

**Designing services at Engine (B)
Co-designing for health and the domestic
environment**

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The information in this case has been obtained from both company interviews and public sources. All websites cited were accessible on 15 July 2010.

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“If applied systematically, service design can offer a vision for the transformation of public services, as well as a route to get there.”

Sophia Parker and Joe Heapy¹

In order to show Southwark Council the value of design in exploring complex social problems, Engine designers initially focused on the specific issue of childhood obesity. In so doing, they involved both the Council and its citizens in co-designing services relating more broadly to health and the domestic environment.

Research: Developing a picture of family life in Southwark

Engine service designers believed that an issue such as childhood obesity required a holistic and personalised approach. Any solutions would need to address lifestyle assessment and change, personal attitudes and cultural issues. This meant starting with a complete picture and in-depth understanding of family lifestyles and everyday environments in Southwark. To achieve this initial goal, as in all their projects, Engine designers used a broad range of “design ethnography” techniques, including shadowing, photography and using props.

Beyond the specific issue of child obesity, the research aimed to develop a complete picture of a family’s life, revealing connections between different elements, such as work, home, education, health and community. The questions discussed with the families ranged across these different topics, as well as seeking to understand what support they needed and how they perceived the current support available from the Council and other local services. This research phase generated awareness not only about how families live but why they make the choices that they do.



Figure 1: Mapping key resources in the neighbourhood and borough

¹ Parker, Sophia, and Heapy, Joe, *The Journey to the Interface: How public service design can connect users to reform* (Demos, 2006), p.7 (free download at <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thejourneytotheinterface>)



Figure 2: Card sorting as a discussion prompt around local issues and services

Designers spent one day (approximately 10 hours) with 8 families across Southwark, using a mix of ethnographic and design research methods to develop an understanding of the complex needs, barriers and drivers that underpinned these families' interactions (or lack of them) with public services. Discussions about healthy weight revealed that this was a complex issue for many families – touching on many other complex issues, including relationships, environments, exercise and money.

Families were recruited with the support of front-line staff and Council organisations already familiar to them. This helped to build the sense of trust needed to put families at ease and allow them to feel comfortable taking part.

During this phase, Engine designers also conducted interviews with managers in different Council departments and partner organisations in order to understand the perceived “big issues” that helped or hindered successful delivery of services.

Co-designing with citizens and Council staff

Using the data collected from their research, the Engine team embarked on an iterative process of co-design with families and Council staff to define and develop a set of health services. Indeed, Engine has found that co-design is an essential approach in the public sector. It not simply builds on the expertise and perspectives of key stakeholders – such as healthcare staff or childcare users – it also increases their commitment to the solutions.

The co-design team – consisting of 20 local parents and a cross-section of public-services staff – was recruited through the same channels as those used to secure participants for the design ethnography fieldwork. Flyers were also distributed, inviting residents and Council staff to participate in a series of three workshops which would look at the priority issue of healthy weight.

The workshops were held at two-week intervals in a local children's centre and generated ideas for new and improved services that would genuinely meet the Southwark population's needs. Each workshop was defined by a unique set of objectives and used a set of service design tools.

The sequence of activities was organised so that the outputs of one workshop become inputs for the next. As a result, participants began to understand both the design process and their role as designers within it. Many reacted positively to the creativity of the experience (outlined below), as much as to the ideas it sparked.

Workshop 1: Research to ideas

Engine designers shared the results from the field research and presented the “personas” (defined by ethnicity, income and family structure) they had developed from the research. These personas helped bring the research to life through stories, quotes and images. They also stimulated a discussion with those present about precise needs and services that might respond to them. By the end of this first workshop, an impressive 65 ideas for healthy weight services had been captured.



Figure 3: Using personas to brainstorm ideas

Workshop 2: Select and refine ideas

The members of the co-design team began by reviewing the ideas generated in the first workshop and synthesised them in a set of eleven service “sketches”. They then narrowed these down to four and finally to two concepts, using service-design techniques such as prototyping with Lego to explore, develop and refine service features. By the end of the second workshop, the participants had agreed on two service concepts – a community-based health resource and a shared space (see below for an explanation) – and developed a clear idea of the audience, proposition and unique selling points of each.



Figure 4: Exploring different service ideas with Lego

Workshop 3: Test and define ideas

In the last workshop, the participants further refined the two ideas they had selected in the second session. Using the customer-journey map technique, they tested the key features, interactions and points of contact with the service to bring both ideas to life. They also identified areas that required further definition.



Figure 5: Service sketching to define the benefits, features, enablers, users, names (who, where, when?) and to evaluate essential versus expendable features

Both the selected service concepts showed, to the surprise of Council staff, that citizens most required general support, such as space or technology access, rather than experts or special events.

Service concept 1: FASH

FASH (Free Access Social Hub) is a community-based health resource open on weekday mornings and weekends in familiar local buildings like schools and children's centres. The central idea is to bring together residents with relevant experience and professionals with

technical skills to pass on their knowledge and skills to others. As well as face-to-face advice and printed information, there is a suite of computers connected to a dedicated FASH website – the other key component of the service.

The FASH portal provides, among other features, local networking tools, forums, a digital bulletin board, work/volunteer opportunities and links to helpful online information sources. Trained staff present at the drop-in sessions offer basic training in computer skills through the use of the FASH portal (including browsing, word processing, and email). They also track key issues in order to coordinate a programme of seminars given by visiting professionals, such as nutritionists and personal trainers.

The aim is for FASH users to become FASH contributors almost immediately, first as part of a knowledge network and later – as their computer literacy improves – taking on greater mentoring responsibilities and ultimately, perhaps, even paid roles.

Service concept 2: Our Space

Our Space is a service that offers groups the opportunity to hire venues by the hour for activities. Priority and subsidies are given to groups running health-related activities, or other activities that contribute to community cohesion.

Organisations such as schools, libraries, community halls and even private businesses, can rent out spaces, which must meet certain standards and are graded according to their levels of accessibility, size or facilities. Residents recognise local facilities through a distinctive “Our Space” plaque, and can use a dedicated website to find and book others.

Financial incentives and various reassurance mechanisms are provided to encourage organisations to take part and to offer venues. Thus, although the concept requires Council funding to get started, it will ultimately result in a sustainable financial model. The service is delivered in collaboration with a consortium of public-sector and relevant partners, to ensure a critical mass of venues.

One of the participants said:

The reason Our Space is my favourite is because I work in the community and one of the things I find hard to get my hands on is community spaces, in terms of hiring and accessing. Right now I am in the middle of running a cook-and-eat session – and the hardest thing to find is a kitchen!

This is a remark that reflects not only the needs of the Southwark community but also its high level of resilience.

Next steps: Developing capabilities

Southwark Council does not have the capacity to implement either of the two services. This initially led to some disappointment and frustration at Engine. Yet, although both Engine and the Council had originally hoped to implement some of the ideas generated, they were also aware

that the project was above all the exploration of a process. In that sense, it was a success, as it highlighted a broader need to develop new capabilities and to change the way people work. It also created an appetite for a bigger piece of work that Engine and Southwark Council carried out in 2010.

The final phase of the obesity project was a workshop held with a selection of Council staff. Its purpose was, first, to share direct insights, stories and experiences “from the field” with those who had not participated directly and, second, to encourage further reflection on what the Council could and should do to meet the needs of residents.

There was general consensus that the project provided a model for improving the Council’s strategies for developing services – using a citizen-centred approach. Joseph Harrington, one of Engine’s specialist public-sector service designers, explains: “We’re using our design principles and approach to model that type of activity, rather than service designing.”

Indeed, focusing on outcomes for individuals and communities, rather than on the mechanisms of service delivery means that decision making and strategic policy relocate from the council chamber or county hall to local contexts. This also means a shift in the definition of engagement, going beyond consultation to a collaborative process involving a range of activities in research, design and service delivery.

The Southwark project illustrates the evolution of Engine’s work in recent years – from designing services to using service design principles to support services, systems and policy making. Joe Heapy says:

Particularly in the public-sector space, people are becoming much more interested in us teaching them how to fish, to use the cliché. So much more of our work is either about strategising or capacity building.

The complexity of the problems at stake thus seems to require long-term systemic change. It is not enough just to fix up a few services. It is a matter of changing the culture, developing skills and stimulating new ways of thinking. In addition, the intangible experience of feeling that the service is supporting you – working for and on behalf of you – is key in the public sector, where policy makers cannot rely on a strict line of command. Engine-style collaboration may therefore prove crucial in effecting the changes in public behaviour demanded by today’s society, such as recycling or healthier eating.

Yet, as projects like Engine’s work with ANA show, there is a similar shift in the private sector. Engine’s role is increasingly to disrupt the way private-sector clients do things and to create a vision that paying customers can share. What service designers learn in the public sector they can then apply to the private sector – and vice versa. Perhaps, then, Engine’s two contrasting “practices” are not so different after all. And the executive in Virgin’s “Upper Class” lounge may not be as different as he thinks from the single mother, struggling to cook her kids healthy meals in a high-rise Southwark council flat.