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SPECIAL ISSUE • Creativity and co-production

research

## Creative and collaborative reflective thinking to support policy deliberation and decision making

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**Background:** Co-creation in policymaking is of increasing interest to national governments, and designers play a significant role in its introduction.

**Aims and objectives:** We discuss instances from our fieldwork that demonstrated how UK Policy Lab used design methods to gain insight into the design-oriented methods introduced to policymakers' practices, and how these may influence conventional policy design processes.

**Methods:** This paper reports on the learnings from a two-month participant observation at UK Policy Lab conducted in early 2019.

**Findings:** We found that, beyond human-centred and future-oriented practices, the designers working at this unit appropriate *design as a reflective practice* for the context of policymaking. We discuss how the use of visual and creative methods of design are utilised by *policy designers* to facilitate co-creative reflective practices, and how these make a valuable contribution to policymaking practices in UK Government.

**Discussion and conclusions:** As deliberation and decision making is influenced both by *what is thought about* as well as *who* is doing the thinking, reflective practices allow notions and assumptions to be unpicked. Moreover, when done as a group activity, reflection leads to a co-production of a deepened understanding of policy challenges.

Consequently, we argue, the reflective practices introduced by Policy Lab are an essential contribution to developing a co-creation tradition in evidence-informed policymaking processes.

**Key words** design methods • reflection • co-creation • policymaking

### Key messages

- Beyond human-centred and future-oriented methods, UK Policy Lab appropriates *design as a reflective practice*, to contribute to policymaking by supporting deliberation and decision making.
- Creative and visual methods from design enable collaborative policymaking processes, as they externalise thinking and surface overlaps and differences among policymakers' perspectives.
- We argue that *design can support the reflective practice* of policymakers, highlighting explicit and implicit frames structuring decision making.

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## Introduction

Public Sector Innovation Labs (PSI-Labs) – regularly called Policy Labs – are spaces within public bodies to help embed new forms of innovation and experimentation within government and tackle complex public and social issues. Generally understood as a response to overcome limitations of current policymaking practices, the remit of PSI-labs is to support governments in establishing change in policymaking practices, such as enabling policymakers to include new forms of evidence and break through departmental siloes (Rutter, 2012; Hermus et al, 2020). Over the last decade, labs like these have started to explore the specific role visual and creative methods play in policymaking practices. A prominent example of one such lab is UK Policy Lab (henceforth referred to as Policy Lab), which was set up in 2014 within the UK central government's Cabinet Office as part of the civil service reform strategy (Policy Lab, n.d.). Initiatives like Policy Lab present opportunities for exploring design practices – predominantly from Service design (Kimbell, 2015) – to provide alternative or additional approaches to conventional policymaking processes. This paper explores the role design practices and methods play in policymaking processes within the UK central government. We draw on a two-month *participant-observation* at Policy Lab, conducted by the lead author at the start of 2019. This study was part of a wider research programme investigating the role of design in policymaking and policy design practices in UK Government. The research set out to understand how and to what purpose human-centred and future-oriented methods were utilised by Policy Lab, and how these influenced policymakers who had worked with Policy Lab on projects and participated in activities facilitated by them. The existing literature on *design for policy* highlights the challenging relationship between predominant forms of evidence-based policymaking and the forms of evidence that may be understood and built on using visual and creative methods. However, the insights from our participant observation at Policy Lab offers a more nuanced view. We found Policy Lab positions and leverages collaborative reflective thinking in design methods to encourage policymakers to behave as *reflective practitioners* in their profession. Schön's notion of the reflective practitioner describes the ability to learn about one's own practice through being aware of what influences one's decision making, and to reflect on these influences in order to critically assess the

validity of a choice (Schön, 1983). This understanding of decision-making processes is valuable for designers, as it enables them to articulate their agency in the process of understanding and interpreting knowledge. Rather than putting their decision making down as creative intuition, this critical awareness enables designers to highlight *how* knowledge informs their decisions and practice (Hummels and Frens, 2009; Dix and Gongora, 2011). In order to externalise their thinking processes, designers have developed a wide range of creative and visual methods that enable them to document and communicate their deliberation and decision-making processes in designerly ways (Dix and Gongora, 2011).

In this article, we discuss instances from our fieldwork that demonstrated how Policy Lab used design methods to support reflection around evidence by policymakers. The article starts with an introduction to the prevailing literature on *Design for Policy*, followed by a brief overview of the fieldwork conducted at Policy Lab. We then introduce key insights from our fieldwork. The paper concludes with a discussion on how Policy Lab uses creative and visual methods to facilitate processes of co-creative reflection.

## Background: *design for policy*

As designers are expanding their territory and have gone to work at national government offices, the appropriation of these methods for this traditionally non-design profession has received much academic interest. Under the umbrella term *design for policy*, this discourse is increasingly engaged with by scholars, practitioners and commentators from both fields of design and policy. Work considered as *design for policy*, both in research and practice, focuses on the use of design practices to address public problems through policy.

A review of the *design for policy* discourse evidences a distance between the discourses from design and policy. While policy is a means for governments to respond to and address public problems, designers have expressed challenges with how the processes of policymaking are run. design addresses critiques around vertical hierarchies, siloed approaches, and advocated for the incorporation of more human-centred perspectives within policymaking practices (Bason, 2016; Mintrom and Luetjens, 2016; Kimbell and Bailey, 2017). These visions combined suggest the need for radical change in how policy should be made, in which changes ultimately result in policy design becoming a participatory practice in which citizens have equal power in the policy decision-making process to those in and of Government (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016a; Kimbell and Bailey, 2017).

Tens of Policy Labs across a range of national governments were established, predominantly focusing on influencing problem-oriented phases of the policy design process. As found by Vaz and Prendeville, many PSI-labs work within policy design, focusing on problem-oriented phases early on in policymaking processes: 'A majority (>85%) of the surveyed organisations claim to be intervening at the problem identification stage of the policymaking cycle, and this resonates with the use of a [D]esign approach' (Vaz and Prendeville, 2019: 153).

As described in the introduction above, we look specifically at the Policy Lab located in UK's Central Government, which is concerned with innovating *policy design* processes: phases of policymaking that are concerned with agenda setting (scoping), formulation and decision making.<sup>1</sup>

In parallel, Policy scholars and commentators – while highlighting a renewed interest in *policy design* approaches – have a predominant focus on articulating the constraints in policymaking that are likely to limit the potential of *design for policy* practices: researchers highlight the responsibilities of contentious decision making, traditions of evidence-based policymaking, and challenges of organising the complexity of policy processes in Government (Clarke and Craft, 2019; Peters, 2020). These institutional factors and taken-for-granted assumptions and practices act as barriers for the introduction of design approaches that are more uncertain, draw on more ambiguous forms of data and material, and are more open-ended. A result of this is a range of arguments across the design and Policy literature that observe the inherent tensions between these fields: the ‘rational decision-making’ of policy versus the creative ‘intuition’ of design (Bason, 2016; Kimbell, 2015); the abductive thinking of design as ‘clearly distinct’ from the deductive approaches in policy (Van Buuren et al, 2020); and the ‘logic administrative organisation’ of policymakers ‘clashing’ with the ‘sensibilities’ of the designer (Bason, 2016). In this light, the *design for policy* discourse focuses on the tensions around evidence practices and how to challenge ‘established hierarchies or bureaucratic categories’ (Hermus et al, 2020: 24) that determine decision-making practices in policy design (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016b; Vaz and Prendeville, 2019). The conclusion reached is that evidence-based and design-oriented approaches supposedly ‘sit uncomfortably together’ (McGann et al, 2018) due to their ‘conflicting beliefs’ on how to design policy (Bason, 2016; Kimbell, 2015; Bailey and Lloyd, 2016a; McGann et al, 2018).

While these discussions seem to present opposing views on how to design policy, they share an emphasis on tensions in evidence and decision-making practices in policy design. Academics have emphasised that it is naïve to assume that evidence-informed approaches to policymaking result in a linear relationship between evidence and decision making in policymaking (Cairney, 2016; McGann et al, 2018). In doing so, it arguably ignores the influence of values, political judgment and organisational cultures (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016a; Mortati, 2019; Peters, 2020). In this context, we believe it is of continuing importance to ‘further explore the contribution of co-creation to support the use of evidence in policy and practice change’ (Metz et al, 2019: 332).

In line with this, Mortati (2019), Bailey and Lloyd (2016a), and Vaz and Prendeville (2019) have called for a more nuanced design perspective on policy design, one that embeds an understanding of Government practices in its claims of what design may contribute. As highlighted by Metz et al (2019), there appears to be a ‘sense of optimism’ to integrate new practices such as a co-creation to work within ‘existing systems of public service provision’ (Metz et al, 2019: 335). Nonetheless, while Metz, Boaz and Robert acknowledge that there may be a role for designers to bridge the gap between research and practice in policymaking, they also state that ‘evidence to support co-creation (and indeed co-production) as a knowledge mobilisation intervention remains thin on the ground’ (Metz et al, 2019: 331). Consequently, they conclude, ‘as a potential strategy for transforming relationships between knowledge producers, policymakers, practitioners and publics, co-creation continues to sound somewhat optimistic if not naïve’ (Metz et al, 2019: 331). Informed by this appeal for a balanced view of *design for policy*, we identified the need for research into the *practical act* of policymaking in order

to understand how other practices of design may be more likely to influence the formative stages of policy design (if they do not already). Findings from our analysis of participant observation at UK Policy Lab have painted a more nuanced picture – one in which the value of design as a reflective practice within existing processes of policymaking is demonstrated.

## Research approach

Designers at Policy Lab are referred to as *policy designers*. The first author stepped into this role, to work as a policy designer at Policy Lab, in 2019, embedding herself in the professional practices and work of the organisation to gain contextualised and situated insights. While her time in Policy Lab was set out as an internship placement, where she worked as a policy designer in practice, it was also agreed with the Policy Lab team that she would use the placement as an opportunity to conduct participant observation as part of a wider project focused on the role of design methodologies and approaches in evidence-based policymaking settings. As such, over the course of two months she was afforded the opportunity to engage in policy design through practice, and overtly and covertly participate in and observe the day-to-day practices of the wider team of policy designers. The first author consciously took on a dual position of both *insider* and *outsider* to the study context, in order for her to join Policy Lab both as an intern and as researcher: being a trained designer, she held an insider position enabling her to understand the discourse and practices of designers working at UK Policy Lab. This position was ‘juxtaposed’ (Fossey et al, 2002: 727) with the outsider position of being a researcher from beyond the Policy Lab team. The qualitative analysis (Fossey et al, 2002) of the data collected by the first author focused on gaining a better understanding of the relationship of policy designers’ practices within a policy.

## Data collection

The study focused on understanding the professional practices of policy designers, how they adapt design methods for the specifics of policymaking and introduce design-oriented practices to central UK Government through collaboration with policymakers. To gain insight into how these professionals mobilise design methods for policymaking, the lead author worked on two interwoven projects for most of her time with Policy Lab (focusing on the role young people could take in government consultation and the experience and knowledge of policymakers conducting government consultations), while also supporting in a more ad hoc manner several others. During these activities, method triangulation was applied as she gathered data through taking fieldnotes, capturing visual materials, and conducting semi-structured interviews. Three different types of data were collected to allow for ‘comparison and convergence of perspectives to identify corroborating and dissenting accounts’ (Fossey et al, 2002: 728). Fieldnotes described observations and reflections on unrecorded conversations which were conducted while participating in Policy Lab’s daily practice. The notes did not follow a specific format, in order to allow for free expression of what was observed and experienced. Visual materials were gathered during the study as well, including those that the first author (in her role as participating policy designer) designed for projects during her participation at Policy Lab. To complement

the notes and visual materials, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy designers working at Policy Lab. The interviews were transcribed verbatim before the start of the analysis.

### *Data analysis*

The data collected during the placement was shared with the third and fourth author to reflect on the observational work and how to capture it in ways that could be analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As a first step into the analysis, several reflections describing the context of Policy Lab were noted. While most of these were documented in one of the notebooks, these stories were rewritten to capture more detail than when initially written down. Secondly, an inductive exercise of a close reading of the notebooks to identify insightful excerpts into practices of policy designers. Rather than aiming to cluster all the notes into themes, this phase aimed at specifying the aspects of practices at Policy Lab that had been particularly interesting. In the last phase of the analysis, focus was laid on bringing forward experiences and observations of decision-making processes of policy designers, the influence of the organisational context, and the authors interpretation of these experiences and observations as design researchers.

In the following section we report on findings from fieldwork and the analysis of data, with a specific focus on insights gathered on the facilitation of reflective practice through design methods. We first broadly introduce how projects conducted in collaboration with policymakers are established and run by Policy Lab. We then focus on two specific examples of how the design methods used by Policy Lab work demonstrated a clear relationship between creative practices and reflective thinking in a policymaking context. We found that the instances illustrate how Policy Lab uses this relationship to flatten hierarchies around evidence, challenge assumptions policymakers have, and promote new forms of reflective policymaking practice.

### **UK Policy Lab's overall practice of facilitating reflective thinking to craft flat hierarchies**

In their work with the UK Government, Policy Lab collaborates with policy teams and departments to introduce policymakers to new tools and methods for policymaking. Their two major strands of work are: (1) facilitating workshops that introduce their creative, visual, human-centred and future-oriented methods to policymakers as part of civil service training or policy schools; and (2) facilitation of projects that support policymakers in understanding and responding to policy challenges in new ways through introducing them to design methods for policy. Both training and projects are initiated by policymakers, who consult Policy Lab for their expertise on these methods.

A collaboration with Policy Lab is generally initiated at the start of a policymaking process. The process goes through several phases, in which Policy Lab meets policymakers and other civil service stakeholders in a series of workshops. We found Policy Lab's use of creative and visual methods from design in policymaking processes often focuses on co-creation being between designers and policymakers (and does not necessarily facilitate co-creation between designers, policymakers and the public). As such, co-creation as we discuss it in this paper may not be understood in its usual sense: the design methods

we report on in this paper do not focus on facilitating co-creation between the ‘end users’ of policy and those that design. Rather, we found that co-creation in Policy Lab’s practice seemed to focus predominantly on bridging gaps in perspectives and ways of thinking around policy problems from those internal to government.

After initial research by Policy Lab (for example, into citizen’s experiences of public transport, or the use of technology in the context of a specific policy problem), a first workshop with policymakers and stakeholders (predominantly members of the civil service related to the policy challenge) is organised to discuss the results of initial desk-based and fieldwork conducted by Policy Lab, set the challenge the policy team aims to tackle, and go through an initial ideation for policy ideas. In this first workshop, Policy Lab introduces the participants to a range of design tools and methods appropriated for the policy context. These materials are tailored to the specifics of the policy project and aim to allow policymakers and stakeholders to get into a human-centred and design thinking mindset.

The outcomes of the first workshop are typically then developed in further detail by designers in their role of policy designer at Policy Lab. They design materials related to the suggested policy ideas and test these policy prototypes with relevant groups of citizens to gather feedback. The feedback is analysed by Policy Lab and the derived insights are used to inform a second workshop with the policy team and stakeholders. In this second workshop, the policymakers evaluate the outcomes of the user testing and conclude the insights gained throughout the process. After this, Policy Lab ends the process by bringing together a project report which includes the prototypes developed during the process. These materials are handed over to the policy team at the end of the collaboration with Policy Lab, after which the policy team continues the policy design process.

Much of the aforementioned research on design for Policy focuses on these latter aspects: the nature of policy design outcomes, the involvement of implicated citizens in policy formation and testing of policy ideas. However, we also observed that the methods developed by Policy Lab for these early stages of a policy design process aim to support policymakers in their processes of coming to understand the policy challenge, while simultaneously revealing that one’s understanding of and perspective on the policy challenge is informed by a range of factors.

Overall, the participant observation confirmed that policy teams need ‘to combine evidence, values, and political judgement’ when designing policy, and for that go through a process of interpretation that could be supported by reflective practices (Cairney, 2016: 1). The potential of these reflective practices of design may be particularly relevant given that policy appears to be moving away from the ‘naively rationalist’ position that ‘presumes an all too linear relationship between evidence and policymaking’ (McGann et al, 2018: 263). In the following, we will describe and discuss two ‘empirical instances’ to illustrate how the use of creative and collaborative practices at Policy Lab cultivated valued opportunities for critical reflection.

### *Instance A: using personas to collaboratively question bias in policymaking*

As part of a project that explored how young people could become more involved in Government consultation processes, Policy Lab developed a series of policymaker personas to use in a workshop with young people to give them a better idea of what a policymaker may be like.

Personas are a frequently used tool in human-centred design to reconcile insights about a specific target user group and to communicate an understanding of their needs, aspirations and values to other designers and stakeholders. Describing a fictional character, personas present an impression of an individual's day-to-day whereabouts, activities and connections to the design context. Often complemented with a visual element (a placeholder portrait image, or a social context), personas allow for a concretising of what is known about the target group related to the design challenge. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that personas were frequently used within the Policy Lab projects observed during the first author's fieldwork. However, while it is often claimed that tools such as personas are introduced into human-centred design processes to elicit empathy towards a target user base and to bring their needs into focus, we observed that personas were mostly found to provide a resource supporting policymakers in how to reflect. In the following, we highlight that UK Policy Lab helps to demonstrate specific evidence gaps and potential bias by using practices such as personas to stimulate reflective thinking about the available evidence.

The use of personas to collaboratively question biases was observed in the early stages of Policy Lab projects. During the initial stages of a project, Policy Lab facilitated workshops that focus on stimulating their participants (predominantly policymakers and members of the civil service related to the policy challenge) to adopt a solution-agnostic approach to policy design. Rather than supporting the participating policymakers and stakeholders in finding a 'solution' to the policy 'problem' too early in the process, policy designers focused on creatively highlighting differences in participants' perspectives on the policy challenge and how to address it.

An adaptation of the design-oriented persona exercise was used by policy designers to make biases of a policy's target group explicit, revealing the differences among policymakers and the influence this may have on the policymakers' assumptions about the best response to the policy problem. Policy Lab adapted the persona exercise into their work with policymakers. Rather than being presented with a completed persona description, if time allowed, workshop participants (in teams) were asked to compose a persona description based on what they knew about the target group of a policy. Workshop participants were asked to populate a blank persona sheet (template) and to write down their general ideas of a person who fits their target group. At this point, as articulated by one of the senior policy designers, they were asked to 'annotate the person on the sheet, draw some things and write a story alongside it with a few questions'. Often, these descriptions included statements on what an individual within the target group was likely to do, think and know.

After populating the blank persona, participants were asked to critically reflect on the descriptions they had created (or when time did not allow were given) and identify whether the persona was likely to be stereotypical or representative. This second step of the exercise challenged participants to focus on what they believe may be stereotypical elements of their persona to illustrate the biases that have influenced the description. By doing so, Policy Lab aimed to enable participants to reflect on what is not known about the target group within the policy team, and trigger questions about the assumptions made to fill in evidence gaps: What are stereotypical elements in your current description? Where do you think your understanding of your target group is biased? What don't you know about your target group? What do you need to find out to get a better understanding of the policy's target group?

Through the facilitation of the adapted persona exercise, participants were encouraged to make explicit the aspects of their thinking that were informed by explicit knowledge of the policy challenge and context and how assumptions had become part of the group's thinking about the target group. Sometimes, participants struggled to come to a persona description that could capture the target group, revealing hesitancy to make assumptions about a policy target group or addressing them as if they could be considered as a uniform group of people.

As such, Policy Lab's two-step approach to using personas appeared to be effective in facilitating discussion in which the danger of biases and lack of evidence on policy target groups are brought to the centre of the participants' attention.

Simultaneously, structuring the activity around visually and creatively developing and questioning a persona enabled participants to identify concrete gaps in knowledge, as they were encouraged to externalise their thinking about and understanding of a policy target group as part of the activity. Reflecting on the persona descriptions from different participants may furthermore reveal that policymakers may have different biases and rely on different knowledge when addressing a policy challenge, which likely needs to be negotiated when designing a policy. Encouraging workshop participants to reflect in a shared space on aspects such as their priorities, beliefs, biases, assumptions, knowledge and expertise with regard to the policy, was found to allow Policy Lab to make the differences between participants visible and explicit in a policy team, and to highlight these as inevitable complexities within a policy challenge.

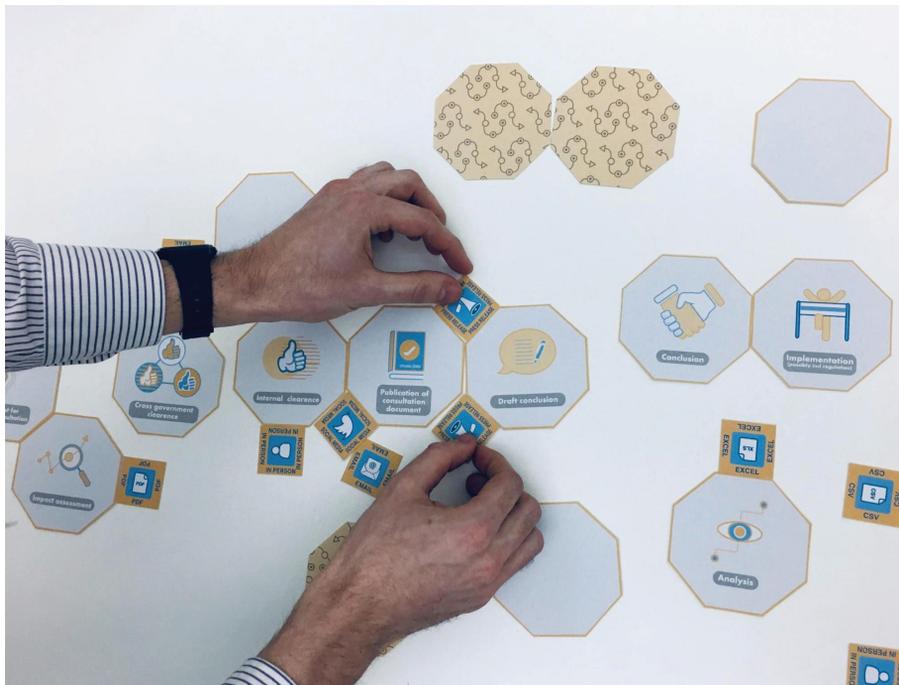
Through these reflective processes, the creative methods aimed to craft flat hierarchies amongst the participants. This echoes findings from the previous special issue on 'Co-creative approaches to knowledge production and implementation' (2019), in which it is highlighted how co-creation can reveal and redesign power structures that may create barriers for deliberation and decision making in policymaking: co-creation 'promote[s] cycles of mutual consultation among stakeholders to ensure different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing are integrated in planning and solutions' (Metz et al, 2019: 333). Creative methods, here, can be applied to ensure participants focus on 'working through challenges together' rather than identifying and reinforcing vertical power structures internal to those participating in co-creation. Consequently, rather than allowing participants to focus implicitly on power balances, a situation is created that allows participants to explore the impact of different perspectives and understand how these highlight complexities of a policy challenge that need addressing in order to respond appropriately.

### *Instance B: using visual methods to guide reflection on policymaking practices*

As part of a project that explored how to engage young people in government consultation processes, Policy Lab conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with policymakers. While theoretical models and available documentation allowed Policy Lab to develop a conceptual understanding of the process, goals, and value of government consultation as part of a policy design process, the interviews aimed at gaining insight into how this conceptual understanding compared to the practical experience of policymakers developing and conducting government consultation.

In order to facilitate the interviews with policymakers, the policy designers developed a bespoke journey mapping tool, to elicit both professional and lived experience from policymakers about how such consultations processes happen in

Figure 1: The tool designed by Policy Lab used to guide interviews with policymakers into their experiences of conducting a government consultation. Copyright photograph: Policy Lab (Bennett and Cutler, 2019)



Source: <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2019/10/28/lab-long-read-policy-consultations-part-1-mapping-the-process/>

practice. As phrased by the junior policy designer who conducted the interviews with policymakers, the interview tool was based on Policy Lab's 'desk-based... understanding of consultation processes'. The first author participated in using the tool during data collection and analysis of policymakers' accounts of their practices and experiences.

The interviews focused on: how the participating policymakers moved from one step to another in the process of conducting a government consultation; how they maintained contact with internal and external stakeholders during the process; and the types of citizen engagement they chose to conduct. The journey mapping tool guided this conversation through the visual depiction of the processes in front of the policymakers' eyes. It consisted of a set of octagonal tiles marking different milestones, stages and steps of government consultation. Each of the elements in the tool was designed to trigger reflection on the policymaker's individual experience of going through this policy design practice (Figure 1).

At the start of the interview, the tiles were laid down in the order which Policy Lab had understood as the 'right' order (informed by their initial desk-based research into UK Government consultation). When putting the tiles down in this order, the interviewer (one of the junior policy designers) stated that it was up to the interviewee (policymaker) to move tiles around and make them fit their personal experience of the process. On first impression of the order in which the tiles were put down on the table, policymakers generally agreed. Only when the interviewing policy

designer started to facilitate reflection through a series of complementary questions about each of the phases of the consultation process (as visualised on the tiles) did policymakers start to reflect on whether the order of the phases was representative of their experience. While policymakers initially seemed to think that Policy Lab shared their understanding of a government consultation, the tool enabled policymakers to make explicit where understandings of the process differed. Resultantly, in each of the interviews, generally, at least one or two tiles were moved to a different place on the table as policymakers reflected on the process of developing and conducting their consultation.

A set of tokens describing tools and expertise available in the process were part of the tool to help policymakers identify the resources available to them during their processes. As the lead author analysed the interviews in her role of policy designer during the placement, it was noticed that this task was simple for participants to identify which tools were used when. Nonetheless, as they were asked to do so, the task triggered reflections on who policymakers had communicated and shared their progress with throughout the process. As such, this part of the tool enabled policy designers to identify (the importance of) external factors influencing policymakers' processes of developing and conducting a government consultation.

Lastly, the policy designer designed a pack of 'pain point' and 'highlight' cards to allow policymakers to respond to the process they were visualising with the use of the tiles. By writing down reflections on the pain point and highlight cards, the policy designer encouraged policymakers to evaluate from their own experiences the process of conducting a government consultation.

When analysing the interviews, in her role of policy designer, the lead author was asked to focus on *actual* practice. This made clear that the tool had a different purpose to most of Policy Lab's tools she had experienced. Most creative and visual methods focused on introducing new ways of designing policy, that were aimed at their adoption in the policymaking practice. In contrast, this tool was designed to support policymakers and policy designers in developing a shared understanding of developing and conducting government consultation.

This instance of Policy Lab's research into the practices of policymakers explicitly relies on collaborative reflective practices in design, which seems to contribute to the development of a new type of activity that policy labs are seen to be exploring: developing tools to facilitate evaluation of and critical reflection on conventional as well as new practices in policymaking. This was also observed by [Zurbruggen and Lago \(2019\)](#), who argue for the value of reflection-on-action to evaluate 'co-creation processes and transdisciplinary knowledge generation':

Reflecting while the actions unfold (barriers and opportunities), enables generation of the necessary adjustments and adaptations to change the rules of the game. In this process, specific interventions can result in new rules, practices and relationships within the organisation and the network of actors involved. ([Zurbruggen and Lago, 2019](#): 443)

As such, tools like the policy designers' interviews with policymakers show strong similarities with Schön's idea of frame analysis, as they 'study the ways in which practitioners [policymakers] frame problems and roles'. ([Schön, 1983](#): 309) As a type

of reflective research, through making visible the differences between policymakers' processes in visual representation, Policy Lab makes policymakers 'aware of and criticise their tacit frames'. (Schön, 1983: 309) As Schön argues:

When practitioners are unaware of their frames for roles or problems, they do not experience the need to choose among them. They do not attend to the ways in which they construct the reality in which they function; for them, it is simply the given reality... When a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice. He takes note of the values and norms to which he has given priority, and those he has given less importance, or left out of account altogether. Frame awareness tends to entrain awareness of dilemmas. (Schön, 1983: 310)

Making policymakers (and designers) aware of their frames through reflection has been seen as a valuable ability to catalyse change in policy design.

This instance showed how, through the design of a visual tool, policy designers created a conversational space to gain overview of a specific type of policy practice, while simultaneously giving space to the personal experiences of the participants. Placing policymakers in the role of experience expert, in particular, appeared to give credit to existing practices, and simultaneously stimulated them to critically reflect on how these may be supported, progressed or expanded.

## Concluding discussion: design in policy as a reflective practice

Through the reported participant observation study and embedded work with Policy Lab, we gained insight into the design-oriented methods introduced to policymakers' practices and how these may influence conventional policy design processes. We identify a particular contribution by design in these spaces: its promotion of reflective practice.

Designers have utilised reflection-in-practice as well as reflection-on-practice, in their methods, skills and outcomes, to support policymakers' moving back and forth between problem definition and solution proposition. The process of reflecting in practice is omnipresent in the practices of policy designers and in policymaker's practices of negotiating between design- and policy-oriented perspectives. Reflection arguably supports policymakers in recognising their perspective on and agency in the process of designing policy: by externalising reflective thinking processes using creative and visual methods from design, Policy Lab enables policymakers to collaboratively form, inform, transform and transcend their ideas (Dix and Gongora, 2011) on how to respond to policy challenges.

As reported on by Yazejian et al, 'develop[ing] an evolving 'collective view' or "shared understanding", rather than pushing for consensus which is often artificial and perpetuates power structures', may allow to address the influence of 'power imbalances between [among others] community members, [and] stakeholders in the wider system' (Yazejian et al, 2019: 342) through reflection on the perspectives that these individuals bring into the policy design process. When evidence-informed policymaking processes prioritise reflective deliberation and decision making over policy solutions, we find that designers can contribute their creative and visual methods to help externalise thinking processes and communicate how the knowledge is

understood by a range of perspectives. As such, collaborative deliberation and decision making is strengthened in a challenging professional setting. In closing, this paper has contributed an empirical case demonstrating the efficacy of how creative and visual methods from design can be practiced to foster co-creative reflection within a policy design team. We highlight the potential value of further exploring the use of such methods in other, related settings, and in doing so further analyse the nature of reflection-in-practice in policy design processes.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, policy design is defined by excluding the work of professionals on how to implement policies.

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### **Research ethics statement**

The ethical implications of this research were discussed in detail between the lead author and co-authors during the planning of fieldwork conducted as part of her PhD studies. This included giving consideration to potential issues of covert data gathering while conducting on-site ethnographic work in Policy Lab, and the gathering of firsthand and secondhand accounts from participants. All work presented in this paper underwent review by and received ethical approval from Northumbria University's School of Design and Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Science research ethics committee. This was approved on 28 April 2018, and an amendment was approved on 8 April 2019 to account for a further round of data collection.

### **Contributor statement**

The first author (AS), as the lead researcher, conducted the study as participant observer that this paper reports on. She is the main author of this paper. The second to fourth authors have contributed to the research as supervisors to AS in her doctoral work that this study forms part of, and as contributors to the design and analysis of the study (JV, AD), to the paper's early development (NS) and writing (all).

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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