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# The role of Design as a critical friend to the Voluntary Community Sector

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## Abstract

This paper presents one of the key findings from a recent Doctoral inquiry into the relevance and applicability of adopting a Design for Service (DfS) approach to effect transformation in Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) contexts. The research used case study method, reflective practice and content analysis to establish that the use of design at a systemic level of a VCS organisation could incite transformational change. The paper reveals that the stakeholders' initial trust in the designer is more important than their trust in the DfS approach (methods and processes), which becomes crucial to increasing the influence of design in the organisation. Once the designer becomes a 'friend' to the organisation, they can operate at an embedded level as a 'critical friend', which allows them to challenge the status quo and create new organisational perspectives. The paper finally presents a 'critical friend' model depicting how design can be used to effect transformation in such settings.

**KEYWORDS:** design for service, transformation, critical friend, charity, public services

## Introduction

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, The UK's Coalition Government signalled its intention to radically reform public services (HM Government, 2010). Their drive to reduce public spending, decrease inefficiencies and decentralise provision (HM Government, 2010) has had a significant impact on VCS organisations offering such services, creating increased competition and a purchaser-provider relationship with the state (Needham & Carr, 2009). Similarly, the reform has also focused on enabling user choice creating a customer-provider relationship between VCS organisations and their service users (Needham & Carr, 2009, p. 3). The sector is therefore faced with the challenge of meeting these altered expectations of the services they deliver, how they are offered, as well as how they are funded.

Even for those VCS organisations not involved in public service delivery, the recent volatile fiscal climate has also had a considerable impact on VCS organisations' capacity, with a decrease of 70,000 staff across the sector (Clarke, Kane, Wilding, & Bass, 2012). Despite this, charities are also trying to respond to a sizeable increase in service demand; 67% of VCS organisations surveyed reported an increase during 2012 (Oakley Smith, Bradshaw, & Lewis, 2012). As a result, the sector is trying to meet a rapidly rising demand for better, more personalised services with no resources to meet the demand.

With a continuation of the crisis predicted, it is imperative for the VCS to transform their service offering and its delivery mechanisms, rather than merely cost-cut. As organisational change models are often incompatible with the specific pressures placed on VCS organisations (Kellock Hay, Beattie, Livingstone, & Munro, 2001, p. 252), new approaches are needed if the sector is to enact internal change at a rate that matches the scale of external change.

Recent studies exploring the value of service design approaches to organisations have identified impacts desirable to VCS organisations at present, including: *improved customer experience* (Hollins, 1993); *distinct service offerings* (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Steen, Manschot, & De Koning, 2011); *connected, cohesive systems* (Bate & Robert, 2007; Mulgan & Albury, 2003); *community ownership of ideas or resources* (Freire & Sangiorgi, 2009; Han, 2010; Manzini, 2010); *efficiency savings* (Design Commission, 2013, p. 35; Design Council, 2010, p. 3); and *shifts in organisational strategies and cultures* (Gloppen, 2011; Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009).

However, the majority of design research to date has focused on the private and public sector, with few studies into the role that design could play in the VCS. Although there are similarities between the current needs of the VCS and many private and public sector organisations (for example, the need to provide efficient, effective services during times of extreme financial pressure), the purpose, values, governance, culture and funding of VCS organisations differ enormously from the other sectors. There is therefore a need to rigorously identify and evidence any potential value that design can offer in this context.

A recent doctoral inquiry by the primary author (Warwick, 2015) has attempted to address this by exploring the value of a DFS approach to VCS organisations looking to redesign existing or develop new public services. It found that the outcomes of using design in a sample of VCS organisations were:

- » Financial gains (design directly supported the organisations to secure £1.2 million in funding and was used as evidence to secure a further £1.5 million)
- » More customer-focused services (each charity developed new service(s) that were still in use 12 months post-collaboration and that they had changed the way that they engaged with their customers);
- » And organisational learning (two of the charities made changes to their policies and processes).

Predictably, some of the research's findings build on existing knowledge within the Design community, such as design's ability to create more customer-focused services. This study has verified this existing knowledge in a systematic and rigorous way. However, it has also extended the contexts in which this can be claimed, which is of significant value for both practitioners and educators.

The understanding of precisely *how* the Design community and VCS community can work together presents new opportunities for the readers of this work. The study extrapolated that

the DfS approach and the designer should operate as a ‘critical friend’ during initial engagements with a VCS organisation, in order to see such outcomes. Positioning the design process and the designer as a ‘critical friend’ in a charity allows their influence to permeate beyond the systems level, to the policy level of an organisation, resulting in a transformational impact (Warwick, 2015).

This paper will discuss how this role was identified and why it is of particular value at a critical time for the sector. Finally, it will present a model that depicts the key stages required to operate as a ‘critical friend’ in a VCS organisation.

## Methodology

There have been no explorations of the use of design in a VCS context to date (Warwick, 2015, p. 13), thus it was necessary to build knowledge of its potential value through the active application of design. Action Research (Lewin, 1946; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011) and an exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) were selected as the focal research methodology, allowing knowledge to be gathered from the VCS context in a manner that could generate practicable theory.

The DfS approach was used in three VCS organisations, which were considered as three cases in a multiple-case case study structure (Yin, 2003); Charity A; Charity B; and Charity C. Each VCS organisation chosen as a case had to be 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 restraints of the doctoral study. The three charities also had to have differing charitable aims and customer bases, in order 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 three 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, hereafter named Network A. 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 (Author 1) 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, hereafter named Network B. 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 educational institutions, which 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.

In each of the three charities engaged in the study, the designer worked with a variety of stakeholders; staff and volunteers who administer services directly to clients; middle management; and executive leadership. Each collaboration, conducted in serial, lasted two months in order to allow an adequate amount of data to be collected, whilst not demanding too much capacity from the organisation.

In each case, the unit of analysis was the relationship between the VCS organisation and the DfS approach. To understand this relationship over time, the data collection strategy was designed to capture data in each case from various project stakeholders (e.g. Chief Executive, Business Development Manager etc.), at various stages of the project timeline (before, during and post-collaboration). Action Research design activity was the predominant method in terms of data collection; data was collated through a combination of project meetings (Nimkulrat, 2007), design outcomes (Zimmerman, Stolterman, & Forlizzi, 2010), semi-structured interviews (Robson, 2011), and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) to generate multiple perspectives on the DfS approach.

Collating multiple participants' perspectives helped to build knowledge about the perceived value of design to different VCS stakeholders, whilst the different stages of the project provided insight as to how that changes over time. These multiple perspectives, both within and across the cases, also allowed data to be triangulated (Denzin, 1988) to ensure it was accurate and generalizable. To further ensure accuracy and remove any possible bias, an independent researcher collected and anonymised the data from post-collaboration interviews.

## Data analysis

Data was analysed using a general inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006) to generate 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 (including 35 hours of audio recording and 109 pages of supplementary written 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 a familiarisation 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 and 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 precise and aimed 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 (project set-up, project activity, 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, creating multiple coding collections.

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 stitching together the photographs that captured the multiple coding collections 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 multiple coding collections for the 'how' evaluation objective at Charity B (anonimised)**

These common categories were then grouped and reduced to create core categories, which were then re-described as 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 and conducting peer reviews with fellow design researchers and key members of the VCS, helped to ensure their accuracy and credibility. This was particularly important because of the duality of the practitioner-researcher role in order to address any potential bias.

## Findings

The data analysis firstly isolated the importance of the initial relationship that a designer creates with the project stakeholders in order to encourage engagement. The design process is inherently bankrupt without participation, and it is clear that to create *anything* of value, there needs to be a trust in both the design approach as a means of achieving that value, and the designer as the facilitator of the process (Acklin, 2013; Malmberg & Holmlid, 2013).

As there are no specific models on the development of trust in relation to design in social contexts, the authors have drawn on those proffered by organisational discourse to discuss the case study findings in more detail. Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) model of trust is the most widely accepted in the literature; it has three aspects of perceived trustworthiness:

- » Ability - "group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain"

- » Integrity - “involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable.”
- » And benevolence - “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor... that the trustee has some specific attachment to the trustor” (Mayer et al., 1995, pp. 718–719)

The data clearly showed that demonstrating the *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence* of the designer and the design approach are crucial to a collaboration. However, more significantly, the data has shown that in an initial engagement, the trust in the designer as a person is more important than the trust vested in the approach, as the designer acts as both the executor of the process, and the only source of the benevolent aspect of trust. In post-collaboration interviews, stakeholders from all charities remarked that they felt the designer’s values affected the projects’ outcomes: “I think a massive amount of [the success] is [due to] her” (stakeholder, Charity C) and “in my three and a half years of tenure here, [the designer has] become one of the most trusted members of staff... I think that’s about her more than just the way she did things” (stakeholder, Charity B).

Furthermore, the patterns extrapolated from the data showed a direct correlation between the trust placed in the designer, and the increased use and reach of design in the organisation. Having stakeholders’ trust and permission to create value on a *service level* allows the designer to then shift their activity to the *systems level* of the organisation. In Charity A, instances such as the CEO inviting the designer to present the work we had done to Network A’s national conference acted as vocal recognition of the value of her abilities and the approach at a senior level. In turn, this had an impact on how she was perceived at a grass-roots level, as the Business Manager commented, “blimey, she’s arrived!”. Similar evidence can be seen across the project timeline at Charity B, and in a post-collaboration interview, one project stakeholder remarked that “as the weeks went on... everyone wanted a piece of her”. Likewise, in Charity C, a stakeholder said that the designer “over performed instantly” and so her involvement in the organisation grew as a result.

The analysis of the design-erly roles, tools and methods that were of value showed that at this systems level, the designer used the approach to challenge organisational perspectives, which resulted in transformational change in two of the three charities. For example, in Charity A, the designer’s challenge highlighted the need to create more progression-focused services. As well as developing new service delivery models, the charity also rewrote their mission and vision to reflect their person-centred provision; “we work with you as a person, not a diagnosis or a problem or set of problems or an illness” (CEO, Charity A). Similarly in Charity C, the design process highlighted the need to involve staff in the development of new offers. Post-collaboration, they have continued to actively involve their front-line staff in the improvement of the customer experience and staff are now contributing to challenges that are both within, and outside of, their remit.

Design has been used historically to establish new perspectives by: reconfiguring the problem space (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006; English, 2006); re-positioning customers at the centre of the process (Gloppen, 2011; Junginger, 2006); generating unconventional ideas (Brown, 2009; Dunne & Raby, 2007); and co-creating a new vision (Manzini, 2009; Thorpe, 2008). Each of these purposes aligns with one of three feature of Tan’s (2012) ‘Designer as Provocateur’ role. As the most recent and most extensive research into the designer’s roles, this has been used to describe how the designer and the design approach were used to create policy level change in the VCS organisations. In this case study:

- » *Proposing an alternative to the status quo* enabled; reflection on the status quo, which created the basis for the co-design activity; presentation of alternative service and system visions; reflection on individual and organisational practices, which resulted in new organisational visions.
- » *Using design as both a methodology and a medium* helped to; engage project stakeholders; communicate ideas in a way that created shared understanding; provide opportunity for project stakeholders to shape and contribute to the co-design activity; root change in user insight; and prompt reflection on the current service development process.
- » *Ideas that were eventually institutionalised* supported the embedding of; radical new service propositions as part of the organisation's offer; and a more customer-focused, collaborative service development approach.

In each of the charities, the creation of new organisational perspectives required both *challenge*, to deviate from the traditional, and *encouragement*, to ensure participation and the pursuit of the new. To describe the duality of this role required of both the designer and the approach in a VCS organisation, this paper proposes the appropriation of the term 'critical friend' from education literature.

Costa and Kallick (1993) define a 'critical friend' in an educational context as:

*"A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of the work."*

(Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50)

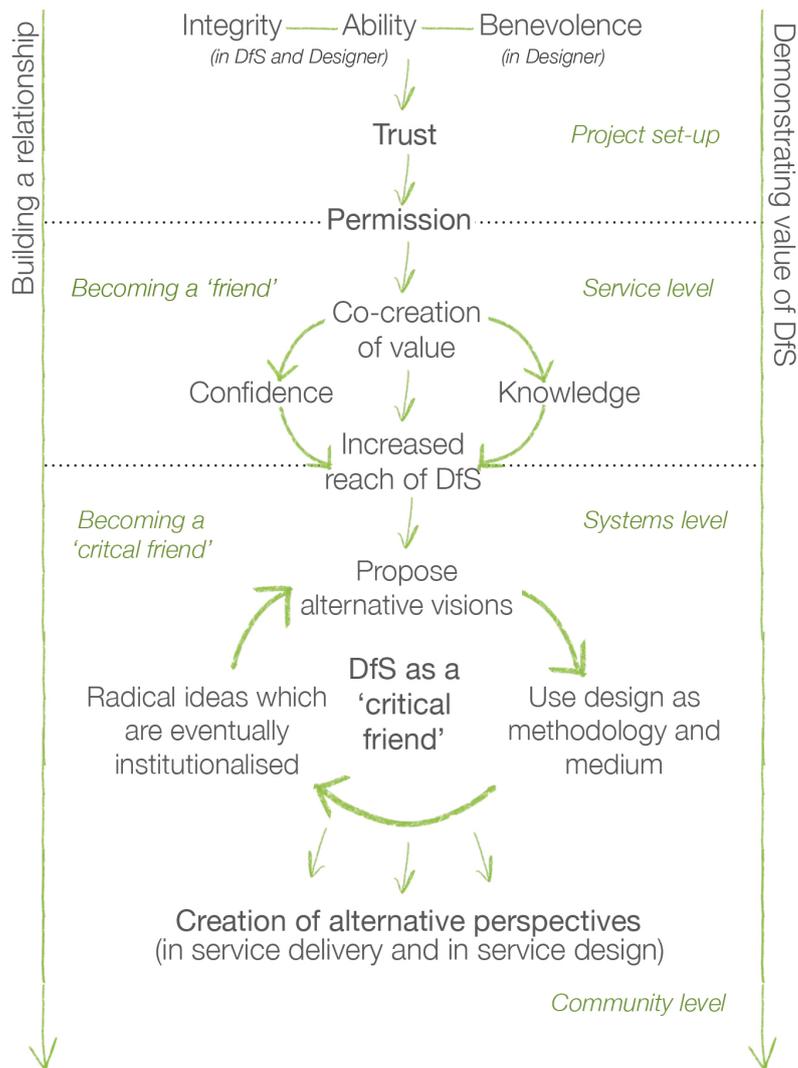
Comparing the features listed in this much-cited definition (MacBeath, Schratz, Meuret, & Jakobsen, 2000; Swaffield, 2004), with the valued features of the DfS approach ascertained through the analysis of this case study data highlights clear parallels between the two. These similarities are presented in Table 1:

Features of Costa and Kallick's (1993) 'Critical Friend'	Valued features of the DfS approach in case study
Trusted person	Establishes trust in the designer's and the DfS approach's; ability; integrity; and benevolence
Asks provocative questions	Proposing an alternative vision to the status quo
Provides data to be examined through another lens	Using design as methodology and medium
Offers critique of a person's work	Using design as methodology and medium
Fully understands the context of the work and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward	Establishes trust to ensure participation; Using design as methodology and medium
An advocate for the success of the work	Using design as methodology and medium; Ideas which eventually become institutionalised

**Table 1: A table comparing the features of Costa and Kallick's (1993) Critical Friend and DfS as Provocateur in this case study**

The term 'critical friend' effectively describes the challenge that results in new perspectives ('critical'), as well as the close relationship required to introduce and encourage the use of new skills ('friend').

Importantly, although there is significant understanding of the value of design and the designer as 'critic', there is no discussion to date about the need for designers to have stakeholders' trust in order to enact this role. Whilst this study recommends the use of the term 'critical friend', it also proves that the 'friend' aspect is crucial to enacting the 'critical' part. This relationship, along with the steps required to enable design to be used as a 'critical friend' in a VCS organisation, has been depicted in the following model (Figure 2):



**Figure 2: A model of the role of DfS as a 'critical friend' to VCS organisations in an initial engagement**

The model is read from top to bottom. It is split into three sections: project set-up; service level; and systems level. The vertical axes of the model describe the two continual activities to which all steps in the model are linked: *building a relationship* and *demonstrating value of DfS*.

The *project set-up* level of the model describes how the designer had to elicit *trust* in the *integrity*, *ability* and *benevolence* of the designer and the DfS approach. This trust then led to *permission*, which allowed the designer to work in a participatory manner and undertake the *co-creation of value* on a *service level*. The co-creation of value then led to increased *confidence* and the *knowledge* of the stakeholders and designer, which resulted in an *increased reach of DfS* to the *systems level* of the organisation, allowing the designer to operate at the elevated level required for transformational change i.e. at the community or policy level.

At this systems level, the designer uses this trusted position as *friend* to challenge organisational behaviour, acting as a *critical friend*. The three features of *DfS as a 'critical friend'*; *propose alternative visions*; *use design as methodology and medium*; and *radical ideas which are eventually institutionalised*, are visually connected to show the importance of each aspect of the role. These features then lead to the *creation of alternative perspectives*, thus impacting on the *community or policy level* of the organisation. The *creation of alternative perspectives* is qualified by the phrase *in*

*service delivery and in service design* to indicate that the new ways of viewing issues affects what is offered, as well as how that is developed.

## Conclusions

This research has found that the core value of the initial use of the DfS approach to VCS organisations is in its ability to act as a ‘critical friend’ and enable the transformation of perspectives. This transformation of perspectives can help VCS organisations during this period of austerity to rethink the challenges they face and the way they address them to come up with alternative models that are more desirable, effective and sustainable.

The term ‘critical friend’ is one that is often used intuitively in a design context; for example, the designers in the *Better by Design* programme, which introduced the approach to ten Scottish, described their role to VCS organisations as a ‘critical friend’ in Yee, White and Lennon’s (2015) research study. However, various searches of the literature show that this term has been used on an instinctual basis to date; there are no papers or publications currently available that qualify the use of this term in a design context through systematic research. Furthermore, no publications could be found that linked the use of this term in design to the recognised definition in education pedagogy; nor any that advocated the role of ‘critical friend’ as one that can drive transformation in an organisation or community.

The inductive analysis approach adopted in this study has meant that the patterns have arisen directly from the case study data; ‘critical friend’ has been used to capture the derived new knowledge, rather than the findings being used to justify the use of the term. The intuitive use of ‘critical friend’ in a design context therefore reinforces the value and usefulness of the concept to both Design and VCS audiences (particularly as *Better by Design* is also set in the VCS): using the term ‘critical friend’ should create more clarity for VCS organisations as to the role of design and the designer in a collaboration; and understanding that this role is of particular value to VCS organisations should also help to guide a designer’s engagement in such a setting.

At the foundation of this key role as ‘critical friend’ is the significance of the trust vested in the designer during initial engagements. Demonstrating the designer’s own trustworthiness was found to be of greater importance than evidencing the merits of design, and thus has multiple ramifications for practitioners, researchers and academics operating in the VCS. Further research into any common personality traits apparent in designers who tackle social challenges (e.g. social intelligence, aspects of empathy) would be valuable to understanding how to elicit the trust required in a VCS context. However, the model presented in Figure 2 offers an overview of the steps required for a designer to operate as a ‘critical friend’ in a VCS organisation, with the need to elicit stakeholders’ trust at its foundation. Although more research is required to populate this model with detail on how to enact each step, it is hoped that it will be able to guide a designer’s initial engagement in this context.

It should also be noted that whilst this research has focused on the use of the DfS approach, the findings presented in this paper have ramifications for Design audiences in general. The use of the term Design in the title of this paper reflects the fact that the design activity in each of the cases was diverse, and the resulting values extrapolated and identified are not specific to service-based practice. They are however specific to thinking of Design as an open-ended inquiry (Buchanan, 1992, p. 16; Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160; Schön, 1983), that advocates designing with people (or even people as designers), rather than designing for

people (Blyth & Kimbell, 2011; Brown, 2009; Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 7). It is hoped that evidence of the value of a design approach in a VCS setting will encourage more design-led collaborations, now and in the future, to inspire considerable change for the VCS as a whole.

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