



relational activism

Family Change-Making

Parent Participation and Co-design in the Telford and Wrekin Parenting offer

Initial Theory Report



Part 1: Introduction (p.2)

Part 2: An overview of Co-design (p.4-11)

Part 3: Case examples of co-design (p.11-13)

*Part 4: Overview of two projects
and theory of change (p.14-15)*

Part 5: Outline approach and timescale (p.16)
And a note on the relational activism team authors of this report (p.16)

References (p.17-18)



Part 1: Introduction

Strengthening Families in Telford and Wrekin believe that parents should be involved in the way support is provided for, with, and by them, their families and their community.

'We believe that parents should have opportunities to influence their local services and share their experiences'

(Helen Clover, Team Leader)

'It is essential to me that parent's views and experiences are valued and built upon. Parent's need to have the opportunity to feel that their opinions are valued, that they are included and an important part of the process'

(Sarah Hall, Team Leader).

'Parents – for me parents are vital as it is a service for them and will only ever work when designed and ultimately ran by them'

(Christine Thursfield, Team Leader).

As the quotations above illustrate, there is recognition that parents are not just recipients of help, but have expertise derived from their lived experience and knowledge of receiving services and of their local community. In Telford and Wrekin, they recognise that the old way of professionals being 'experts' has limited utility, and by drawing upon the people they serve through co-design, new, novel and unimagined possibilities and ways of helping can emerge. Ways of helping that are rooted in love, connection, and community. Localised help that is co-produced with and for people.

It is under Helen, Sarah, and Christine's commitment to participation and co-design that this project is being undertaken in an attempt to generate a different type of conversation between those helping and those being helped. In the next section, an overview of co-design will be provided that will provide the basis for the two projects. The following section will provide some examples of co-design. The third section will provide a theory of change. In the final section, an overview of the workshops will be provided. In the appendix, there will be an overview of principles that will underpin the approach adopted.



Part 2: An overview of Co-design

What is co-design?

'Co-design is an approach to designing with, not for, people. It involves sharing power, prioritising relationships, using participatory means and building capability' (McKercher 2020 p. 8)

Co-design is a creative method to work *with* people to bring about social change.

At the heart of this approach is working collaboratively with others, especially those usually on the receiving end of services. This approach dramatically changes the power dynamics and role of professionals. Typically, professionals working with people identify the concern and then try to fix these issues with a solution they or the service they work for has devised.

Co-design, in contrast, positions people as experts in their life and situation. Instead of being passive recipients of help, they are invited to participate in conversation about the help they receive from professionals. Through creative and participatory dialogue, they explore and identify needs and develop, deliver, and test solutions.

Co-design can be considered a process underpinned by principles and undertaken with a set of practical tools (Blomkamp 2018).

Process	Iterative stages of design thinking, oriented towards innovation
Principles	Exploration; experimentation; empathy; diversity; participation
Practical tools	Creative and tangible methods for telling, enacting and making experiences and ideas.

(Table from Emma Blomkamp and can be found [here](#))

Co-design or co-production?

There are various descriptions of co-design and co-production. Some consider that the two terms are distinctly different, whereas others think they have overlapping features or that co-production is one element of co-design. For our purposes, we will consider co-production referring to one phase within co-design, namely the part that involves the implementation of a solution (Blomkamp 2018).



What are the benefits of co-design?

'It is a method by which public services tap into the abundance of human assets, enabling them to flourish and expand, and then bringing them into play – complementing and augmenting the publicly funded resources of the welfare state' (Boyle 2009, p17-18)

- ❖ Supports the development of creative solutions tailored to the needs of local people.
- ❖ It brings together a diverse group of people and creates social networks.
- ❖ Reinvigorates trust and collaboration between parents and professionals and organisations.
- ❖ Provides a foundation for parents to become more active in their health, wellbeing, and community.
- ❖ Builds on the capabilities of individuals, their family and community.
- ❖ Unleashes untapped potential and expertise of parents, allowing them to develop and influence services that impact them.
- ❖ Provides a space for professionals to learn from parents and develop more collaborative relationships.

What co-design is not?

- ❖ Co-design is not a one-off event. It is a process. Developing services takes time.
- ❖ Co-design is not a consultation whereby professionals ask users their opinion on a limited number of pre-identified solutions.
- ❖ Does not exclude professional experience, expertise, or knowledge. Instead, it changes the power so that the professional's perspective can be balanced with users' perspective, multiplying insight, and generating collective energy and intelligence.
- ❖ Co-design is not just about talking about issues. It requires action.
- ❖ It is not about absolving responsibility and encouraging self-reliant service users. It is about developing genuine partnerships and sharing power and resources to build more impactful, localised, and sustainable solutions.

What are the principles of co-design?

'Love and co-design go hand in hand. We can't elevate the voices and contributions of people with lived experience if we don't see and champion their wisdom and resilience' (McKercher 2020 p. 12).

 *Design Justice - A Lens to Hold in Mind*

“Design justice” is an approach to design that is led by marginalized communities and that aims explicitly to challenge and reduce structural inequalities. Design justice therefore has a social justice lens and focus - not just to design together for the sake of designing together, but to recognise the socially and structurally transformative power and potential of participating in design processes. Design then must be a deeply collaborative practice which



lifts the voices and influence of the communities most affected by inequality, oppression or discrimination.

The Design Justice Network uses ten principles to inform this approach (cited in full below and available from [Read the Principles — Design Justice Network](#)):

- we use design to sustain, heal and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems
- we centre the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process
- we prioritise design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer
- we view change as emergent from an accountable, accessible and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process
- we see the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert
- we believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process
- we share design knowledge and tools with our communities
- we work towards sustainable, community-led and community-controlled outcomes
- we work towards non-exploitative solutions that reconnect us to the earth and to each other
- before seeking new design solutions, we look for what is already working at the community level. We honour and uplift traditional, indigenous and local knowledge and practices

Contemporary co-design will be mindful at least and committed at best to these principles, and, before any co-design process begins, to reflexively examine them and the ways in which they can provide a foundation upon which to build a co-design process.

Design justice is coupled with design ethics - the ways in which your design approach will be rooted in rights and ethical practices. Manzini (2006) describes design ethics as 'what has to be considered as ethically relevant are not only the intentions behind a given action but also its implications and results' (p.9). Whilst design ethics as a concept may have been afforded more contemporary relevance to industrial, technological or commercial design, it is no less important to co-design. Dilnot (2016) eloquently captures this in arguing that 'design begins and ends in its relation to persons; the ethical core of design lies in the relation of reciprocity established in any act of human making'.

Before embarking on your co-design idea, it is worth reflecting on what design justice and design ethics mean for the work you want to do, and how your approach to co-design will



reflect their principles, ideas and concepts. A simple method is to take the 10 design justice principles and frame them as questions. "To what extent are we" before each statement allows repositioning of the statements into a reflective enquiry which you and your group can examine and explore together.

Plus notes on how should they be applied to this project;

Group Roles

Language will be important. Words change things.

What are we talking about when we recognise the lived experience of the parents that are taking part and their valuable role? As well as being clear about the participation of the 'outside' facilitators from the *relational activism* team and the local leadership from Telford and Wrekin - allies of the change. How can we express conscious and grateful acknowledgement of all contributions?

Reflections

- Is there privilege in the room, and how is this being considered? (McKercher 2020)
- Are all participants credited as "knowledgeable" with important knowledge to bring? (Sage Handbook of Action Research, 2015)

Definition of the group

The naming of the group as a collective will be key, particularly as the group may have ambition beyond this task and the finished project. The naming process should feel inclusive of everybody in the co-design process with consideration of different factors. Such as, if the group is made up of parents, that will be important to recognise. However, if the terms are limited, e.g., simply "parent group" or "young peoples" group, that may limit how the group is viewed. The function of the group, e.g., to consult, advise, to co-design, may need to be explicit in its name.

Reflections:

- The naming process should be given thought, and this topic could be broached at the end of the first session for everyone to consider and settle in the second perhaps.
- 'Catchy' names can help settle the concept and help people hold it in mind.

Connection

Here we are really thinking about the connection of the service and this co-design initiative to the community and the strength of the investment of everyone in it. Beginning with the value position of the community as an enabler for cooperation and connectivity. Community is continuity, ongoing stories. So, we start with curiosity and encouragement of creative expressions of the local community. This has to be a good starting place for service design.

Reflections

- Good co-design can be seen as a bridge, connecting the "Life World" of Communities which is fluid and dynamic, with the "Service World", which is structured and funding dependent (Burns and Fruchtel, 2014).



The Space

The workshops and spaces for co-design will be creations of everyone involved, 'professionals' and 'parents', 'lived' and 'learned' experience. It is vital to create a space in the co-design that appreciates everyone taking part and which is an enabling space to have the necessary meaningful conversations. Sometimes, the 'professionals' (privileged) will need to purposefully lead and facilitate this, describe the context, make acknowledgements, and leave the floor clear for 'parents with lived experience' to lead. A good venue, food and refreshments, the maximum "radical" hospitality is important. (New Town Culture, Goldsmiths report, 2020)

Reflections

- Sometimes we can catch the exhilarating feeling of moving into a new space with others, and it feels great.
- A Belief that everyone has a right to space. (adrienne maree brown, Holding Change, 2021).
- People facing difficulty can't constantly be expected to make the running on change all the time; allies are needed.

Format and Boundaries

Position is important. A circle of chairs on a venue floor can be powerful. A circle is a visible, practical way of arranging participants to demonstrate the invitation for all to be included. A circle can be a cue to slow down, listen, and feel our bodies' presence with others. Holding that circle closed may be important at times to generate confidentiality. Boundaries and boundary setting - establishing the mission - are essential, as is control over them. The act of crossing a boundary together with another person or as part of a group can generate energy and hope.

Reflections

- Asking ourselves, what power is here in the space, who has it? Where does it come from?
- The closed circle has positive power. However, a fixed circle could become unproductive or even harmful, and widening the circle or allowing movement can be important.

Transformation

The Co-design should aim for transformational, not transactional change/project development (McKercher 2020). Not losing sight of what has gone before, but also going beyond this. The values need to be held, displayed, and re-confirmed in the workshop moments. The relational mix of lived and learned experience can bring energy and creativity and give the values and mission life. Coming at the co-design process with a sense of occasion, attending to the ceremony of it. (New Town Culture, Goldsmiths report, 2020)



Reflections

- Epictetus, the Greek Philosopher, said, "Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it."

Discomfort

Sometimes not knowing is a precious type of knowledge, but it is not always valued. To say you don't know can be an invitation to others, a sign of your faith in the community. The co-design process is likely to be an 'outside of the comfort zone' experience for many, if not all, of the participants at different times. 'Professionals' have really got to take the hit if they can and prioritise the comfort of the lived experience participants. A kind of Hopeful disruption can follow when we come together in a design space that is traditionally bounded and privileged for professionals (Four Bars, 2021).

Reflections

- There may be moments when things don't work, but we would do well to remember Kelly Ann McKercher's wisdom that 'Failed ideas make great compost.' (McKercher 2020)

Feedback & Story

We live in feedback loops; we will want to invite all participants to reflect on past experiences and have that inform the Co-design. A useful and related aim of the process can be to speed up these feedback loops and stay engaged and responsive to feedback, on the past and the present Co-design ideas and the process itself. We may need to work hard on listening, and even create fresh organisational cultures and systems of feedback.

Reflections

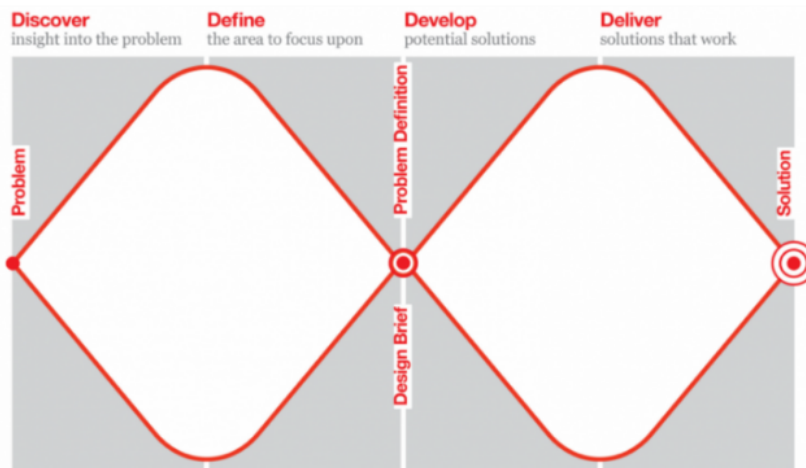
- Support and aftercare - In the circle and afterwards important.
- Storytelling along the way could be key in exchanging experience. If you want to connect with someone, you have to be open to sharing a part of yourself as well. Making sense of each other by showing vulnerability helps us build compassion and break down barriers, rather than creating new ones. (*relational activism*, SSIR, 2019)

Process of co-design

There are variations in the design process, but most tend to include the following:

1. Discover and explore
2. Refine and define
3. Develop solutions
4. Deliver





The UK Design Council's ['Double Diamond'](#)

In the first stage, an exploration is undertaken to understand the problem. Or, as Cottam describes it *'frame the problem, find the opportunity'* (2018 p.218). Curiosity and understanding the issues from multiple perspectives are critical. Creating a safe, supportive, and participatory context is required to enable maximum participation of all in attendance.

In the second stage, you transition into refining and defining the concern. This might be a natural consequence of the former step because there is often a relationship between the framing of a problem and identifying a solution.

In the third stage, ideas are generated about how and who can solve the problem. At this point, all ideas are welcomed and considered.

In the final stage, an idea is selected, funding is secured, and an implementation plan is developed and enacted. Cottam (2018, p.224) refers to this final stage of prototyping, which *'is a verb: it is an active process – we are in there, playing roles, taking apart for remaking.'* In other words, this is like testing a solution that is subject to an iterative process with learning loops built in to allow adaptation, adjustment, and improvement in response to further user feedback.

Top tips for implementing a co-design approach

Hospitality: This is both relational and practical. Relationally this involves users feeling invited and welcomed into a space. It is knowing a familiar name or face and being supported to contribute to discussions. Practically, it means consideration is given to the venue, the venue's location, transport, and childcare. In addition, it is ensuring that basic physical needs are met, such as easy access to toilets, snacks, and drinks. The role of the facilitator is to make attending a session as frictionless as possible.

Recognition: Acknowledging the time, energy, and emotion of those participating is critical. Anything less than this becomes exploitative and undermines co-design's principles, ethics, and integrity. Professionals are paid, and so should those who contribute their expertise through experience.



Inclusion: Being mindful of the role power plays in reinforcing inequalities, professionals should be aware of what they wear, including any symbols of professionalism such as their name tag, laptop, notebook, etc. Refer to people by their names, not their job titles.

In addition, Kercher (2020 p.107) provides ten principles for widening inclusion:

1. Remove barriers: Pre-empt barriers to participation and remove them.
2. Slow down: Give people time to connect, think and learn.
3. Go beyond writing: Embrace visual, oral and somatic practices.
4. Support power-sharing: Encourage people to use their names, not titles
5. Practise flexibility: Remain open to how people can and want to participate.
6. Seek consent: Apply consent-driven convening
7. Use affirming language: Focus on strengths and dignity.
8. Be mindful of sensory differences: load and sensory Remain aware of sensory differences.
9. Ensure safe venues: Ensure that venues are accessible, neutral and comfortable.
10. Seek intersectionality: Seek co-designers who can speak across many identities'

Part 3: Two examples of Co-design

1. Camden Conversations

Full Report can be found [here](#)

Camden Conversations saw parents with lived experience of child protection leading an enquiry into local child protection practices, an alliance of national expertise Professor Anna Gupta and Annie from Surviving Safeguarding supported the local Family Advisory Board * in Camden to do the work, with the research design and analysis.



An innovative project that aimed to redress some of the power imbalances by involving parents trained as peer researchers to interview both parents and professionals about their experiences of the child protection system. Commissioned by the Camden Local Safeguarding Children Board (CSCB), it was a restorative process, premised on the belief that building dialogue and co-constructing services offers a means of opening up new knowledge and collaborative responses to protecting children and supporting families.

Parents and other family members were centrally involved in the design, implementation, and recommendations. Family members were interviewed and had focus group discussions with family members and (separately) social workers and managers. The interviews were



analysed and preliminary findings were discussed with the Family Advisory Board. To change the stories, perhaps we need to change the storytellers? The “rich, untapped resource” to help children and families is being noticed and Helping human services should be all about bringing together networks of support. The London Family Group Conference learning partnership have created an OCN accredited qualification in parent advocacy which parents from London had completed in a first cohort of advocates, we are beginning to conceive parent peer advocacy and lived-experience peer support as something that adds value.

For parents, it might mean having someone alongside you who gets how it feels to be you, with valuable insight and knowledge of the world you are currently inhabiting and, critically, how to navigate it. For professionals, it might mean enriching the helping network with unique expertise, and doing so safely, ethically and respectfully in a way that helps a parent, child and family to move forward with their journey. Nothing in those last two sentences stands contrary to the values of our disciplines or presents as an unethical enterprise.

*In Camden, the citizen-led Family Advisory Board is now in its 8th year. This parent group has given a platform for participation, inclusion and the co-construction of services which has been very useful to the local authority.

*The final report has already led to real change, for example, parents now lead monthly “learning exchange” workshops, sharing with practitioners their experiences of subjects such as domestic violence and of being in state care. The relationship between the independent chair of the child protection meetings and the family is being improved; the chair now keeps in contact with the family between meetings so the family has the opportunity to give feedback and build a trusting relationship so they can speak openly and honestly.

A video of Camden Conversations: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnhjunSxGAg>

2. Camden Family Change Makers Project

Changemakers is a participatory design project that brought together Camden parents and family members with service design Masters students from the University of the Arts London College of Communication to co-create a design vision for good family help after COVID. The parents and students worked together to describe how good help should feel and what good help should be and created a set of design concepts to bring the vision to life.

If you’ve got a spare 8 minutes, have a watch of this about the Camden Family Changemakers co-design project where local families decide what good help looks and feels like (spoiler alert – everyone can help and be helped, and the help feels)

A brilliant video showcasing a highly innovative project exploring how families can be helped. But also, the value in bringing the helped and helpers closer together and co-designing support services:

A video of Family Change Makers Project: <https://vimeo.com/541404031#>



Part 4: Theory of Change

Project 1: How to end family support in a way that leads to sustainable changes i.e. family book

Program inputs
<p>A willingness to create a participatory approach, using co-design principles that value's parents experience and expertise.</p> <p>Finances to support the design and implementation of the sessions.</p> <p>Practitioners from Telford and Wrekin to support the facilitation of the sessions.</p> <p>An inclusive and inviting setting to facilitate the group discussions.</p> <p>Telford and Wrekin parents</p>
Activities
<p>Invite at least 12 parents to participate in a dialogue about endings and the development of a book that supports lasting change.</p> <p>Consideration to be given to maximize parent participation, including support with transport, a creche and nourishment.</p> <p>Activities to be inclusive and participatory so everyone can contribute meaningfully to discussions</p>
Outputs/Impact
<p>Short term:</p> <p>Parents are involved in fun, engaging and creative dialogue about their needs and the value of support they receive.</p> <p>Parents voices are heard and they feel validated, and expertise is acknowledged. They will feel empowered.</p> <p>Ideas are generated about how to develop a tool that helps parents make lasting change.</p> <p>A dialogue between professionals and parents will create a more rich, nuanced, and insightful understanding of what would help lasting change.</p> <p>Medium term:</p> <p>A codesigned tool to help parents sustain change will be developed for parents, by parents. Changes more likely to last – safer children, happier families.</p>



Families will have a tangible record of the support they accessed and reflect on what they have achieved. A celebration of their success, and an artefact that will help them if difficulties re-emerge.

Families and communities resolve their own difficulties

Outcomes

Children experiences less adversity in their family.

A reduction in re-referrals to early help as families can draw on their strengths, previous success in making positive change, and community support networks.

Project 2: What is good, impactful parenting support?

Program inputs

A willingness to create a participatory approach, using co-design principles that value's parents experience and expertise.

Finances to support the design and implementation of the sessions.

Practitioners from Telford and Wrekin to support the facilitation of the sessions.

An inclusive and inviting setting to facilitate the group discussions.

Telford and Wrekin parents

Activities

Invite at least 12 parents to participate in a dialogue about endings and the development of a book that supports lasting change.

Consideration to be given to maximize parent participation, including support with transport, a creche and nourishment.

Activities to be inclusive and participatory so everyone can contribute meaningfully to discussions

Outputs/Impact

Short term:

Parents are involved in fun, engaging and creative dialogue about their needs and the value of support they receive.

Parents voices are heard and the feel validated, and expertise is acknowledged. They will feel empowered.



A dialogue between professionals and parents will create a more rich, nuanced, and insightful understanding of what good help is and looks like.

Medium term:

Ideas for help that are codesigned by the people receiving them.

A way of helping that is available when needed, not just when threshold is met.

Services designed and co-delivered between agencies, parents, and the community

Parents actively and consistently involved in decision making forums about support in the area, and in the implementation of the support

Outcomes

Support services that integrate typical support services with knowledge, wisdom and expertise of community members

Less adversity for children and families

Support that better helps

Part 4: Outline approach and timescale

Workshops

Round one (March) - SETTING THE SCENE AND CREATING A VISION

Round two (April) - GATHERING AND FORMULATING

Round three (May) - DOCUMENTING FORWARD STEPS



Round four (June) – CELEBRATION - bring the two workshop groups together for celebration and potential constitution of the ongoing Telford Parent Ambassador Group. Filming and inviting in others from Telford and Wrekin to see the work the parents have achieved



A note on the *relational activism* team, authors of this report

The team supporting this work will be a blend of professionals and parents with lived experience.

Clarissa Stevens, Parent Activist
Tim Fisher , Social Worker, Service Manager
Richard Devine, Social Worker and Researcher
Becca Dove, Family Worker, Head of Early Help

Our theory of change is based on a 'preparing the soil' methodology, namely that a successful co-design approach is predicated on all parties considering the relationships (including power relationships) between families and professionals, and deciding the values, purpose, and parameters of joint work together. Relational conceives of the individual as a member of a community; relational uses daily practices to change norms, and relational uses the private sphere for public purposes. In this way, relational activism locates agency in the collective and uses relationships as the locus for change.

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