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**Case Study #3**

**Camden Family Changemakers**

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## Case Study #3

### Camden Family Changemakers

#### Overview

Camden Family Changemakers was a co-design project carried out in 2021 between Camden Council's family services team, parents and family members residing in Camden, London College of Communication (LCC) MA Service Design and MA Data Visualisation students, two MA Service Design alumni, five academic staff members, the Service Futures Lab at LCC and the UAL's Public Collaboration Lab. The partners came together to create a design vision for "good help" for families after the COVID-19 pandemic. As well as supporting the Council's aims around its Early Help Service, and co-developing policies and services, the project produced a number of insights around how to do co-design in a non-extractive way, and the potential of visual and material methods both in policy and on the front line of council services.

#### Case study methodology

This case study series is intended to represent the diversity of design practice research in social and sustainable design across UAL, and to articulate its contribution to both real-world challenges and academic research. It uses the conceptualisation of practice research in design, developed in 'Practice research in design: Towards a novel definition'.<sup>1</sup> Each case study is based upon a semi-structured interview with a researcher, as well as reviewing related literature and documentation from the project.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaszynska, P., Kimbell, L., & Bailey, J. (2022) Social Design Institute Working Paper. Practice research in design: Towards a novel definition. London: UAL Social Design Institute.

## Project context

In October 2020, Camden Council's Family Early Help Service decided to work with local families to explore what good help looks like. Believing that it is families themselves who are best placed to know what works, and that they should be empowered to influence service provision, the Council team also wanted to use the collaboration to prototype how policy should be developed more generally. In terms of the specific challenge, the Early Help Service was aware COVID had changed family life in many ways – both for better and for worse – and wanted to take some time to rethink how support ought to be delivered in a post-COVID world. 'Early help' is support provided by the council to stop a worrying situation from getting worse and more action having to be taken, and to enable families to solve their own problems. It can take many forms including, for example, therapy, employment advice, or a family support worker.

## Research context

The project mobilised a range of design practices and concepts, including systemic and policy design, co-design and Design Justice, fields that have come to the fore as design research is increasingly advocated for its potential to generate solutions as well as knowledge in relation to climate injustice, social change and public policies. In the context of such challenges, where design is used to engage marginalised groups and address inequalities, there are pressing questions around how to make sure the right participants are involved, how to work with those groups in a non-extractive or exploitative way, how to ensure 'designs' are realised, and about the effectiveness, outcomes and contributions of design practices.

## Core research questions

- What does 'good help' look and feel like for Camden families after COVID?
- How can we make sense of complex ecosystems of help that might include family and friends, schools, teachers, GPs and other informal links, as well as official council-run and charity-run dedicated services? How do parents and service users access this ecosystem, when it isn't even clear to people who work within it?
- How can councils meaningfully involve service users in shaping policy?

## Approach and methods

The project blended three different practices:

- Deliberative dialogue: using consensus-building techniques, enabling participants to work together to develop an agreed view or set of recommendations to be taken forward to decision-makers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> McCoy, M.L. and Scully, P.L., 2002. Deliberative dialogue to expand civic engagement: What kind of talk does democracy need? *National Civic Review*, 91(2), pp.117-135.

- Participatory design: a democratic process for design of systems involving human work, where users are involved in the designs they will be using, and all stakeholders have input into the design process.<sup>3</sup>
- Design justice: an approach to design that is led by often marginalised communities that aims to challenge structural inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

In practical terms, the students worked with a group of around 20 parents and family members, recruited by the council and paid for their time, from January to March 2021. The group represented 12 different Camden wards, 11 ethnicities, and had children ranging from newborn babies to young adults. They acted as an advisory group, co-designing what policies should look like post-COVID for families.

Co-design workshops were held online every fortnight for ten weeks, exploring the nature of the Camden community, its strengths and weaknesses, and questions such as what good and bad help look like. This process produced a manifesto of what good help looks like at a policy level. The students then co-designed with some of these parents, as well as other stakeholders and experts, materialisations of what the manifesto and policy could look like when applied to service delivery and transformation. In parallel, UAL MA Service Design students, working with MA Data Visualisation students, mapped the whole ecosystem of family services from different points of view, and validated these maps with parents and stakeholders.

Throughout the project, Design Justice tools were used to critique and reflect on the work to ensure no-one was being marginalised, asking questions like ‘who benefits?’, ‘who is harmed?’, ‘who has power and who doesn’t?’, and so on. Finally, the manifesto and recommendations were jointly presented by the students and parents to leaders and decision-makers from across Camden, who were asked to make pledges as to how they will implement these in the future.

## Outcomes: what did the practice research produce?

[For the site...](#)

The project drew upon the situational knowledge and understanding of multiple perspectives and stakeholders – parents and families, council employees, medical professionals, headteachers and so on – which was synthesised by the students and parent advisory group into a new set of concepts for the council. These included ‘The Good Help for Families Manifesto’ (see fig. 1), and 8 service proposals operationalising the principles and values enshrined in the manifesto. Some of these were small service interventions, some were bigger future facing redesigns of the whole service. This answered and visualised the research question of ‘what good help looks like’ in different ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson, T. and Simonsen, J., 2012. Participatory Design: an introduction. In Routledge international handbook of participatory design (pp. 1-17). Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Costanza-Chock, S., 2020. Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need. The MIT Press.

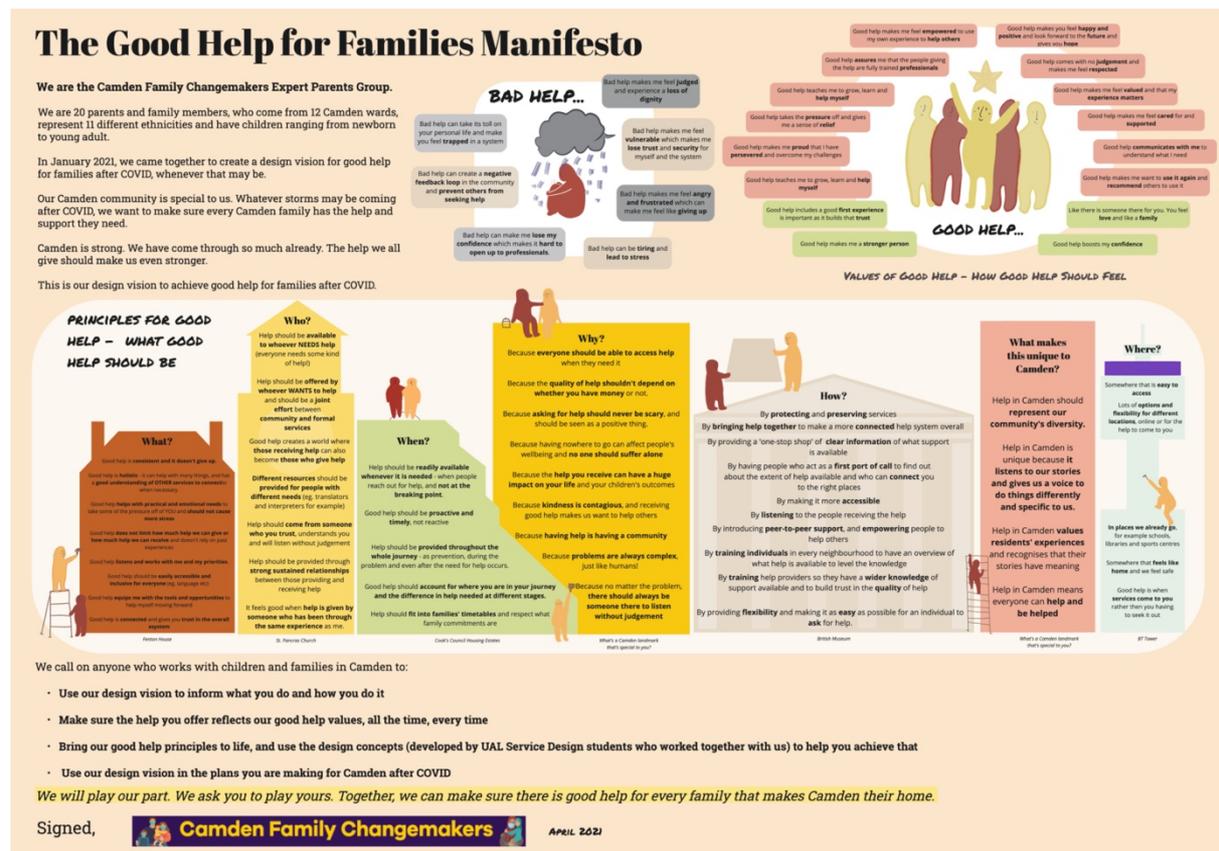


Figure 1. The Good Help for Families Manifesto, created by the Expert Parent Group, illustrated by Angela Tam.

In terms of impact within the council, the Good Help Manifesto has been instrumental in the work of the Family Services team, informing practice and acting as a touchstone for reflection and planning. It has also been shared with and influenced other teams in the council, including Education, Health and Wellbeing, and Housing; and at a national level with the Department of Education, Ministry of Justice and Department of Health and Social Care.

The project also had several spillover effects for the site of research and community of inquiry. For the parents involved in the advisory group, the evaluation, carried out by the Co-production Collective at UCL, identified increased confidence, pride, skills, wellbeing, new connections and improved family relationships, and greater appreciation of life in Camden. The empowering experience of participation in the project helped them understand what their skills were and led some of them to gain paid employment in Camden Council and in other organisations. One UAL student involved, Ziwei Lin, has taken the model and applied it in a local government setting in China, working in a co-design way with a group of local communities, and making policy recommendations to local government which have been adopted.

For design practice and research...

In relation to the practice question of how to do non-extractive methodologies, this project furnished a number of insights around the knowledge, time, resources and commitment required to do this properly. The Camden project lead had a clear

understanding of co-design and all the issues around it and was committed to the significant organisational effort required to coordinate a group of 20 parents, some of whom were not digitally literate, some of whom needed translators, and all of whom needed time to establish relationships and create a safe space within the advisory group. This speaks to the emerging body of theory and practice within participatory design around ‘infrastructuring’,<sup>5</sup> and the necessity of taking time to do this before embarking on designing anything.

In relation to design for policy, and systemic design, the project highlights the potential of visual and material methods, and the need for more research in this regard. For example, visualising the family support ecosystem/ policy system from different points of view highlighted the disjointedness of that system for many of the stakeholders within it. In addition, pairing the policy outcome (manifesto) with designed service propositions helped policymakers and parents involved in the project to envision how the principles can be applied in practice, effectively ‘prototyping’ the policy. The project also produced unexpected results in terms of the students’ design methods being taken on as a practice within the council: one group developed a visualisation method and research tool, which became their final concept. They had established that the experience of the social worker intake assessment method, normally done over the phone, was not working for many people. The research tool used blocks for the parent or family member to represent their situation, in terms of support. Visualising this helped people to step back from the intensity of the situation, to be able clarify where they had and where they needed support. The materiality of the method acted as a support to detach and depersonalise slightly – and also became a device that was referred back to within the conversation as it proceeded. This points to the need for further research around the role that such devices play in human interactions and collaborations within the specific context of policy, but also on the front line of council services.

## Further reading and resources

- [Early Help for Children and Families](#)
- [Good Help for Families after Covid](#)

## Researcher biography

Dr Silvia Grimaldi is Reader in Service Design and Collaborative Futures, and Co-Lead and Co-Founder of the Service Futures Lab at London College of Communication (LCC), University of the Arts London (UAL). She has a PhD in Design from UAL.

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<sup>5</sup> Dantec, C.A.L. and DiSalvo, C., 2013. Infrastructuring and the formation of publics in participatory design. *Social Studies of Science*, 43(2), pp.241-264.

## Project partners and participants

### **MA Service Design Students:**

Qian Zhao  
Liming Ye (Freddie)  
Jiaoyan Yang (Joyine)  
Ziwei Lin (Zoey)  
Xiaoran Sun (Ran)  
Yaqi Zhang  
Moosa Khan  
Devika Sharma  
Ritika Periwal  
Sohana Mohanty  
Yidan Zhang (Dan or Bella)  
Peilun Li (Nathan)  
Chun-I Wang (Gina)  
Sayali Wandhekar  
Giselle Dsouza  
Mary Claire O'Brien (Claire)  
Guo Chen  
Qingnan Liu (Tako)  
Sara Picozzi  
Trisha Rathod  
Dixita Suresh Patel  
Vini Garg  
Marina Michelle Filiba Barcelo (Maru)  
Fianda Van Kuler  
Isabel Karina Brooks (Isa)  
Nirali Jain  
Jiaming Liu (Ming)  
Danwan Zheng (Dan)  
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Luyi Xu

### **MA Data Visualisation Students:**

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Yi Chen  
Tatiana Dunenko

Martyna Glock  
Syennie Valeria

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Veron Lai  
Megha Wadhawan  
Dr Hena Ali  
Henrietta Ross

**Public Collaboration Lab:**

Prof. Adam Thorpe

**Service Design Interns:**

Angela Tam  
Laura Leahy

**Camden Council:**

Becca Dove  
Elaine Crouch

**Camden Expert Parent Group:**

Abdul  
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Caroline  
Jesmin  
Jo  
Josephine  
Luthfa  
Mahad  
Mary  
Michele  
Nadine  
Natalie  
Osob  
Rani  
Rukshana  
Salina  
Samina  
Tomina  
Ubah