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Exposing charities to design-led approaches through design research

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Abstract: This paper discusses the value of using design research to expose Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organisations to design-led approaches. The discussion is based on the findings from two qualitative, exploratory doctoral inquiries into the relevance and applicability of adopting a Design for Service (DfS) approach to effect transformation in VCS contexts. Using Action Research and a case study structure, the DfS approach was introduced and applied within four VCS organisations in succession. The research findings have provided valuable evidence and insight into design's capacity to incite transformational change, and the challenges of doing so, at a critical time for the sector.

Keywords: public services; voluntary sector; design for services

1. Introduction

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, the UK's Coalition Government signaled its intention to radically reform public services (HM Government, 2010). This drive to reduce public spending, decrease inefficiencies, decentralise provision and enable user choice has had far-reaching impact on public services. It has impacted: families and children; jobs and welfare; the justice system; and public health (HM Treasury, 2010), and thus has had a significant impact on VCS organisations offering such services.

This challenging operating environment had a considerable impact on VCS organisations' abilities to continue to provide quality services; none more so than those operating in the North East of England who, because of their disproportionate reliance on public money, saw 73% of their VCS community suffer a reduction in funding (Wilding, Kane, & Clark, 2011, p. 24). The consequences of these actions led to 40% of the region's VCS organisations making redundancies, and over a quarter decreasing the number of services that they provide (Voluntary Organisations' Network North East, 2011, p. 12). Despite this considerable



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reduction in capacity, the third sector was trying to cope with a sizeable increase in service demand (Voluntary Organisations' Network North East, 2011; Wilding et al., 2011).

Simultaneously, policies such as Putting People First (Department of Health, 2007) and Open Public Services (HM Government, 2011) meant statutory contracts demanded person-centred, tailored provisions, rather than traditional offerings. VCS organisations were therefore being asked to deliver radically different services, with drastically reduced capacity and resource.

This same transformation agenda affecting the VCS was acting as a catalyst for the engagement of designers in public settings (Schaeper, Maher, & Baxter, 2009). Programmes of work such as the *Public Services by Design* project (Design Council, 2010), Open Policy Making within the UK Cabinet Office (Buchanan, 2014) and the creation of the *experience based design* (ebd) approach for use in the NHS (Bate & Robert, 2007) provided valuable examples of the impact that design could have on services and systems in the public sector. National initiatives such as Dott 07¹ (Thackara, 2007) and Dott Cornwall² (Relph-Knight, 2011) also demonstrated at an international level that design-led approaches could result in new services and systems that were co-owned by the community they benefitted (Relph-Knight, 2011; Tan, 2012; Thackara, 2007).

Those experiences suggested that a Design for Service (DfS) approach could be of value to VCS organisations trying to make the changes dictated by new policies and a volatile fiscal climate. However, given the drastic cuts in funding from both voluntary and statutory sources (Kane et al., 2014), there was little resource for VCS organisations to engage in traditional contractual relationships with designers. For those that did have available capital, a predominant focus on using design in the public sector meant there was little evidence of the impact that it could have specifically on VCS organisations, making it a high-risk engagement.

Academic design research and teaching projects have long been seen as a way of testing out new approaches and developing concepts in exchange for research data, teaching content, publicity or funding (Reeves, Redford, & McQueen, 2010). Recent programmes such as DESIS International Labs have attempted to actively involve undergraduate and postgraduate students in live social innovation projects to promote sustainable change (DESI Network, 2012). However, design research in social settings remains immature (Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell, 2014). Added to the need for more academic presence in this area, academic institutions are now asked to demonstrate the impact of their research on society. The new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, the Research Excellence Framework assessment, asks for evidence of the impact of the research activity, including any impact on society (Research Excellence Framework, 2011).

¹ Dott 07 (Design of the times 2007) was a national initiative of the Design Council and the regional development agency One North East. It was a year of community projects, events and exhibitions based in North East England, exploring how design could support sustainable and inclusive life (Thackara, 2007)

² As above, but with practical projects run in Cornwall in partnership with Cornwall Council, University of Falmouth and TSB (Relph-Knight, 2011).

Design research doctoral inquiries therefore offer a unique opportunity for VCS organisations to work with a designer outside of a traditional fee-paying structure, as well as offering significant benefits to the academic institution by building valuable knowledge and demonstrating research impact.

This paper will describe the outcomes of initial applications of using a DfS approach in four VCS organisations through two doctoral inquiries; one completed in 2015 and one ongoing. The paper will describe how all of the charities involved reported positive outcomes from using the approach, which include: more customer-focused services; financial gains; and organisational learning. It will also detail how the use of design on a systems level in two of the organisations resulted in transformational change, which has enabled the charities to thrive in challenging times. The paper will also suggest that design researchers have a continued, crucial role to play in exposing VCS organisations to the value of design and extending our knowledge of the impact of the approach in this important context.

2. Methodology

Although the paper considers two separate doctoral inquiries, the research aims and methodologies are largely similar. Given the duality of the aims of both research programmes (delivering outcomes to the VCS organisations involved, and creating new knowledge for the various audiences of the study), the inquiries needed to build knowledge through the *active* application of design, but in a rigorous way. As these studies aimed to understand the value of a DfS approach in a VCS organisation, it can be seen to be addressing both *ontological* and *contextual* questions; considering what design is good for, and how it interacts with the world in this context (Steinø & Markussen, 2011).

To answer these questions in a way befitting of the capacity issues afflicting the VCS organisations, the designers needed to be based within each organisation as both practitioners and researchers. As a result, Action Research (Lewin, 1946) was selected as the predominant methodology, supported by a case study structure (Yin, 2003) to ensure generalizable theory. In the VCS, where contextual factors such as funding and commissioning have proven to be problematic for existing change models, Action Research has been considered an appropriate approach because it is context-specific (Kellock Hay, Beattie, Livingstone, & Munro, 2001).

As a researcher operates within an organisation, it is possible to gain an understanding about the realities of the organisation and respond in an appropriate way (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; McTaggart, 1997). Although the level of change that can be brought about by Action Research is debated (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), the methodology pursues practical solutions to problems in order to improve situations, aligning with the societal change ambitions of the DfS approach (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006; Manzini, 2011). Reason (1998, p. 71) defined Action Research as having a double objective; the first to produce knowledge and action useful to a community of people, with the second aim to empower those people at a fundamental level by helping them to construct and use their own knowledge, which aligns with the dual aims of this research study.

However, given that Action Research develops 'local theory' (Elden, 1983) based on the particular individuals and contexts with which it takes place, "it cannot be guaranteed that results can be made richly meaningful to people in other situations" (Checkland & Holwell, 1998). To improve the validity of the findings, it was necessary to adopt a second complementary methodology: a case study research design. A case study research design (Yin, 2003) adds detail to the methodological strategy by providing an extended look at the Action Research process. The DfS approach was applied in four VCS organisations, which were considered as cases in a multiple-case case study structure (Yin, 2003); Charity A; Charity B; and Charity C in the first doctoral inquiry; and Charity D in the second.

Each VCS organisation chosen as a case was a registered charity or other formally constituted VCS organisation with an income from charitable activities between £100,000 and £1 million per year; an indicator that an organisation will be at risk as statutory support diminishes (Voluntary Organisations' Network North East, 2011). They also had to be currently offering, or have a contract to offer public services, and looking to evaluate, change or expand these in some way in the future, in order to undertake design activity in the time constraints of the research. The four charities also had to have differing charitable aims and customer bases, so that the DfS practice was not guided by any previous engagement, as is required by the Action Research approach (Lewin, 1946, p. 38; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). The four organisations, along with a brief description of the collaborations' aims, are described below:

- Charity A is a local organisation that is part of a UK federation. They provide mental health and wellbeing services across three boroughs in North East England, many of which are on behalf of a local council. In this project setting, the designer was asked to help the organisation consider what services they should provide in a new geographical area.
- Charity B is also a local charity registered with a national federation. Operating in one borough in North East England, they provide a variety of community education services to all ages. In this project setting, the designer was engaged to help the organisation improve its earned income, particularly focusing on how it could improve its membership system, which offered discounts on fitness, arts and children's services to the local community.

- Charity C is a national charity based in North East England. Their mission is to engage children in reading and they offer a variety of services, both directly to the public and through education institutions, that address this aim. Here, the designer helped the charity to consider the experience that their services provided and how it could be improved to better meet the aims of the organisation.
- Charity D is a local charity based in North East England. The organisation provides a range of artistic services for people with mental health issues partly funded through a local council. The designer helped the charity to redefine its services within the context without alienating existing service users.

In each of the four charities engaged in the studies, the designers worked with a variety of stakeholders; staff and volunteers who administer services directly to clients; middle management; and executive leadership. Periods of action research were conducted within the charities for two months or an equivalent amount of time. This length of study allowed data to be collected and ensured that the researchers did not place burden on the organisation's capacity.

The Action Research design activity was the primary data source for the case study. Through Action Research, research participants were engaged in creating, making, commenting on and shaping existing systems. Data was collated from 31 project meetings (Nimkulrat, 2007), 6 workshops and 54 design outcomes (Zimmerman, Stolterman, & Forlizzi, 2010). These data sources were also supported by 25 semi-structured interviews (Robson, 2011) pre- and post-collaboration with Charities A, B and C, as well as 108 reflection-on-action logs (Schön, 1983).

The data collection strategy was designed to capture data from various project stakeholders in each case (e.g. Chief Executive, Business Development Manager etc.), at various stages of the project timeline (before, during and post-collaboration). The multiple participants' perspectives helped to build knowledge about the perceived value of design to different VCS stakeholders, whilst the different stages of the project helped to build knowledge about how that changes over time. As the designers' embedded position in the organisations could also lead to criticisms of bias (Checkland and Holwell, 1998), post-collaboration data was gathered by an independent researcher to ensure honesty and parity.

3. Data analysis

Within the collaborations, the designers acted as both researchers and practitioners. To reduce any influence data analysis might have on the designers' practice, analysis commenced only once the data collection for each study was completed. As such, only the data from the first doctoral inquiry has been systematically analysed using the process outlined in this section. As the collaboration with Charity D is ongoing, the results of the analysis were compared with reflection-on-action logs from Charity D, allowing data to be

compared and contrasted with the derived patterns in order to present the findings considered in Section 4.

The data collected in Charities A, B and C (31 project meetings, 6 workshops, 54 design outcomes, 25 semi-structured interviews and 108 reflection-on-action logs) was analysed using a general inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006) to build theory directly from the data, without being influenced by pre-defined goals. The data was taken through four stages of analysis using both inductive and abductive logic in order to construct theory: data-cleaning; first-stage coding; building multiple coding collections; and identifying themes and patterns.

In stage one, data-cleaning, all data was converted into a common format (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 51). All data was then collated for each project setting (including interview transcripts, project meeting summary sheets, reflection-on-action logs and other project correspondence), printed and filed in chronological order. This enabled the researcher to become familiar with the content, themes and events described during a close reading of each data set.

The second stage (first-stage coding) continued the process of data-cleaning (Rahm & Do, 2000) by using the four aims for the study as evaluation objectives to guide hand coding of the data, further refining the pool of data relevant to the study's aims. Throughout the data, when a critical incident that related to one or more of the evaluation objectives was identified, it was first attributed to the relevant objective(s) using a number that correlated to each question (e.g. '4' for How was the DfS approach established in the VCS organisation?), and then encoded (Boyatzis, 1998). The codes were simple and clear, aiming to capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). Once this first-stage coding was complete, all relevant excerpts were copied onto Post-It notes to enable manual comparing and contrasting of the data.

Despite these primary stages of data-cleaning, there were still approximately 4,000 excerpts of text relevant to the research. Stage three of the process was therefore to create multiple coding collections (Guldbrandsen, 2006, p. 56) rooted in the original context. To do this, each excerpt was considered in a matrix, which placed time (pre-project set-up, project, and post project reflection) on the horizontal axis and stakeholder (Designer, Chief Executive, Service Manager, Business Manager etc.) on the vertical axis. Where commonality was spotted within a quadrant of the matrix, similar quotes were grouped together and encoded. The fourth and final stage was to compare multiple coding collections (Guldbrandsen, 2006, p. 56) within and across stakeholders, timelines and cases to isolate common categories. This was enabled by bringing together the photographs that captured the essence of a collection related to a specific evaluation objective (four in total) and in a specific case study (three in total) to create an image that could be viewed in detail (see Figure 1).

Each image (there were 12 in total) showed the multiple coding collections related to an evaluation objective across the case study timeline e.g. multiple coding collections for evaluation objective how in Charity B, as in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Screen shot of compiled image showing an example of multiple coding collections

These common categories were then grouped and reduced to identify themes (Silverman, 2006, p. 307). These final themes were then analysed to derive patterns (Reichertz, 2007, p. 221). With each of the patterns, a process of correlating the theory with existing literature, as well as reflecting back on the original data, ensured the reliability of the findings.

4. Findings

4.1 The outcomes of using design in a VCS organisation

The foundations of the findings presented here are based on the diverse outcomes reported by each charity, which are described in brief in Table 1 below. Please note that only outcomes that the stakeholders attributed entirely to the design activity have been considered and presented here.

Table 1 Design activity and associated outcomes in each charity.

Charity	Design Activity	Outcome/Impact
Charity A	New system vision infographic	Used to shape new staff roles, mission statement and policies. Submitted as part of a successful £500k grant application.
	Service customer journey and prototype touchpoints	Used to co-design and test service proposition. Resulted in radically different service model.
Charity B	Co-design workshop and findings report	Findings helped to shape the service to be more customer-focused. Report submitted as part of a successful £190k grant application.
	Brochure prototypes with new pricing and membership structures	Used to co-design new pricing and membership structures with key stakeholders. Resulting structures were rolled out and resulted in an increase in memberships.
Charity C	Visitor experience report and customer experience maps	Used to share findings of service experience with key stakeholders to define project focus. Maps used to

		train new staff on the diversity of customers and their varying needs. Findings contributed to two successful grant applications totalling £1.9m.
	Idea generation workshops and summary of ideas	Used to generate new concepts to address the welcome and exit at the visitor centre. Shared ideas to encourage ownership amongst teams and encourage quick changes.
	Service prototypes	Prototypes co-designed with teams were rolled out over a holiday period to test their impact at a busy time. Resulted in £50k increase in earned income, as well as better customer feedback.
Charity D	Co-design service environments in four workshops and a summary report	Co-designed outputs made visible key attributes of the service resulting in services that closer match user expectations. Part of this work directly supported a successful grant application.
	Concept generation activity contributing to a 5-year plan for the organisation	Co-designed concepts from the workshop were selected to form a strategy, leading to a service model based on extensive evidence.

The main outcomes for charities involved in the studies were (1) more customer-focused services and (2) organisational learning.

All four charities involved in the research reported more customer-focused services as a direct result of using a DfS approach. In the completed doctoral inquiry, all of the newly designed services were still in use 12 months post-collaboration. Furthermore, Charities A, B and C leveraged a total of £1.2 million in grant funding by being able to clearly articulate and evidence that their newly-designed services met user need in a desirable, efficient and effective way. The study also underpinned Charity C's successful application for a long-term contract, bringing the total financial impact of the studies to £2.6 million.

More significantly for all communities involved, the outcomes from the studies have shown that design can also have a *transformational* impact on a VCS organisation. In Charities A and C, Design impacted on all levels of the organisation, including staff roles, organisational policies, and mission statements. These changes were marked enough to be considered transformational by all stakeholders. Charity D is considering becoming constitutionally user-led in response to design activities, which is a radical shift within the organisation; however,

it is yet to be seen whether this leads to the transformation of the charity. The following sub-sections describe how these outcomes were achieved:

4.2 Designing challenge

To achieve the transformational change required of the sector, it is argued that a designer must question the fundamental assumptions, norms and behaviours of an organisation (Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009, p. 4345). Analysis shows that this was a key role of the designer in all four organisations. For example, in Charity A, the designer's questioning of the current model of delivery prompted the service manager to experience a 'light bulb' moment, where she recognised that there was no reason that services should not be time-limited;

"I've never even thought about it before and now I'm like 'whoah controversial!' but, yeah... I feel like it's a light bulb moment really isn't it?"

This realisation formed the foundation of their transformational shift to time-limited partnerships between organisation and service user to set expectations, reduce dependency and encourage progression from their support.

The idea that Charity A's services should be ongoing was an example of "givens or truths... held so strongly that they are no longer questioned nor even consciously thought about" (Ott, Parkes, & Simpson, 2003). There was evidence that the designers challenged similar assumptions in all four of the charities, both through questions, but also through activities such as ethnography, customer interviews and design workshops. Through these activities, the designers demonstrated that services could be presented, offered or delivered in a different way. This had an impact on how stakeholders viewed their services, acting as a foundation for the design activity in each case to move forward.

4.2 Co-creating visions

Data in all four charities showed that stakeholders' visions were often limited by their knowledge of the service and systems; they struggled to stop imagining "what exists" and start imagining "what could be". Therefore, a key role of the designer in the VCS contexts was to challenge the existing, in order to present an alternative future.

During design activity, the designers used methods and tools to help co-design alternative futures that addressed some of the underlying issues uncovered through the prior activities (Tan, 2012). In Charity A, the concept of promoting progression from their services was then used to suggest how that could be realised as both a service, and as an organisation-wide initiative. In Charity C, a new vision was entirely co-designed by staff using frames such as 'what is a fairytale welcome?' to generate ideas and insights that resulted in a different way of viewing areas of their visitor centre. In Charity D, by considering how progression into and from their services might be considered, the organisation was able to highlight a number of issues with existing services to address those issues going forwards.

Design was key to co-creating visions of “what could be”; using tools to help stakeholders shape alternative systems, but also to enable the shared understanding of the alternative visions, and the insights that underpinned them. Tan (2012, p. 266) describes this as using design as both methodology and medium. In Charity A and D, design methods were used to capture insights from current and potential service users and translate that into ideas that would address the underlying issues. The medium of design was used to communicate how these distinct service components would combine to create a progression-focused service. Figure 2 is a diagram created to improve understanding amongst all project stakeholders of a service concept in Charity A. This visualisation allowed the stakeholders to suggest changes and additions and an iteration of this strategy diagram was also used to apply for their successful BIG Lottery Reaching Communities award.

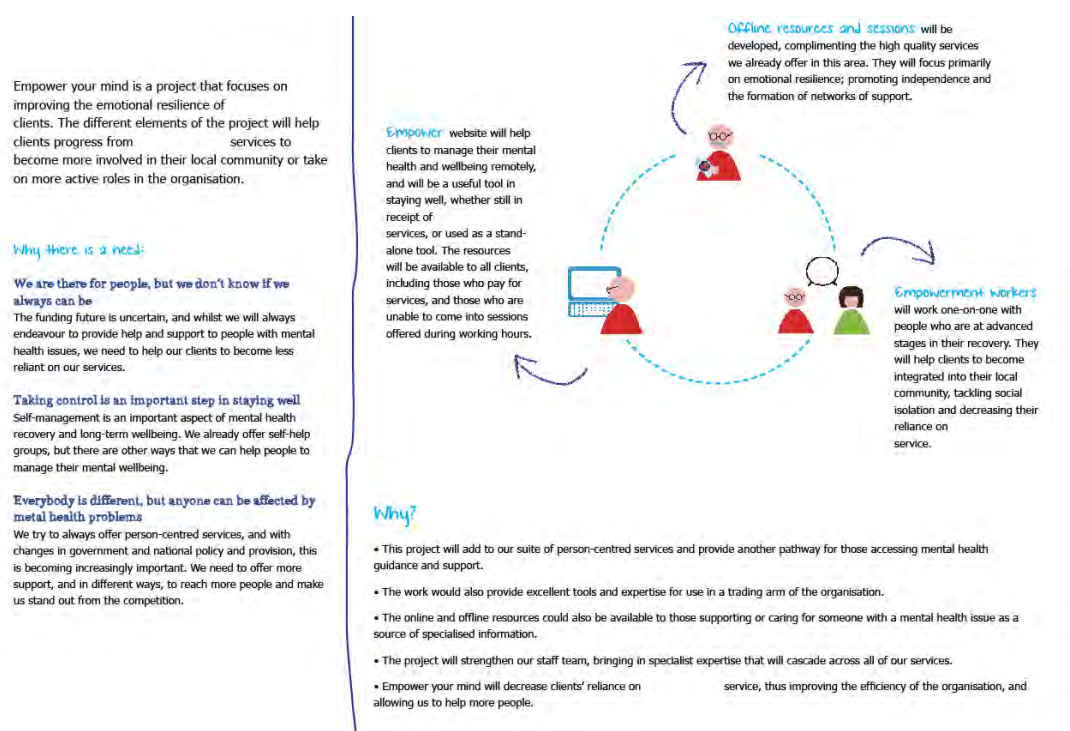


Figure 2: Strategy diagram for 'empower your mind' project (anonymised)

A significant characteristic of the relationship between the designers and the VCS organisations was the designer's role as both challenger and visionary. This duality was successful in supporting staff and stakeholders to understand the need for change, imagine new ways of doing things, and support the charity in realising the ideas in their context. Although the duality of this role was of value to all VCS organisations involved, the stakeholders' preconception of design and receptivity to it was also directly linked to its potential impact.

4.3 Understanding the role of Design

Data showed that often stakeholders were confused about the role that design could play within a charity. This confusion arose because of a misunderstanding of design as a practise

of “making products for the market”, which was a common perspective in stakeholders who had not been exposed to design activities in the past. All four charities received information about the DfS approach before the collaboration commenced in order to challenge those preconceptions. Despite this consistency, analysis shows that the understanding of the DfS approach was different in each setting, which influenced the trajectory of the project.

In Charities A, C and D, there was both an expectation and desire that the designer would operate across the different levels of the organisation and challenge their existing processes. Charity A also predicted that the collaboration would “influence personal and organisational learning” and that they wanted the designer “to influence the way [Charity A] work”. In Charity C, the CEO stated in their pre-collaboration interview: “I think being challenged to think about things in different ways... that’s one of my expectations”. Furthermore, in Charity D the aim of the collaboration was to “bring a new perspective and way of looking at things” to challenge the way the charity had done things in the past.

In contrast, management stakeholders in Charity B linked the DfS approach to the marketing of services; “I cannot see how you can differentiate that much... between service design and the marketing and communication of what you’re trying to do”. Although the stakeholders’ lack of knowledge about the DfS approach was expected, their preconception became a barrier to the design activity when the outcomes being generated were seen to extend beyond traditional Marketing Communications. When design work challenged fundamental policies and structures in the organisation, for example interrogating the way that membership prices were set, the work was not well received. The roles that the designer was allowed to adopt in Charity B were therefore greatly restricted.

Considering Charity B’s current organisational practice, the analysis shows that management did not see this challenging role as appropriate; “it’s not your role [to say what services should operate] but I’m prepared to listen to those large facts” and “I want something... that says you may just have to think about that a little differently and we may dismiss that”. The data demonstrates a low receptivity to change in Charity B. This receptivity is most evident in their response to proposals made throughout the collaboration that would impact on their current models of working. In Charity A and D, the organisation-wide appetite to try new processes and be open to the outcomes that they presented, provided an ideal environment for the design activity to progress. Likewise, Charity C’s stakeholders identified that they were comfortable with the concept of transformation; “we are quite used to change and challenging the business model”.

The readiness for change and receptivity to challenge observed in Charities A, C and D, in comparison to the lack of appetite for this at an executive level in Charity B, ultimately restricted the designer’s work to a service level in that organisation.

5. Conclusions

Socially-engaged designers and the VCS share the same goal of inciting positive change within society. When designers and the VCS can find common ground for collaboration it can

benefit society by enabling work that would otherwise not be done to take place, transforming the organisations, and society.

The paper identifies a number of benefits to adopting a DfS approach within the VCS, namely; improved customer experiences and organisational learning, which in turn can lead to financial gains. To achieve such impacts, the paper suggests that a key role for the designer (and the DfS approach) is that of 'challenger', before proposing co-designed alternative visions. The paper has similarly presented factors that can impede these impacts, in particular including a lack of understanding of the DfS approach and their receptivity to challenge.

The findings show that a design research framework can allow VCS organisations to successfully reimagine 'what is', but in a way that reduces the apparent 'riskiness' by engaging in a discrete, demonstrative project and lowering the associated costs.

The current impetus on both the VCS and academic institutions to increase their efficiency and impact means that design research collaborations offer all parties a timely opportunity. For the VCS, design research offers an organisation the opportunity to engage in a design-led approach as a pilot, outwith of a traditional fee-paying structure. For designer researchers in this context, engaging with the VCS provides them with a willing research site with meaningful data to, in this case, extrapolate the value of a DfS approach to VCS stakeholders. For an academic institution, the benefit of engaging in such a model is that it can leverage significant, and locally sensitive resources, to tackle the region's social problems, thus increasing its own impact.

In each of these instances, there is a balance that must be attained to ensure that the relationship between the designer and VCS is appropriate for the collaboration. The designer is offering financially valuable services to some organisations and not others; the designer is therefore making a choice about which organisation is more worthwhile as a case study. This imbalance puts significant power in the hands of the researcher, thus, designers conducting this activity must be aware of this power as they enter, and exit, the field and act accordingly. Similarly, in introducing an approach that then is found to be valuable to that organisation, designers must aim to design for when they are no longer present (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014; Botero & Hyysalo, 2013), in order that the VCS continue to benefit.

Organisations participating in research must also be aware that the design research being conducted is not 'free'; there is an obligation to make use of the resources provided, support the designer within the context and provide accurate data for the research activity. In Charity B, without the required permission to challenge the existing practices of the organisation, the designer's potential impact was limited; a designer who could otherwise be engaged in socially-valuable activities.

Lastly, the academic institution must ensure that it tackles problems that are the most relevant to its locale. Academic institutions should ensure that the case studies being conducted are of significance to the region and the country. The academic institution, in this

context, can also act as a mediator between the designer and the VCS to ensure that the collaboration reaches its potential.

6. Further work

Design researchers have a continued, crucial role to play in exposing VCS organisations to the value of design, and also extending our knowledge of the impact of the approach in this important context. Although the opportunity offered by the doctorates helped to expose VCS organisations to the value of design, further research needs to be done into other sustainable ways of introducing and then up-skilling the sector in an approach that will be of particular value in times of austerity. Models such as 'grant plus' (where expert support is offered alongside funding), undergraduate and postgraduate student projects and other academic partnerships could all be explored as ways of working with resource-poor organisations.

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