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Funding Service Design: growing Service Design practice through a grants programme.

Author 1, 2, 3 and 4

contact.author@email.mail

Full contact address

Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a case study of a grants programme aimed at growing service design practice within a mental health network. The case study employed a ‘grants plus’ model, offering both money and coaching support, to promote the use of service design and build ‘communities of practice’ around this common approach within the organisation. The authors reflect on the findings from two grants programmes and share the advantages and challenges of building a design community through a funded model. This offers learning for those trying to scale Service Design practice across organisations or communities, as well as anyone trying to encourage the use of the process with other teams or organisations where there is a perceived power imbalance.

KEYWORDS: service design, scaling, grants plus, voluntary sector

Introduction

Mind is a federated charity that aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of people living in England and Wales (Mind, 2017). Together with their network of 140 Local Minds, they are the largest service provider of mental health services across the UK. They operate at a national level providing advice and information to people experiencing mental health problems and campaigning for system change in the mental health field. At a local level, they support approximately a third of a million people with mental health problems through a network of local Minds, which are independent charities in their own right. The local Minds are of varying sizes; ranging from a few thousand pounds in turnover, to a few million pounds. The majority of Mind’s network is involved in the delivery of public services for mental health in some way, either as providers, partners of providers or as advocates for beneficiaries (Mind, 2017).

Mind launched their Service Design programme, Service Design in Mind (SDiM), “as a response to the transformation agenda and the mantra of austerity” (Authors, forthcoming). The aim was to introduce local Minds and national Mind departments to design approaches to encourage the co-design of services with beneficiaries to create desirable, efficient and effective offers (Authors, 2016). In doing so, the programme aimed to create a Community of Practice; a group of advocates who used and encouraged the use of the approach to

sustainably grow the practice and capitalise on the innate creativity of non-designers (Authors, 2016).

Following the launch of a bespoke methodology and toolkit, the SDiM team offered coaching support to local Minds who expressed an interest in using Service Design approaches. However, the team recognised that using the approach requires a capacity and commitment that was difficult for many organisations to provide during a period of such austerity. The programme therefore looked to fund Local Minds to use the approach. Mind already had an existing Local Mind grants fund, which makes annual grants of up to £30000 to organisations in the federated network. Following an independent review of the current Mind grants scheme and the aims of the SDiM programme, it was suggested that an ‘Insights’ and ‘Prototype’ grant would support Local Minds to use SDiM resources to explore (insights) or test (prototype) an idea. It focused on these aspect of the design approach specifically as Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) funders tend to fund service delivery, rather than development. As a result, organisations commit to a service model in the application stage, and so they do not venture from traditional offers, nor establish the viability or desirability of their ideas.

To support organisations to explore and test, the team decided to use a ‘grants plus’ model, which is a programme of support that includes ‘activity which is additional to a grant and the grant-making process’ (Cairns, Burkeman, Harker, & Buckley, 2011, p. 5). Foundations and trusts have been ‘giving more than money’ for numerous decades, but it has become a more popular practice in recent years as a way of ensuring that financial support has the maximum impact (Cairns, Burkeman, Harker, & Buckley, 2011). It is also seen as an approach to ensure that organisations have the capacity, means and strength to perform more effectively (Mandeville, 2007). In this case, the SDiM team recognised that they would need to provide service design training and mentoring in addition to money, as financial support alone would not guarantee the quality of engagement and application.

In January 2015, the SDiM team ran a prototype of the Insights grant with two local Minds, who were awarded £5000 each and service design support to explore a specific issue relevant to their locality using a service design approach. Having received positive feedback from stakeholders at the two sites, and observing an increasing demand for SDiM support, it was decided to launch the Insights grant and Prototype grant in September 2015. The fund offered up to £8000 to each local Mind, alongside specialist support, to either explore an issue or test out an idea over a maximum six-month period. Each grant recipient was encouraged to form a project team, comprised of a project lead who was the key liaison with the SDiM team, and any other relevant staff, volunteers or partners who could support the service design activity. The SDiM team delivered three training workshops: one held at the project site that acted as a kick-off for their team; and two held at a central location, which brought together all grant recipients to get an overview of key stages of the process relevant to them. The project team also had regular coaching calls with an assigned member of the SDiM team, to provide expertise, critique and encouragement. At the end of each project, the grant recipient submitted a visual report documenting their process, outcomes and experience.

This paper draws on an independent evaluation of the first Insight and Prototype grant, which supported seven local Minds to use service design for the first time. It first outlines the research approach and how the data was gathered and analysed, before presenting the benefits and challenges of using a grants plus model, all of which are linked to the relationship between the SDiM programme and the project team. It concludes by suggesting how similar programmes might ‘fund’ the scaling of Service Design activity, and the potential for further research.

Research Approach

This research conducted as was part of SDiM’s learning strategy, which aims to reflect on and codify practice at three key stages of the programme’s development: *design* (the development of the SDiM programme, methodology and team); *perform* (designing the demand and refining the offer); and *embed* (embed design thinking and approaches in the organisational culture). The programme is currently in the *perform* stage and so the research aims are tailored to ambitions of this stage:

1. Encourage – Understand the barriers and drivers to using service design and increase the awareness and use of service design;
2. Enable – Understand the resources and guidance we should provide;
3. Impact – Understand and capture the impact of using service design.

The overarching research question of interest in this case was: ‘how should we facilitate Service Design projects?’ To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, an independent researcher was engaged to explore the following:

1. The impact and outcomes of using Service Design to the grant recipients.
2. The perceived and actual value of the grant to the recipients.
3. The role and the value of the ‘grants plus’ offer to the grant recipients.

This paper focuses on the findings related to the second and third objectives, in order to contribute to the on-going discussions on how to scale and embed service design approaches in novice organisations and communities (Morelli, 2014; Sangiorgi, Prendiville, & Ricketts, 2014).

Research Design

The research adopted a case study design as it “define topics broadly not narrowly, cover contextual conditions and not just phenomenon of study, and rely on multiple and not just singular sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 33). It is also seen as an appropriate research methodology to develop theory from practice (Breslin & Buchanan, 2008; Teegavarapu & Summers, 2008). This was an exploratory case study, as it aimed to explore a phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2003, p. 3). Each local Mind that was a grant recipient was considered a case study, resulting in an embedded, multiple-case design that allows the authors to draw generalizable insights (Yin, 2003, p. 45).

The research was qualitative by nature, in order to explore “well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 3). An independent researcher, also an author, gathered a ‘learning history’ from each project; a story of the process, experience and learning that the project and team went through, not just what happened and when. This was gathered through a semi-structured interview (Robson, 2011) with the project lead(s).

As the aim was to understand how the grants programme supported the growth of service design capability and knowledge, the research was solely focused on the relationship between the organisation and Service Design practice, rather than the impact of the design outcome itself. As such, the research into the ‘Insights’ and ‘Prototype’ grant focused on the impact on the individuals and organisations involved, rather than any beneficiaries of any resulting services. The sample strategy was therefore to interview the project lead(s) who could provide the most detail about all aspect of the grants plus model, from application to final report. The projects and data sources are outlined in brief below (Table 1):

| | Project focus (as described in application) | Number of project stakeholders interviewed |
|----------------|---|--|
| Insights Fund | | |
| Local Mind A | How do we inspire young people to prioritise and invest in their mental wellbeing to develop thriving communities? | 1 |
| Local Mind B | How can we best support local people suddenly made redundant in order to minimise any adverse impact on the mental health and wellbeing of themselves and their families? | 2 |
| Local Mind C | What methods are most effective in engaging young people at risk of joining gangs to prevent mental ill health and promote pro-social behaviour? | 1 |
| Local Mind D | What are the needs of people living on a deprived estate? | 1 |
| Prototype Fund | | |
| Local Mind E | Exploring if offering activities (particularly sports) will encourage more young men to engage and will deliver wider benefits including improved physical health. | 1 |
| Local Mind F | Exploring if advocacy clinics within GP services would offer a support provision for people with mild – moderate mental health conditions who are not eligible for statutory advocacy services. | 1 |
| Local Mind G | Exploring if a flexible choices pathways would promote and support good mental health and wellbeing in young people. | 1 |

Table 1: A table showing the organisations involved in the programme, the project focus and number of stakeholders interviewed

The independent researcher also ran a workshop to gain the reflections of the three design coaches who had supported the projects to provide an internal perspective on the facilitation of the work. The outcomes of this workshop, along with the case studies, has subsequently been analysed to extract learning.

Data analysis

As this research was both qualitative and exploratory, the authors adopted a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to build theory directly from the data, without being influenced by pre-defined hypotheses. This research went through four distinct stages:

- data-cleaning;
- first-stage coding;
- building multiple coding collections;
- and identifying themes and patterns.

Each interview was transcribed by the independent researcher and put into a common format to aid reading of the text. Each interview was read several times with hand codes made amongst the text (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 106). Each excerpt of text related to one of the research objectives was copied onto a Post-It note, to continue the manual analysis of the data. Post-Its from the workshop conducted with the coaches were also added at this stage.

Each of the Post-Its was grouped based on the commonality in the meaning, creating a series of categories. Each category was then given a title that summarised the sense of the group, where possible using terms from the quotes in the collections. Looking across all these groups then allowed the researchers to identify a set of themes related to the research objectives. These themes are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

It should first be noted that the independent review found the Insights and Prototype fund to have been successful in its primary aim of promoting use of service design; all project leads were enthusiastic about the approach and intend to use service design again. They all felt that service design had helped them to gain new knowledge about their potential service users' needs, and that had led to a more successful project outcome. The project outcomes varied across the cases, including: new services; new policies; new job roles; new partnerships; and secured funding for delivery. However, they all felt that they had achieved the most desirable outcomes for their organisation, and linked that directly to their use of service design.

Although valuable data, this builds on an already extensive body of knowledge about the impacts of design on services and organisations in the voluntary sector (Author 2015; Yee, White and Lennon, 2015; Tan, 2012). The focus of this discussion is instead on the benefits and challenges presented by the use of the grants plus model to encourage that activity. To do this, we present four themes that encapsulate this learning: creating dedicated time and space; establishing relationships; the residue of traditional funding arrangements; and building multiple communities of support.

Creating dedicated time and space

In Bailey's (2012) exploration of the factors that affect how service design is embedded within organisations, he established that assessing design 'readiness' is not sufficient to determine whether the approach will be embedded sustainably. He found that staff need to be given the time and space to move away from the day-to-day delivery of services, and to focus on developing ways of doing things differently.

Participants viewed the grants plus programmes as enabling: it gave the 'luxury' of time to focus on values and engagement that they otherwise would not have been able to do. The interview participants particularly valued the financial support as they noted a lack of similar funding in the voluntary sector to simply do research or testing.

Similarly, and perhaps more surprisingly, the research showed that the programme had also created a dedicated time and space for the design coaches. The SDiM team noted that their own time and resources were limited, which impacted on their ability to sustain regular contact and long-term relationships with the local Minds engaged with service design. This in turn can lead to loss of interest and momentum in the organisation at what is a very delicate moment; their first encounter with new methods, tools and ways of thinking.

The advantages of a grants plus model are particularly evident here as it provides dedicated resources, and therefore time, for the a team within the local organisation to commit to the new project; and it allows the supporting design team to work consistently with a selected and smaller group of projects, providing focus and the right impetus for pushing the approach within the organisations involved.

This time and space also allowed project teams to develop their service design knowledge and skills through doing, with the safety net of structured support. The data showed that

their confidence in using, adapting and integrating service design grew over the course of the project, often attributed to their coach's support and training workshops that brought order to the 'messiness' of user research and co-creation.

However, the data showed that a disadvantage of the grants' structure was that it only supported part of the design process. In the workshop, the coaches reflected that this had been to keep projects short and focused, but as a result, project teams only had confidence in one aspect of service design. The projects clearly created an impetus to use the approach again, but the teams only felt confident to use the tools and methods they were already familiar with. Without the time and space afforded by the funding, project leads described feeling unable to progress to the next stage of the process. Similarly, coaching relationships stalled as the SDiM lacked the structure to maintain regular contact and encouragement.

Establishing roles and values

By creating this space (and time) for reflection and dedicated work on a service design project, the grants plus model also allowed SDiM team to be more deliberate in the way relationships with the project teams were formed and nurtured. Alongside the more formal grant contract, a 'Partnership Agreement' was signed at the beginning of the projects. The Agreement clarified the expectations, the values and the roles that the two parties were endorsing to follow: for example, that the coach would be both critical and encouraging; and the project team would be open-minded, honest and patient. It linked each of these attitudes back to the design process to help emphasise this new way of working and create a shared understanding on the roles of each party.

The data shows that each project team formed a successful relationship with their design coach largely based on the values depicted in the Agreement. The coaching support had an enabling effect on project leads, who felt motivated and confident to carry out service design as a result of this guidance. For example, a stakeholder in one local Mind described the support as "genuinely very engaged and committed to us doing the best project that we possibly could, facilitating us to ask the questions, or explore whatever emerged".

However, the coaches and project leads noted that the pace of the communication often created tension in the relationship. In the projects that moved at a consistent speed, coaching calls were mutually agreed and occurred regularly. However, some projects had slower periods of activity, mainly due to external barriers. The lack of contact from a project team would prompt the design coach to arrange a call to 'check in', which felt like "being checked up on" to project leads. In local Mind F, this proved to be a particular point of anxiety, as the project lead felt he "had nothing to say" and the calls were at "unhelpful" points in his project.

The interviews revealed that in nearly all cases, the project lead did not disclose to their coaches at least one concern, failure, or reaction to constructive criticism. These often acted as an barrier to the success of their learning journey, service design practice or project outcome for a period of time. The analysis found that the concept of a 'coach' was also new to the project teams, which created moments of misunderstanding that impacted how they viewed the SDiM team. The Partnership Agreement was intended to set a context for the collaboration that was a departure from the traditional Mind-local Mind working relationship, which could often be stratified. However, the data shows that the legacy of this relationship remained, and it coloured project leads' reception to aspects of the coaches' role, in particular the role of the challenger or 'provocateur' (Tan, 2012): "I felt she was telling me what to do".

The coach's role as 'expert' created a hierarchy that acted as one of the barriers to disclosing any issues. The SDiM team reflected that using the term 'co-creators' might have helped to better establish their collaborative role in the project, and remove the power implied by the term 'coach'. As a co-creator, the SDiM would ask for and provide critical friendship,

creating a relationship where the designer does not impose their views, but listens and collaborates in a reciprocal relationship (Cipolla, 2014). This would also explicitly establish the role of project teams to shape the service design support offered; one stakeholder noted “it would be nice to have more of a feedback system... an area for us to say ‘it would be helpful if we had a tool like this’.” The term ‘co-creator’ could therefore help to establish design coaches as co-creators of the local Mind’s projects, and local Minds as co-creators of the service design community.

Residue of traditional funding arrangements

As well as the legacy of a traditional Mind-local Mind relationship, the grant model also imposed an implied hierarchy that impacted on relationships. A grant scheme is not a new tool in the VCS, and is usually attached to a strict contract, a tough monitoring and evaluation system and a clear hierarchy, where the funders are the evident and unique source of power, even in relation to Mind’s own grants programme. The Insights and Prototype fund were therefore not as neutral as intended. Data showed that they were associated with a long history of specific values and rules, including: the grant recipient should already have all the answers (or pretend to have them); project management is the default approach to the delivery phase; failure is not contemplated; and impact is measured in purely quantitative terms.

Although the Mind Community Programme and Grants team had administered the grant, some project leads still associated the financial support with the SDiM team. This resulted in project team sometimes hiding away from their coach if they perceived they were late or not progressing as well as they wanted, as they assumed seeking for help or advice proactively was not going to be perceived positively. Flattening this hierarchy and challenging these stereotypes took time and encouragement across multiple interactions, including coaching calls and workshops. However, the grant makes also have to push this agenda through their interactions with the project teams, as they are seen not only as current funders, but also future ones:

“When there’s a representative from the grants team, it could inhibit the idea that it’s ok to fail... That tension could be useful to explore for future times, to remember local Minds have one voice in their heads, ‘am I going to get future funding?’”

However, the SDiM team also acknowledged the value of having the grant structure as both “carrot and stick”, where the grant contract could be imposed where there were periods of inactivity or the lack of commitment to the service design approach. In local Mind E, the design coach paused the project and withheld funds until the project team could be committed to the work, which helped to ensure the full engagement of the team and led to a successful outcome. These moments of contractual challenge need to be carefully managed so that they are not associated with ‘designerly’ challenge, nor reinstate the power imbalance between the parties. Any grants plus programme would have to navigate this tension between encouraging freedom to embrace uncertainty, change track, and take time; and the need to keep the pace, avoid project drift, and produce practical deliverables for the different phases of the design process.

Building communities

The analysis found that a grant plus approach also established a special way of connecting people together, which was focused on both: the process, the common learning journey of introducing a new approach; and the project, as local Minds were invited to work together on similar topics or around common issues (i.e. mental health).

The first training workshop acted as a launch event, introducing key service design principles and the resources available; the second was held approximately half way through the project timeline to reflect on their work so far, and introduce ways to analyse and translate data into design outputs. By encouraging shared moments of reviews and mutual learning, the Grant Plus model also established the creation of a community of peers, which is perceived as equal and collaborative. Because projects work at different speeds and run in parallel, a mid-point workshop with all the grantees was organised as a way to physically connect the work and the ideas. At least two people from each of the local Minds involved came to the workshop to share projects updates, methods used, and tell the story of what was working and what wasn't. As staff was hearing from peers about their struggles with the process, their failures and frustrations but also about the excitement of working differently from the routine, of engaging meaningfully and creatively with users, and as the first insights and findings started to emerge, it was evident that a "community within a community" was starting taking shape.

As everyone had the opportunity to tell, listen and provide advice and solutions to each other, their confidence on the work and the process started growing, as people felt more relaxed, open, and in the end more reflective. For examples, one stakeholder described the workshops as: "absolutely excellent, brilliant, inspiring, an opportunity to meet with other Minds... Some of the ideas, and how they were presented, there were so many different ways and approaches to doing things."

Although the funding helped in part to create a community of service design advocates, research showed that knowledge of service design did not always permeate beyond the project team to other parts of the host organisation. One project lead said:

"I think if I'm being honest that's where we didn't work so well as an organisation. Really honestly, if asked if they knew what we were doing, some people would probably say, 'what are you on about?'"

The complexity of organisations and networks has been recognised as a barrier, particularly to more collaborative design processes (Pirinen 2016). There were examples of the projects impacting on organisations, but mostly through the outcomes of the design activity. In local Mind C, the design work the team did to engage a young person led to the organisation creating a 'young person's engagement lead'. In the coaches' workshop, the design coaches recognised that whilst the aim of the programme was to inspire wholesale change, having only one contact with the organisation meant that it was difficult to have this impact.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a series of advantages and challenges to scaling service design through a grants plus programme. Despite the problems highlighted in the discussion, the authors believe this hybrid approach offers the most viable form of building a service design community in organisations that are so resource-scarce. Combining funding with specialist coaching allows teams to carve out vital time and space to dedicate to this new way of working, with a 'safety net' that helps the project to be as impactful as possible.

The relationship between coach and project lead has been shown to be the lynchpin in these engagements. The data presented here has shown that many of the programme's existing structures, such as the Partnership Agreement, are useful tools for other practitioners attempting to establish constructive working relationships at distance. However, the very nature of grant programme has created a second, underlying affiliation of funder and recipient that has been shown to impact on the quality of communication. This dynamic is particularly important to consider when working in voluntary sector contexts where

relationships with grant funders are traditionally hierarchal and without mutuality. Future iterations of the programme will attempt to mitigate these legacy issues by attempting to create a clear distinction between the grants team and the service design team. However, further research is required to understand how to create the flattened hierarchy that is desirable in design teams, when the contractual arrangement automatically creates a power imbalance.

Similarly, future programmes need to consider how to extend the relationships between design coach and project lead from one-to-one, to team-to-organisation. The data has shown that the project outcomes can have significant impact on the organisation, but the impact of the process often stays within the project team, which are frequently comprised of just one or two people. For the programme to act as a true community builder, design coaches have to work with the design team and organisation simultaneously, to help the approach to permeate beyond the boundaries of the project and impact on other aspects of the charity. In this case, the SDiM team plans to fund Service Design projects from start to finish, to help build longer, stronger relationships that will provide more opportunity to influence on this wider level.

Finally, this research has highlighted the importance of using this model to build multiple service design communities simultaneously, to capitalise on the momentum and impact created by positive engagements. Firstly, practitioners working in this area should consider how they support design teams to create a *community of engagement* within their own organisation. These communities would provide on-site peer support and help expose people to service design. Designers then need to leverage these disparate communities to form a *community of practice*, where engaged stakeholders can continue to cultivate their service design expertise. A particular challenge will be to help this community to feel supported and connected across diverse locations and with many pressing agendas. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, designers need to build a *community of interest*, comprised of those that understand the importance of the process, and provide the necessary support, permission and resource to allow the other communities to thrive.