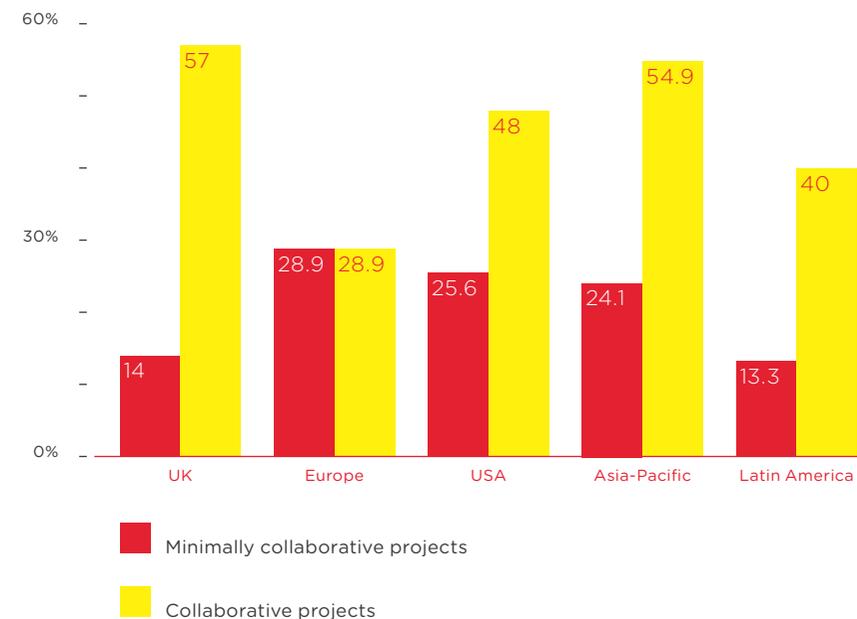
The main benefit is obvious. We have a sort of external pressure, which sends a signal to staff that change is coming. Survey respondent, Hong Kong and China

I think the benefit or the advantage is that we can get what the users actually want. So that we can design a plan that would fit them, that they want. Survey respondent, Hong Kong and China

While one might not expect co-design to thrive within countries associated with an often profound lack of democracy, the survey suggests that there is a degree of collaborative spirit evident in public services. The results suggest an emerging, if tentative, co-design ethic. So, although Hong Kong and China respondents reported the highest level of ‘collaborative’ processes (58 per cent), they also showed one of the highest levels of minimally collaborative processes (28 per cent), and the lowest levels of processes described as ‘completely collaborative’.

The nature of this collaboration is suggested by the responses to further survey questions. In only 30 per cent of cases were Hong Kong and China service users involved from the very start of the design process, the lowest result from all the territories. In 21 per cent of cases, users were consulted only rarely. There is a suggestion here that there are differences across territories as to the definition of collaboration, and this must be borne in mind when considering the survey results.

Figure 4 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects described as collaborative or minimally collaborative (users were occasionally consulted if a specific question needed an answer), by territory

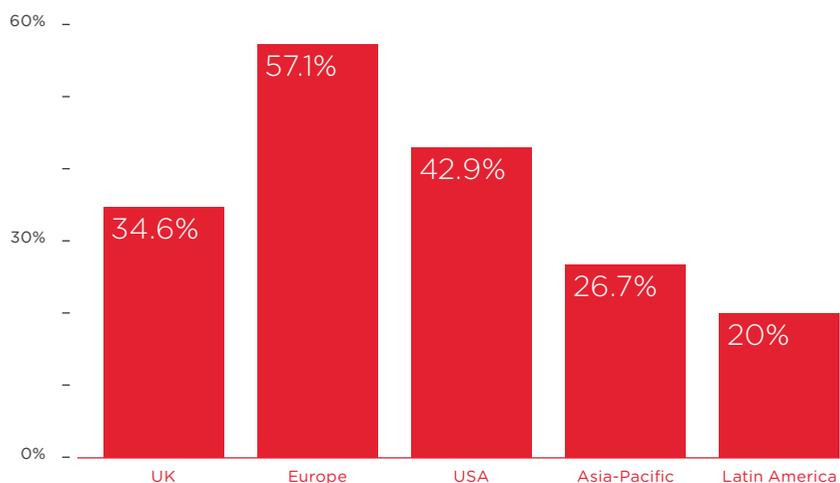


Sectors

In the health sector, participation design is good in theory but community members become frustrated because it's too hard for them to understand. Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that social welfare, health and education emerge as sectors 'open' to co-design. Social welfare has, for example, the highest percentage of projects for which no assumptions were made about what could and could not be changed during the design process, in the UK, Asia-Pacific and Latin America.²⁷ It is in the health sector that users are most likely to play a day-to-day role in the design process in the UK and Asia-Pacific.²⁸ Education is most likely to have projects described as 'completely collaborative' in all territories but Latin America (see figure 5).²⁹

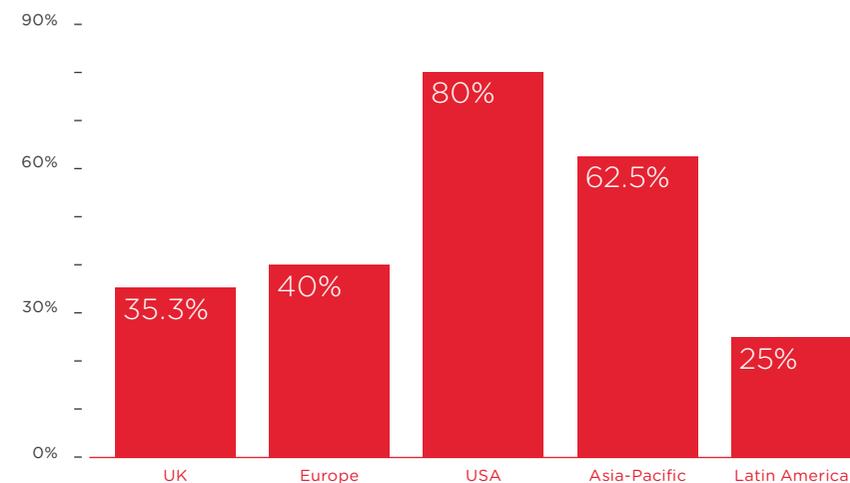
Figure 5 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects described as being completely collaborative, in the education sector



This certainly matches some of the work explored in the Demos pamphlet *Making It Personal*,³⁰ which focused on the successes of individual budgets in social care. It is a field in which 'user knowledge' is perhaps most personal and esoteric. Understanding health or social problems involves intimate knowledge that is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire without the involvement of users themselves.

Interestingly, the results for transport suggest that the sector is remarkably open to some elements of co-design given the scale of projects involved, and the necessity of their interacting with complex transport infrastructures. This is particularly true in the USA, where 80 per cent of transport projects were identified as having no assumptions about the scope of changes involved.³¹

Figure 6 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects described as having no assumptions about what could and couldn't be changed during service design, in the transport sector



However, the real story emerging from the sector data is the primacy of territorial variations in measures of co-design activity. The examples given illustrate this effect. The responses to a variety of the survey questions show that different aspects of co-design are prevalent in different sectors within a territory (see table 4). This is an interesting result in itself, and illustrates the need to tailor co-design to the specific needs of different groups of users. Yet it is also clear that different sectors dominate certain aspects of co-design across different territories, and, if we are to move towards a global perspective, it is these variations that should catch our attention.

Table 4. Co-design survey – sector variations within/across territories

Sector most often described as...	UK	Europe (Not UK)	USA	Asia-Pacific	Latin-America
A	Education	Transport	Welfare	Transport	Health ³²
B	Health	Health	Education	Education	Transport
C	Welfare	Education	Transport	Welfare	Welfare
D	Education	Education	Transport	Welfare	Health

- A** Collaborative or completely collaborative
B Consulting users very often or continuously
C Permitting changes at all scales
D Giving a great deal of weight to user comments

4 · the big picture: future challenges

In the future things will increasingly be designed collaboratively. Design participants such as marketing researchers, stylists, engineers, customers, component suppliers may be distributed geographically over the world, belonging to different organizations with intricate organizational, technological and financial meta-systems operating under dynamic market conditions and uncertain business circumstances. Collaborative design systems are typically heterogeneous and very dynamic, involving complex interactions among many humans, applications, services, devices, and many changing constraints.³³

Professor Jeffrey Johnson and Dr Shengfeng Qin

One problem was actually the richness of the input from so many different viewpoints.

Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

The survey dispels any doubts about the prevalence of co-design ideas and ideals, not only in the UK but across the globe. Well over 90 per cent of respondents claimed to be, or have been, involved with projects which include the users of a public service in their design or development. The results confirm that, far from being a UK policy 'fad', co-design can be considered an established international movement, reaching across territories and service sectors. We heard from professionals involved in a wide array of projects including electronic vehicle registration, long-term transport planning, community health assessments, park renovations, maternity care, communicable disease reporting and senior fitness programmes.

Nor is this merely 'thin-end' customer service work, either. Nearly half of all projects reported through the survey saw the collaborative relationship with users being at the start of the design process. The majority of respondents also claimed that the process of co-design itself was open and transparent to the participants. Furthermore, the results suggest that these collaborative processes involve more than surveys and questionnaires. For example, globally, in the great majority of cases (86 per cent) users had input not only into the design of a service, but into the nature of the design process itself.

Verbatim comments suggest that co-design and collaborative design processes are welcomed, often with real enthusiasm. As one USA respondent told us: 'It allowed the public to feel included, and we have an outstanding product as a result.'

Where to, now?

In striving to embed the principles of co-design into public services, we have turned towards a new set of questions. Will co-design continue to grow and develop, and take its place as an important part of our involving people in the institutions and public services around them? How does it develop into a systemic ideal, consistent with the broad policy process? And how will that grate against established methods of design, delivery and models of accountability?

Addressing these types of questions requires us to understand that services vary widely in their offer, in the roles of the professionals within them, and in the way people expect to encounter them. The spectrum of co-design does not run from ‘less’ towards an ill-defined ‘more’, from questionnaires to ‘fully blown co-design’. There exists a multiplicity of options for types of interaction, levels of change and models of participation.

At the same time, we need to step back and look again at the rationale of co-design: we need to ‘zoom out’ from the micro-issues of deep engagement, which are well negotiated and understood by an host of organisations, and look with the same intensity towards the relationships and connections between different levels of policy making. As co-design principles become embedded, so too does the notion that engaging users is a moral and practical imperative. What is needed now is an understanding of how the language, ideals and direction of co-design practice interact with the practical aims, objectives and constraints of higher-level policy makers.

‘Top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’

People are quick to recognise an empty promise of greater power, where consultation bears no reflection on final decisions and where bottom-up deliberation continues to be trumped by top-down directives. Sophia Parker ³⁴

When politics comes in in relation to resources, particularly power, the direction is not necessarily generated by the users but some other organisations. Survey respondent, Hong Kong and China

In addition to practical considerations there is a wider imperative for applying co-design. Governments are generally stricken with a sense of declining public trust and legitimacy. Across the political spectrum attention is turning to reinvigorating that legitimacy by connecting government to a more immediate connection with the experience of democracy.³⁵ Governments have been searching for ways in which to make the business of politics more relevant to people and it is clear that public services, through their effects on people’s everyday lives, play an important role in this endeavour. Breaking down the provider/user barrier ‘reminds us that we are active contributors to a public realm that is also experienced by others around us’.³⁶

The community has ownership of the program – it’s not just something that public health does... This is a very small community and to get a dentist here three days a month and a hygienist two days – that’s five days of dental health we didn’t have before. It’s making a real impact on the oral health of the community.

Survey respondent, USA

One of the main restrictions was the education department’s rules and guidelines. They were inflexible. Survey respondent, Australia & New Zealand

For example, much like the USA respondent’s comments on dental services, the UK Design Council has worked with GP surgeries in Bolton to understand how health services can better respond to the needs of people with diabetes. Working closely with people to understand their day-to-day lives and the pressures on them enabled the team to help sufferers more effectively deal with their condition.³⁷

There is, however, a disjuncture between top-down strategic imperatives and people-centred initiatives. Drivers and incentives are very different for high-level policy makers and frontline staff, but the decisions of each impact greatly on the other.

No one wanted the highway in their front yard. Survey respondent, USA

A real problem was having to refer some ideas to the Health Secretary for approval, which sometimes took a considerable amount of time. Survey respondent, UK

The bureaucratic barriers were the main problem: the people that had to approve it to get any changes, making it acceptable to get funding. Survey respondent, USA

Commitment to participation requires a real willingness on behalf of those who have power to share it. This requires a change of culture such that ‘coordination [is] more highly valued than control’.³⁸ Government officials must attempt to view ‘the world through the lens of the service user [and to move from] government controlling and directing the delivery of public services to government playing the role of facilitator and enabler’.³⁹ They need to accept that they may not be the most effective people to take part in the process as users are more likely to trust frontline staff than they are to trust high-ranking officials. It is easier for service users to imagine the necessary collective ‘we’ if that involves comparatively powerless officials.

The legacy of traditional service provision

It can be a real problem motivating all the employees to participate and have everyone on the same page. Survey respondent, Europe

The scope for co-design to have a practical impact is restricted by the legacy of traditional models of public service provision. While asking, ‘What do you want?’ does not seem particularly revolutionary, it has prompted some fraught soul-searching in the context of public service reform. The co-design approach to problem-solving may well result in changes to the problems addressed. Where there is a need for accountability to certain groups (shareholders, taxpayers, users, etc), the resource allocation required by co-design may necessitate new modes of justification. This justification seems most successful where assessment is by informal interview with users,⁴⁰ but there is an ongoing perception that user opinions are no match for hard figures.

It is clear that it is often legitimate to ask whether the processes described by respondents really involve in-depth collaboration, or whether they betray more minimal, customer-service approaches. The results suggest the level of collaboration varies by sector and territory. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, despite respondents’ reporting that almost three-quarters of projects involved no assumptions about the scale of changes available, nearly a quarter involved only minimal collaboration, and few (13 per cent) involved users for an extended period. Although the results around involvement of users is positive, the breakdowns suggest that the type of involvement tended towards a more restricted collaboration.

Scaling

In some cases it was like trying to compare apples to oranges. We were trying to translate how the private sector does something, to match how the public sector does something. Survey respondent, USA

The responses of different people to what seems like the same problem can be unexpectedly different. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss explained a surprising finding from his time with soldiers in the First World War: English soldiers, taking over from their French counterparts, could not use French spades to continue work. It meant that, each time duties switched between the French and English, 8,000 spades had to be swapped around.

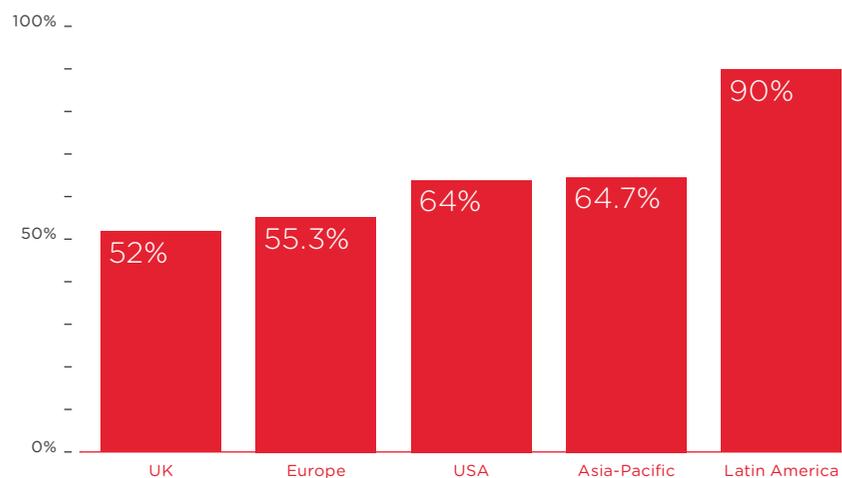
*During the war I was able to make numerous observations regarding this specificity of techniques. These included those of digging. The English troops with whom I was [posted] did not know how to use French spades, which necessitated changing 8,000 spades per division when we relieved a French division, and vice versa. Here is the evidence that a ‘knack’ takes time to acquire. Any technique has its own form.*⁴¹ Marcel Mauss

Mauss’s findings help to demonstrate that not only are there multiple ways to solve a problem, but countless ways to identify, frame and understand the problem itself. If the scales at which co-design happens are to increase, from, say, small patient groups to general healthcare policy, this ‘site specificity’ will increasingly need to be taken into consideration. Co-design is participatory but, at larger scales, the participation of a few has the potential to dictate a design for the many. There is an inherent risk that the benefits of co-design will be undermined as this happens and, to those outside the consultation process, co-design becomes simply design by committee, albeit a very large committee.

In the context of this project, users’ interests were very diverse. With a wide range of interested organisations it was difficult to establish an effective forum in which to gauge the views and opinions of users. Survey respondent, UK

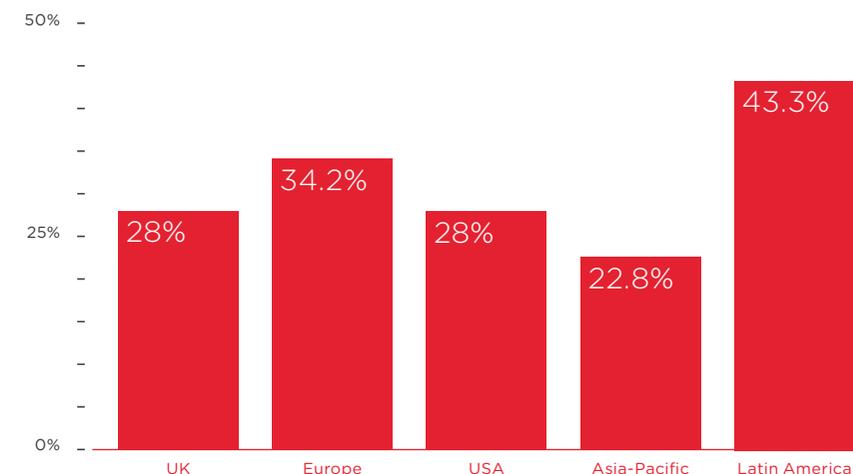
There are serious issues to consider, relating first to the extent to which co-design processes actively seek the expression of a representative or properly diverse range of views. The evidence is that this remains a problem (see figure 7). In the UK, 52 per cent of respondents said that the users were already known to the project team – the lowest of all the territories. In the USA, and Hong Kong and China the results are higher still. The highest by far is Latin America, where respondents said that 90 per cent of users were already known to the project team. What is more, with the exception of social welfare in Australia and New Zealand, only around 29 per cent of respondents across the territories (with particularly low results in the case of Latin America) say they selected participants around criteria specifically designed to ensure a variety of viewpoints.

Figure 7 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects for which user participants were already known to the design team, by territory



Such problems of scale emerge as co-design principles gain system-wide application, across multiple delivery channels within extended organisations. There are, for example, issues with regard to the public service under design. We need different ways of working, giving people with different needs alternative ways of interacting with public services. For some, the automated convenience of the call centre or online application may simplify their experience. For others, more complex needs imply entirely different models of interaction.

Figure 8 Co-design survey results: percentage of projects described as 'not at all' (users selected to fit specific criteria which match specific design goals) or 'not very' diverse, by territory



There are further issues arising from the fact that the amount and type of co-design itself differs across types of service and organisation. This can involve practical questions, such as the extent to which expert opinion is required; opinion which may well override certain user inputs. Some of the resources and information in public services are, in Eric von Hippel's terminology, unavoidably 'sticky', meaning it can be difficult to 'move' that information from one place to another, from professional to user.⁴²

The general plan is to try to involve them, but we tend to use a lot more behind-the-scenes strategic planning. Survey respondent, UK

Scaling also emphasises political problems, which may be glossed over in smaller-scale projects. Different sectors involve different structures of influence, and the 'right amount' of co-design depends on those structures in addition to the kinds of factors already mentioned. At even higher levels of policy, we should be asking how much we ought to invest in people-driven initiatives, and what role we envisage for the state in the context of those initiatives.

‘Explorers’ versus ‘exploiters’

The survey helps us to think about the extent to which territories and the governments within them can be considered, in the language of James G March, as ‘explorers’ or ‘exploiters’.⁴³ ‘Explorers’ are able to find new ways to define a problem as well as finding solutions to it: they can redefine the challenges they are looking to address. ‘Exploiters’, on the other hand, are more likely to have seen their areas of interest become expressed as a particular set of problems. Their approach then becomes dominated by finding cheaper or more efficient ways of addressing those problems or goals.

While recognising the need for caution arising from a small sample size, the Latin American results are interesting here. Once co-design does become mainstream, public services seem to be presented with a trade-off: the scope for really radical system innovation seems to get smaller as collaborative principles become embedded in public service delivery. While the respondents in Latin America were involved in the most engaged collaborative projects, this does not necessarily mean that they were the most radical of service (re)designers. The most radical innovation is seemingly coming from the place where co-design has yet to become mainstream.

Why is this? There is no a priori reason why ‘exploiters’ are only tinkering at the edges. The evidence is that there is a danger that co-design, once normalised and embedded in the core business of public services, is taken on as a set of tools for delivering a collaborative methodology. Once this happens, its more innovative aspects, which require relatively ‘free thinking’, are lost. The question to keep in mind is: how do we focus on maintaining the ability for an organisation to ask whose problems a service is solving – the bureaucratic needs of a delivery process, or the possibilities available for meeting people’s needs?

Table 5 Top 10 co-design survey responses, globally, to the question: ‘What would you say worked particularly well in relation to the involvement of users in the design of this project?’

1	Everyone was involved in the project	24.6%
2	Ability to engage clients	9.6%
3=	Project was service-led	8.9%
3=	Responses from patients/public have been positive	8.9%
5	Transparency	8.7%
6	Generates new ideas and concepts from real-world experience	8.0%
7	Encouraged dialogue about aims/goals	7.5%
8	Users were involved in background discussion	7.0%
9	Processes made it easier to involve users	5.4%
10=	Training enabled users to participate	4.5%
10=	Project roles were clear	4.5%

Table 6 Top ten co-design survey responses, globally, to the question: ‘What barriers or difficulties did you face?’

1	Time constraints	14.3%
2	Conflicting views and opinions	10.6%
3	Financial constraints	9.9%
4	Availability of people	9.4%
5=	Bureaucracy	5.6%
5=	Geographical barriers	5.6%
7=	Knowledge levels of participants	5.4%
7=	The organisation of the actual [participative] event	5.4%
9=	Difficulty in communicating the need for change	5.2%
9=	Linguistic and cultural differences	5.2%

5. conclusions

[W]e want the good influence of women to tell to its greatest extent in the social and moral questions of the time. But we cannot do this unless we have the vote and are recognized as citizens and voices to be listened to.⁴⁴

Emmeline Pankhurst

We ended up with a more authentic result. It opened my eyes to the barriers people face every day.

Survey respondent, Australia and New Zealand

Wanting to have one's voice heard by those in power is nothing new. Co-design is happening now, globally, and is allowing new voices their place in influencing the services that affect their lives. Indeed, when it works it goes further, actually rebalancing power in an environment of deep collaboration. Yet, this is a moment of reflection for co-design as an international movement. It is a time to reflect on how the collaborative ethic is impacting on the everyday realities of public services. As co-design has matured we are seeing the challenges faced by services designed to work to very different rules. These are problems that will not be fixed by the rhetoric of participation and empowerment alone.

In shifting power towards users, inevitable tensions arise between this new approach and public services' established ways of working; between top-down strategy and bottom-up aspirations; between the demands of large-scale services and smaller, localised solutions; and between the new ideas and problems posed by users and the legacy of traditional service delivery. It is these tensions which will need to be resolved if co-design is to thrive as an established component of service design, and we should address them now.

As an example of the way ahead, if we are to continue to move forward with the principles of collaboration, we need to map the diversities within providers themselves. Scaling co-design to larger, policy-orientated implementations requires a widening of scope, beyond the point of user-provider interaction, to look at collaboration and innovation within and across departments and public agencies. This 'systemic' co-design carries with it an ethos that will help co-design shift to the core of public service business.

It is vital that we 'zoom out' to the system-wide challenges, asking how the language and constraints of design vary across levels of policy making. However, even as we take this wider view, so we must recognise the variations by sector and, particularly, territory, which are highlighted by our survey. If co-design is to advance, it must be understood that the analysis and approaches of one country may not successfully translate directly to another. What is a global desire for collaboration will require local knowledge in order to succeed.

appendix

survey questions and response ranges

- i** *Have you been involved in a project to develop or improve a service that has included the views of users?* Yes or No
- ii** *Are there any other parts of your organization where this type of participatory approach is taken to service design?* Yes or No
- iii** *Are there any particular reasons why your organisation has not involved users in the development or improvement of services?* verbatim responses
- iv** *Looking to the future, how likely is it that your organisation will begin to involve users in the development or improvement of services?* 5 responses, from Very unlikely to Very likely
- v** *How do you plan to involve users in the development or improvement of services?* verbatim responses
- 1.2** *Does the project involve new services or existing services?* 5 responses, from All services are new to All of the services related to the project already exist
- 1.3** *Which of the following best describes the approach taken in designing the services associated with this project?* There were no opportunities to make large-scale changes; Large -scale changes were permitted only if absolutely necessary; No assumptions were made about what can and can't be changed
- 2.1** *What kind of relationship did the project team have with the users during the design?* Minimal collaboration: users were occasionally consulted if a specific question needed an answer; Collaborative: users were consulted at many but not all stages; Completely collaborative: users were involved in all stages
- 2.2** *Were the users already known to the project team?* Yes or No

- 2.3** *At what stage of the process, if at all, did the relationship with the user begin?* 5 responses, from At the very end of the process: users were not involved until the design project is finalised by the provider to At the very start of the process: users were involved in the very earliest discussions, even before the main design effort had begun
- 2.4** *To what extent, if at all, were users involved in the definition or modification of the design process itself?* 3 responses, from To no extent at all: the process was owned by the internal project team, and there was no user feedback regarding that process to To a great extent: the internal project team and users worked together at all levels to define and refine the process
- 2.5** *How much information, if any, were users given about internal design discussions in which they did not directly participate?* 5 responses, from None: internal discussions were strictly private to All information available: the entire process was open-access to all those involved, whether users or the internal project team
- 2.6** *How frequently were users consulted during service design?* 5 responses, from Rarely: one or two consultative meetings took place over the course of design to Continuously: users played a day-to-day role in the design process
- 2.7** *For how long did a particular user play a part in the design process?* Single interaction: each particular user contributed a single comment or set of responses and has no further involvement; Some users were involved for an extended period, others involved in only one part of the design effort; For an extended period: each user followed the design process for a substantial amount or a particular phase of its entire duration
- 2.8** *How diverse were the viewpoints which users contributed to the design process?* 5 responses, from Not at all diverse: users are selected to fit specific criteria which match specific design goals to Very diverse: users were selected using criteria specifically designed to ensure a variety of viewpoints and interests
- 2.9** *Which of the following best describes the relationship that developed between all those involved in the design?* Limited: relationships between individuals were limited to those strictly necessary for the design agenda; There were some opportunities for interaction outside of the project but most of the time the relationships were limited to those necessary for the project design; Wide ranging: All participants were given opportunities to interact and form a wider community of common interests

- 2.10** *To what extent, if at all, did users learn about the service(s) under design?*
To a minimal extent: discussions with the user only covered those specific areas of the service to which they were likely to be exposed; To some extent: users obtained some insights into the service beyond the areas that they are directly involved in; To a great extent: users obtained a wide-ranging picture of the service and the context in which it is delivered
- 2.11** *How much did users learn about the way in which the service was designed?* 3 responses, from **Only a little:** the user was given some information about the process if it is necessary to elicit a response to **A great deal:** users left the project knowing as much about the design process as the internal project team
- 2.12** *Again thinking about the project that you have just described, how important was the existence of a clear design process?* 5 responses, from **Not at all important:** there was no design process – the way to proceed, and the people to be involved, are decided as and when necessary to **Very important:** the process clearly guides the actions to be taken, and the people to take them, every step of the way
- 2.13** *In the project, how clear were the responsibilities of, and limitations on, the internal design team and users, during the design process?* 5 responses, from **Not at all clear:** responsibilities and limitations varied with no apparent reason to **Very clear:** everyone involved was aware of the responsibilities and limitations that apply to him or her
- 2.14** *How much weight was given to the ideas and comments of users?* 5 responses, from **Very little:** user comments were only considered in exceptional circumstances to **A great deal:** user comments were every bit as important as those of the internal project team
- 2.15** *What scale of change warranted consultation with users?* 5 responses, from **Only very small changes involved user consultation,** through **All scales of change involved users** to **Only very large changes involved user consultation**
- 2.16** *In your opinion, how clear, if at all, was the communication of the overall vision and direction of the design effort to users?* 5 responses, from **Not at all clear:** each participant had a different idea of the goals of the design effort and the way of reaching those goals to **Very clear:** all participants shared the same goals and are working closely together to achieve those goals
- 2.17** *How concrete and practical was the focus of the detailed design effort?* 5 responses, from **Not at all:** the detailed design effort remains focused on very generic goals, eg ‘improve service delivery’ to **Very:** the detailed design effort was focused on the achievement of tangible and measurable goals, eg ‘reduce waiting times by 15%’

- 3.1** *In your opinion, did the design process encourage comments from users?* **No, never:** comments were always attributable and criticism was viewed unfavourably; **Yes, sometimes;** **Yes, always:** all comments were welcome and did not reflect on the source, whether named or not
- 3.2** *How well did users and the internal project team communicate with each other?* 5 responses, from **Very poorly:** communication was difficult because users and the internal team had difficulty in explaining their ideas clearly and effectively to each other to **Very well:** participants used methods of expression which aid understanding and made communication effective, eg diagrams, simplified models
- 3.3** *How flexible, if at all, were the ways in which participants could contact each other?* 5 responses, from **Not at all flexible:** contact was limited to a few set times, using one means of communication to **Very flexible:** all participants could contact each other throughout the working day and often beyond, using several different means of communication, eg telephone, email, face-to-face meetings and web pages
- 3.4** *What level of involvement did participants have in any changes to the way they were involved in the design process?* eg unable to make comments on certain areas. 5 responses, from **None:** changes were made without any form of discussion, through **Some:** participants were informed of the reason behind restrictions but are not involved in the decision to make those changes to **A great deal:** participants were fully involved in both the decision to make changes and their implementation
- 4.1** *Are you aware of any other people within your organisation to whom we should speak about this type of participative design?* **Yes** or **No**
- 4.2** *Can you suggest any other public sector organisations that we could speak to in relation to this subject?* **Yes** or **No**
- 4.3** *What would you say worked particularly well in relation to the involvement of users in the design of this project?* **verbatim responses**
- 4.4** *What barriers or difficulties did you face?* **verbatim responses**
- 4.5** *What would you say were the main benefits or impacts of using the participative or co-design approach in this project?* **verbatim responses**
- 4.6** *Have you measured or evaluated these benefits?* **Yes** or **No**
- 4.7** *How have you evaluated these benefits?* **verbatim responses**
- 4.8** *Do you have any further comments to make in relation to this topic?* **verbatim responses**

notes

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- 4 Europe is used as shorthand for 'Europe, excluding the UK', and includes respondents from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Denmark.
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- 25** With the exception of Hong Kong and China.
- 26** With the possible exception of the education sector, in which collaborative practices were less prevalent than in other regions.
- 27** It is second highest in the USA, behind transport, and in Europe (not UK), behind education.
- 28** It is second highest in Latin America, behind transport, and in Europe (not UK), behind education. It is third highest in the USA, behind education and transport.
- 29** Where, interestingly, it is the sector *least* likely to be 'completely collaborative'.
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- 31** Again, Latin America displayed results tending towards collaborative processes, and with 100% of transport projects relating to existing services, but with more constraints on the level of change available: only a quarter of projects made no assumptions about what scale of changes were available.
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