

## Activating the core economy by design

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**Abstract:** The traditional provision of public services needs to be transformed, and this transformation includes ceasing to consider users as passive recipients of services. Instead, the process of service development should be opened up to more participatory methods, whereby users and providers, working together, transform the way in which the welfare state is conceived and services designed and delivered. In achieving conditions of wellbeing, societies face very complex problems, particularly such groups as the elderly, who depend most heavily on the social care services. The paper describes the research developed, as part of the major project of MA Sustainable Design in Kingston University, London, whereby, through the core economy of all the human resources and social networks that support social life, new possibilities for services may emerge, capable of addressing the ageing and wellbeing agenda. The paper also reflects upon dialogic conversation, and social interaction, as the ideal means of engagement when working with social agendas.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; public services; core economy; ageing

### 1. Social Welfare - Change is needed

Nowadays, societies are facing very complex problems in their efforts to bring about conditions of wellbeing - conditions which neither the welfare state itself nor its institutions have proved able to provide successfully and with long-term effect.

These complex challenges are defined by the rapid transformation of the communities, with deep social changes, which have imposed new demands upon the provision of services. Communities are facing new types of 'wicked' problem (Cottam, 2008), which nowadays are more particular, and specific to each population group, so making them harder to tackle.

From the perspective of the welfare state, all this makes it harder to respond appropriately to each particularity.



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The traditional model of welfare has not managed to recognise and value the abundant resources residing within the communities themselves, often it views people as little more than passive receivers of services, overlooking their natural assets, such as local knowledge and life experience. It tends to define people simply as vulnerable potential users and therefore describing them only in terms of problems. Their needs and demands are thus perceived as the only 'assets' they possess.

In reality however, effective social care, with its provision of services, relies on a non-monetary economy which is present within communities and in the daily lives of every human being. This is the core economy, which is to be found in human relationships, such as family, friends, neighbours and social networks, but also extending into civil society as a whole.

This aspect is constantly undervalued and ignored, but it supports all the human resources which flourish in social life. Although this non-monetary economy provides care for children and the elderly, within safe and vibrant communities, where the quest for social justice is powerful and in a variety of ways helps to shape conditions conducive to wellbeing, the market will always tend to overlook its influence, failing to attach any value to all these human qualities: the capacity to love, to manifest empathy and solidarity, to offer help and care, to share and to learn from each other, together with the countless other characteristics that define us as human (Stephens, Ryan-Collins & Boyle, 2008).

Edgar Cahn, the founder of TimeBanking and main advocate of the relevant role that the core economy plays in achieving wellbeing, often uses the analogy of a computer to explain its importance. According to Cahn (2000) the performance of a computer relies on the basic central operating system. This operating system is the core economy: families, neighbours, and the community.

If the operating system, our society, is failing, this is not because it has lost the capacity to care for others or show solidarity, but because there is an inherited tendency to view these natural human qualities and actions as commodities, which can be bought and sold through the market. The response must instead be to strengthen the community, finding new ways to rebuild this core economy on a basis of solidarity, reciprocal support, trust and engagement. The essential idea of rebuilding the core economy can be implemented through the co-production model, and the public services may play a fundamental role in achieving this.

While it is impossible for social programmes to directly deliver community, co-production does offer a way to acknowledge people as assets, and to build people's capacity to define the characteristics of the community they want to live in, and the services they need, all these under relationships based on parity, between people and institutions.

This model leaves behind the passive roles imposed by the traditional welfare system, in which service users are only considered as receivers. Instead it entails a shift in the way providers and users relate to each other by blurring these roles, and thus enabling peer-to-

peer relationships based on reciprocity, in which responsibilities and expectations are shared (Penny, Slay & Stephens, 2012).

In a situation where the traditional welfare state is not enough, nor capable of providing appropriate responses to the particular demands of society, co-production suggests a promising alternative framework within which communities can be drivers of their own transformations, and offers a unique opportunity to make radical changes in the welfare state.

For design also, and above all for designers, it is both important and relevant to play an appropriate role within such a model. Earnest consideration must be given as to how design can best participate in the transformation of services and their delivery, and in particular how the principles of the core economy and co-production may shape the process of design, especially when tackling social issues.

In the context of the provision of services and within the co-production proposal, it is absolutely essential to highlight co-design, as representing an attitude towards the design process which has a close relationship with social innovation, especially in its role of tackling social issues.

Co-design implies a scenario of multi-stakeholders, in which the premise is that everyone possesses the capacity to participate in the definition of their own realities, and that this is likely to be the only way in which a design can be effective. The mind-set for a co-design process is based on general inclusiveness, far beyond simple consultation, with mutual learning, openness and the breaking of the tradition top-down responses, as the only ways to generate real change (Fuad-Luke, 2009), plus the adoption of a “consensus over dissensus approach” (Fuad-Luke, 2013, p.471).

For designers, specifically, it is necessary to ask how the field of design, and therefore the designers, can best engage their practice and skills with social issues, considering, among other things, questions of with whom, from where, and, above all, towards what type of society.

## **2. Ageing as a challenge both globally and locally, and so also for design**

According to the report "World Population Ageing" (United Nations [UN], 2013), the number of older people is expected to double by 2050, reaching more than two billion. It is predicted that by 2047 the number of people aged 60 years or older, will exceed the proportion of children below 15 years.

Population ageing is a worldwide demographic phenomenon. Old age is a natural stage of life, yet this demographic change is often understood less as a breakthrough than as a problem, not only for the older people themselves, but also for the state which has to make welfare provision for them.

These figures suggest that ageing, and the securing of wellbeing provision for the elderly, should be considered a priority agenda, in which designers need to be involved.

As stressed throughout this paper, there is an urgent need for the provision of services to be transformed and radically improved. Thus the agenda of ageing offers a valuable opportunity for designers to address a social issue which clearly requires priority attention, especially because older people form one of the large groups more dependent on the welfare state.

This agenda is relevant not only for the sake of the immediate and positive outcomes which might result, but also because working with and for this population group can offer opportunities to reshape social relationships, introducing innovative and effective ways of tackling problems and so empowering and improving the communities themselves for the future.

As the major project for the Master's degree in Sustainable Design at Kingston University, this research was developed with the aim of finding alternatives to the unwelcome scenario of deep cuts, especially in the health and social care budget, within the Borough of Kingston upon Thames in South West London, and indeed to look for ways to improve services without expectation of further funding.

Starting from 2010, the Government of the UK has gradually implemented massive public spending cuts, or, as the report of the New Economics Foundation defined it, a policy of "new austerity" (Slay & Penny, 2013). These cuts were heavily targeted upon the services which provide help to those in need of considerable benefit support from the welfare state, such as the elderly, the unemployed and people with disabilities.

This austerity model was linked to a new social programme focused on building a "Big Society", which called for community action, local decision-making processes, and the involvement of communities in their public services.

An advantage of the "Big Society" strategy might be that it should, if successful, encourage citizens to participate actively in the definition of those services likely to affect their wellbeing, and so result in the communities as a whole, becoming more active and involved. In principle, therefore, it might be perceived as presenting both an opportunity and an incentive to redesign the welfare state, while enjoying government support.

There are, however, some very different and less acceptable possible implications inherent in the government proposals, especially at a time when, in practice, cutting expenditure has often seemed to be its primary, if not its only, aim and commitment. A major challenge will be to activate the core economy within the communities, opening up the process by which public services are delivered, and so redefining them, without at the same time taking from the state the essential ultimate responsibility (Coote, 2010).

It may well be judged that the activation and use of the core economy provides the ideal approach to tasks such as that of driving innovations within the public services, but important practical questions still remain to be considered.

What steps will have to be taken if communities are to be built, strong enough to respond with vigour to their varied challenges, including the need to introduce bold and novel reforms in the public services? What mind-set changes need to take place, not only among ordinary citizens, but also in the framework and process of design, and in the role of social designers, in order to achieve these aims?

In fact, the present project seeks to respond to some of these questions. It is particularly relevant to examine how, with the committed support of design, the core economy might indeed be activated, so opening new opportunities for the people to take control over what happens in their own localities and spheres of interest.

One aspect which may serve as an example of the need for a new, more enlightened, mind-set, is the concept of ageing itself, which is truly a natural stage of life, not something which needs to be managed or stigmatised as a "policy problem to be solved" (Bazalgette, Holden, Tew, Hubble & Morrison, 2011, p.9).

Many of the daily limitations that the elderly face may be tackled through a better understanding of the challenges, and through a redefinition of services.

### **3. Addressing the ageing agenda through social interaction**

As already mentioned, the research project was developed within a scenario of deep cuts in the health and social care budget of the Borough of Kingston upon Thames.

The thesis of the research was built upon the activation of the core economy so as to provide the means and opportunities to reframe the provision of services locally, with special reference to the elderly and the wellbeing agenda. It is important, however, at this point to outline the steps and activities through which the project proceeded, and to acknowledge the background which was essential for its development.

In March 2015, Kingston Borough issued an invitation to the course leader and to some students on the Master's course in Sustainable Design at Kingston University, to participate in developing and delivering a workshop based on co-design principles. The primary aim of the workshop was to seek out opportunities for possible future collaboration among local service providers and commissioners in Kingston.

Faced with the scenario of deep cuts combined with a continuous rise in the demand for services, this first workshop sought to strengthen links between providers and commissioners of services, in order that they might collaborate, funding activities or projects in common, and so be able to apply together for public funding.

After this workshop, the participants and representatives of the Borough expressed their interest in being part of a second workshop in which they could flesh out and put into effect some of their initial thoughts.

This first encounter provided a rich experience, which helped towards a better understanding of the position of the Borough and of the challenges with respect to the ageing agenda.

An important insight concerned the role that money usually plays within the social sector. By itself, an increase in the money available for services is rarely enough to bring about the hoped-for improvements. A clear implication is that, just as important as the financial aspect, is a fundamental change in the mind-set of both providers and receivers of services.

In fact, many organisations within Kingston Borough are already making use of the core economy as an alternative to tackle the challenges in the provision of services for the elderly, and these places should be considered as spaces where collaboration can be strengthened.

One of the places where the core economy is central to its daily activities is The Bradbury, a day centre located in Kingston upon Thames. This charity offers a wide range of activities, from Art Classes and a Creative Writing group to Tai-Chi, Chair Exercises, and various lively dance sessions, all this in support of people aged over 50 and their carers.

There are many aspects which make the Centre very special, and also relevant to the theme of this project. There are only two people (the manager and the chef) who actually receive a salary for running The Bradbury. Everything else is run by a quite remarkable, and numerous, set of volunteers, who lead activity groups, teach, help in the kitchen and serving the food, tend the garden, and so much else. Notably, they still find time to welcome newcomers and visitors. It is important to emphasise that most of the volunteers are also members of The Bradbury.

The relationships, enabled and established over several years with young people, especially with students from Kingston University, have been a great benefit, not only for the elderly but for the young too. Through something as simple as a cup of tea and a chat, a connection with the wider community is made.

Through this contact and the diverse activities, everyone there is addressing issues crucial for the physical and emotional wellbeing of this population group, on a firm basis of solidarity, care and friendship.

In this case, the initial approach happened about six months before the actual research project. An alternative way to foster digital literacy among elderly people, based on principles of co-learning, was co-developed with some members of the Bradbury, as part of a social innovation module in the Masters programme. This initial approach was a crucial and relevant aspect, which positively influenced the research for the major project.

On the basis of this experience, it is necessary to acknowledge and emphasise that, for projects aiming to work with social agendas, there is a fundamental need for designers to get involved with the core economy through daily life, and not to be satisfied with being simply observers in any context. Observation is indeed important, just as are social interaction and the building of relationships involving peer-to-peer collaboration. All these proved to be key elements for the development of different stages of research.

The informal and easy relationship which developed with many of those at The Bradbury, in particular, led to an openness which permitted the natural and organic exchange of viewpoints and experiences, in a most valuable way, and without excessive dependence upon set questionnaires or interviews.

As stressed earlier, the core economy was at the heart of the project, and once its key role was acknowledged, it offered the opportunity to begin a radical reinterpretation of the provision of services.

Following the good reception of the first workshop in March 2015, there was an initial petition from the Borough suggesting a second workshop, for which the content control, the dynamic, and all the arrangements were left in the hands of the student leading the project, and the university. This second workshop proved an invaluable opportunity for the research.

Instead of considering this event as an occasion for new ideas to be generated which might go on to be rapidly implemented, or indeed for producing new projects; it was in fact understood as the opportunity for a novel agenda, in which the idea of new possibilities of services may be presented.

This process was guided by the search for new and less rigid approaches to the reform of the social care services, which would keep an open mind towards alternative or untried methods, in response to the local wellbeing agenda.

The workshop was therefore considered as an opportunity to introduce to the participants an alternative mind-set, to be based on the importance of the core economy, especially for this task of addressing wellbeing. In fact, such a change in the mind-set offers a remarkable opportunity to provide a new frame for viewing society, and potentially reforming the care services.

Relying on the willing cooperation of the Bradbury members, and the perceptive information they provided, often from personal experience, in interviews and informal conversations, it was decided to focus the investigation to the issues concerned to the elderly and those living with dementia.

### *3.1 New definitions for ageing and services*

As previously discussed, an essential stage for working within the core economy and thereby activating it, is to strengthen links with all the possible stakeholders. In this case this process of engagement occurred not only with the local service providers and commissioners who attended the first workshop, but also with some receivers of local services.

This helped towards a much better understanding of the issues affecting the final users of services and the challenges that organisations and institutions face within their daily activities.

Local service providers and commissioners had been offering, with positive outcomes, a wide range of activities and projects targeting, directly or indirectly, the elderly and sufferers of dementia with positive outcomes, however there were inevitably some duplications and omissions. An interesting aspect is that although they do not officially recognise the vital role that the core economy plays, in practice they are following its principles.

A deeper research was undertaken on the elderly and people living with dementia, and this led to a better understanding of the challenges and limitations affecting the elderly and those living with dementia, and so helped to define areas of opportunity which might prove of value in the effort to tackle the local wellbeing agenda.



*Figure 1 Discussion table run at The Bradbury, delivered through an open dialogue for discussing the concept of ageing, the misconceptions about it and the possibilities to address the local wellbeing agenda. Photo courtesy of Guilia Bossis, 2015.*

This engagement process was carried out through both primary and secondary research with elderly people, mainly members of The Bradbury and with their staff.



This social interaction fostered closer links with some service users, who became potential participants in the second workshop. Furthermore this was a discovery process in which the ageing agenda was not understood through a dry list of requirements established in a design brief. Instead a variety of interviews, together with ethnographic observations made during their daily activities and a group discussion table, enabled a dialogic interaction, aimed at strengthening a bond of empathy, and providing insight into their challenges, needs, and aspirations.



Figure 2 Outputs of the reflection and discussion based on the report “Five Ways to wellbeing” of the New Economics Foundation, which was used a catalyst to stimulate naturally the conversation about this agenda as respects the elderly. Photo courtesy of Guilia Bossis, 2015.

As a result of this social interaction, and in preparation for the second workshop, four agendas were defined as the first step towards tackling the ageing agenda as a whole.

These sought to present some of the most representative topics with respect to the local wellbeing agenda. The topics and issues selected were built upon the insights, four areas of opportunity, and potentially valuable responses which had come to light in the earlier activities.

*People living with dementia:* this topic is important, not only for those directly affected and their families, but for the community as a whole. It is possible for someone suffering from the earlier stages of dementia to continue living a dignified independent life, but only where the community is knowledgeable and aware, so as to be able to respond in a way which supports the sufferer.

*Informal carers and the community:* although the role of the informal carer is officially recognised, it rarely receives the support and attention it deserves. Usually the provision of services targets only the person with dementia without acknowledging that the wellbeing of the patient is greatly dependent on the carer. To respond to this, there is no need of a major structure or extra services. Often all that is needed is a supportive environment, with access to relevant services which may already exist.

*Bereavement and better access to services:* various potentially valuable services do exist, but often these may be difficult for those needing them to access. It will not be enough to increase the supply of leaflets and other official means of information. Instead a variety of friendly and informal channels need to be introduced. For those recently bereaved, are often shocked and find it hard to communicate and re-enter normal life, so that they have a special need of suitable ways to learn what help is available, and then to find the motivation to take action.

*Transition into retirement:* retirement is potentially a very dangerous event. The self-image which a person has cultivated over many years, is often suddenly shattered, and there is the difficult task of establishing a suitable new one. The person who does not find the motivation to build a new routine, is very likely to become lonely and inactive. It is vital to give special support at this stage, so as to re-motivate such a person. In this way, the subsequent social isolation and depression, now evident within the elderly, may be prevented or reduced.

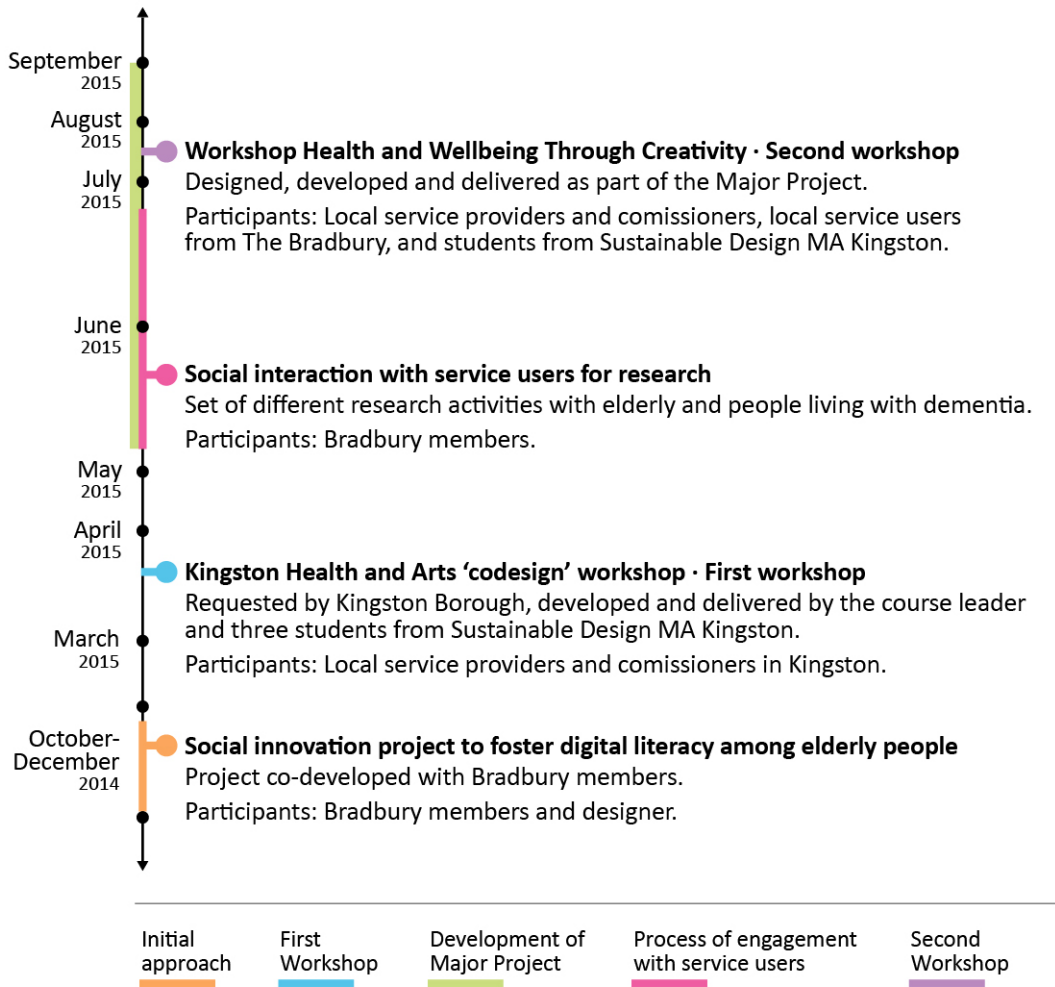


Figure 3 Timeline of the design process and main research activities.

#### 4. Co-designing in search of new possibilities of services

The second workshop brought together elderly users of local services, together with local service providers and local commissioners, and designers (from the Kingston University Sustainable Design Master's course). The format adopted sought to provide a supportive framework, within which these diverse elements could gather and be guided in their search for new possibilities of services which might be of value in tackling Kingston's wellbeing agenda, with particular regard to the elderly.

The intention was to foster a mind-set open to the possibilities which may offer themselves if the core economy within Kingston is activated, and is considered as one of the main assets available for an effective response to the wellbeing agenda, for the elderly and those affected by dementia.

The workshop format proposed to place the ways in which people may address, achieve, and eventually experience wellbeing at the centre of any service innovation.

Through principles of co-production, enabled by a co-design process and by the insights arising from the earlier research, participants were aided to discover and define (the first two phases of the Double Diamond design process model) opportunities for responding creatively to the agendas and the issues underlying them.

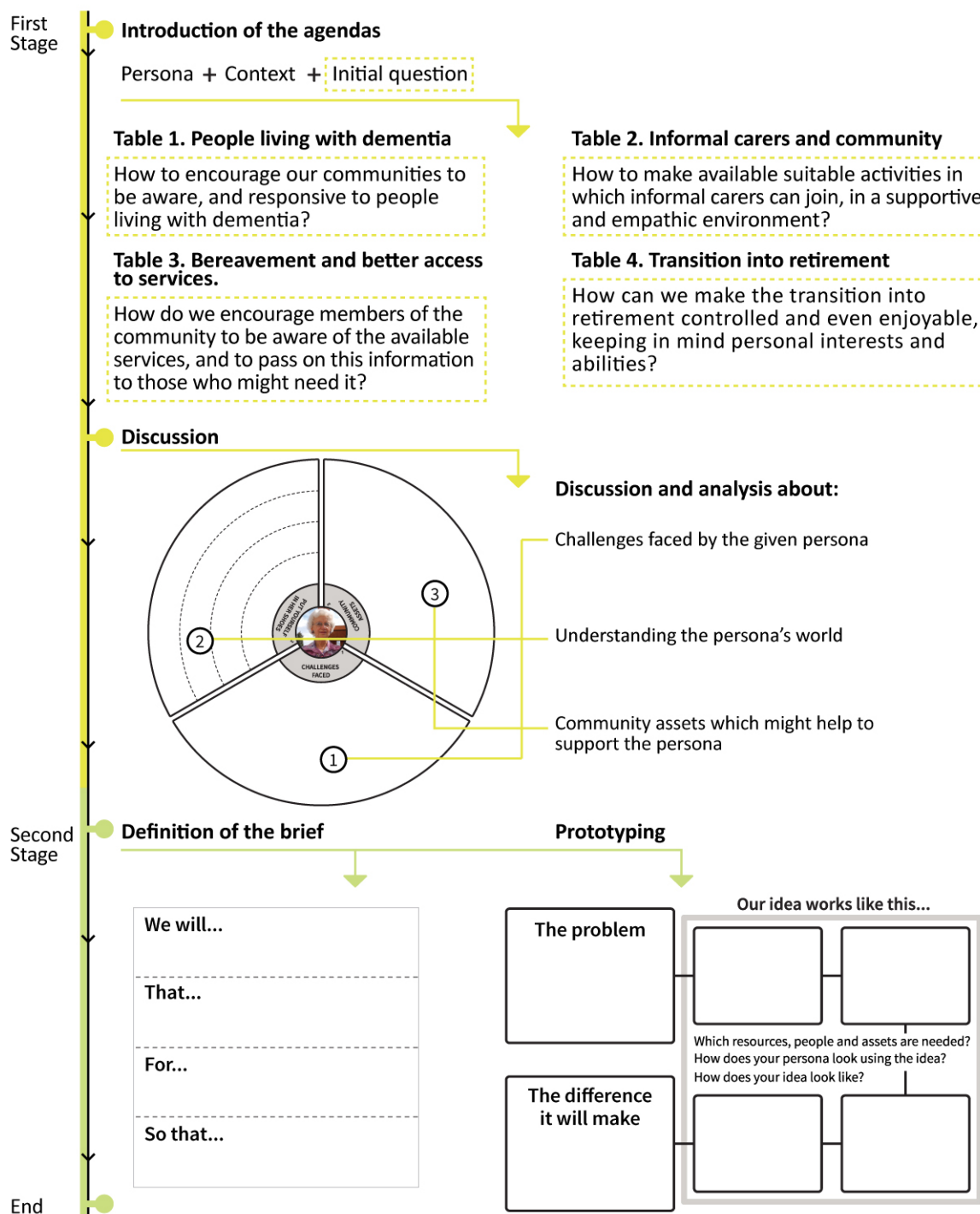


Figure 4 Workshop format with materials and templates used to support the process in each table.

The chosen way to introduce each agenda was by providing specifically relevant material, with information which acted as a catalyst, to release suitable responses from the participants.

This information consisted of a persona, a context and a question. Each persona presented an elderly person facing a particular life crisis related to wellbeing.

The persona was to be introduced through a first-person narrative, embodying not only the facts of the situation but the challenges, aspirations and emotions felt.

In order to facilitate the conversation and the analysis of the persona, the report “Five Ways to wellbeing” developed by The New Economic Foundation were provided for each table.

An initial question sought to stimulate lively and energetic subsequent discussion, while suggesting potential areas which it might be fruitful to consider, and which were likely to call forth a range of different ideas.



*Figure 5 Teams during the discussion and analysis of the given agendas. This process was guided by understanding the persona’s challenges and interactions, and finally by recognition of the available local assets which would provide significant support to the persona. Photo courtesy of Pudsorn Promkingkaew, 2015.*

The second stage included the clarification and definition of the team’s brief, in response to the initial question provided. The prototyping of their ideas and suggestions, by means of a storyboard, explained the way that the initiative could work, and expand on the team's response to the agenda.



Figure 6 Teams working on their service prototypes in order to explain how their idea would work and the impact of this idea in the persona's life and eventually throughout the community. Photo courtesy of Pudsorn Promkingkaew, 2015.

In terms of the co-design process, the event showed the importance of ensuring a group dynamic in which different voices would have a hearing, drawing on widely different areas of knowledge and experience.

It became clear that co-design processes, especially those related to social innovation, gain greatly from the input of ordinary people, with their day-to-day knowledge and particular life experiences.

One of the main aims of the second workshop was to provide participants with a framework which would encourage them to generate and propose new and original possibilities of services. The pattern of discussion about the development and delivery processes was likely to have more relevance, and a more enduring significance, than the workshop outputs per se.

With respect to the agendas of the elderly, and of people living with dementia, it was evident that the way in which the agendas were introduced enabled the participants to have a deeper understanding of the challenges faced, and especially to begin to look on the people involved in terms of human assets, rather than only as users, in constant need, and thus as problems.

Most of the outputs developed by the each of the teams, could be considered as new definitions of services, which in fact, could be easily translated to local services.

The workshop outputs provided fresh responses, in which the roles of providers and receivers were redefined, or even completely renewed. This emphasised the potential of the core economy, was seen as a natural and essential participant in all efforts to tackle the local wellbeing agenda.

The suggestions from the teams were varied, creative, and really promising.

For example one team developed a "companion matchmaking" service (in which a volunteer will naturally support the sufferer in continuing with present activities, and potentially extending them), as a service which seeks to encourage the local community to be aware and responsive to people living with dementia.

Another team suggested a street party, as a way to generate a better and more engaging method to keep informal carers in touch with their community, and to provide them with both support and relevant information, in a supportive and empathetic environment.

The team which worked with the transition to a retirement agenda, created a retirement advice centre, where the opportunity for mentoring, and the availability of new and varied channels of communication, would help to make the transition into retirement controlled and potentially enjoyable, being based on the person's interests and abilities.

Dealing with the topics of bereaved people, and access to services, the last team worked on a proposal for creating more friendly and engaging ways to communicate the availability of local services. Members of the local community, and word of mouth, would play a major role in promoting these methods, making use of places in frequent and easy use.

It was very interesting to see how readily, in the teams' proposals, the traditional, and isolating, role of user was broken, so that, instead of simply passively receiving a benefit, they in fact became part of the delivery service, achieving improved wellbeing, while actively participating.

Although some resourcing and financial support is still likely to be necessary, this was no longer at the heart of the provision of services. The majority of the proposals aimed to make fuller use of those assets and resources which were already in existence; but the assets which were most valued were those provided by the people and the communities themselves.

## **5. Conclusion**

The research project sought to study the power of the bottom-up approach, and its potential ability to drive positive changes leading towards the generation of more active and supportive communities for tackling social issues. While many answers are proposed as to what should be done to improve the world, much less attention is given to the way in which in practice, such answers might be found, and such improvement brought about.

In answer to this need for suitable approaches to use in the search for better ways to bring about the necessary transformations, this project proposes an agenda based on a bottom-up

approach and the involvement of the general population, combined with the empowering stimulus of a co-design process and the core economy.

The second workshop, in addition to offering some interesting potential solutions, also, and perhaps more valuably, showed that, with a suitable guidance from designers within a co-design process; a mind-set could emerge based on the value of the ordinary citizens and their natural assets, and this could be the basis for a completely revised view of the possible ways to improve fundamentally the provision of public services for the elderly, even in time of financial stringency. It is important to emphasise that within the co-design process, designers have their own contributions to make which are in the first place their specialist training, but also those assets which are built upon their experiences and particular interests. Therefore, they combine several valuable roles involving the guidance of the design process and to be responsive to the insights raise by the participants.

Although some positive comments were received by the participants, *“it was great to think about what really matters to people. I think a challenge for me is to ensure that those who work in the creative arts are seen as a community asset and that they have an important role to play in maintaining the wellbeing of our community”*, one of the limitations of this project, was the lack of enough time to be sure that this change in mind-set would last, and to watch how far it could go in renewing the social care and health system in Kingston.

As for next steps, some of the ideas developed by the teams during the workshop are considered to have much potential, and to be almost ready for official prototyping and testing. But again this needs both time and guidance, which at this late stage of the project cannot be guaranteed, but must be left in the hands of others. The work will not be wasted, however, if the principles are picked up by the participants and employed, in different circumstances, elsewhere.

All projects tackling social issues are dependent upon the existence of strong social networks, since without them it is very difficult to build trust and empathy among the stakeholders. Therefore it is important to provide time to strengthen relationships among designers and the community in general.

There is no sort of professional training which can take the place of the insights arising from daily experience in all its variety, as provided by people who are actually dealing with the social issue under consideration. Such a source of knowledge must be acknowledged as valuable in its own right, and also as an asset which, in one way or another, all participants have in common. This factor in itself may help to enable horizontal channels of communication, and so facilitate and enliven the design process.



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Project website: <http://tinyurl.com/q97ecwl>

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