

## Using design to rethink our approach to work and skills.

*‘Taking the opportunity to step back from what we’re doing and questioning what really matters can make all the difference. We’ve been trying to improve work and skills outcomes for our communities for a while now but have been wondering whether we are focusing on the right areas. Using a design approach to this challenge has opened up our thinking, which I introduce below.*

*We are only at the beginning, but it feels like we are getting more to the heart of the matter, like we can actually begin to make a real difference.’*

Tina Favier, Head of Wellbeing, Adur & Worthing Councils

Over a six month period, a small team of eight colleagues from across the public sector - local government wellbeing, economy and community, an FE provider and the DWP - formed part of the [Design in the Public Sector](#) programme challenge. Working with the Design Council and the Local Government Association (LGA), we learned to apply [design skills and techniques](#) to a public health challenge. Our challenge was to improve work and skills outcomes for people in [Temporary Accommodation](#) (TA), with a greater ambition of creating a new employment and skills landscape, and healthier and well people and places.

Essentially we wanted to focus on how we might connect the worlds of people ‘needing’ to work who are living in our TA with employers, who are struggling to find good people and retain them.

### **Our focus and starting point**

At any one time there are up to 150 people in our Council’s TA which they can stay in for up to five years before finding suitable long-term accommodation. Whilst officers are doing amazing work securing this accommodation, there has been little focus on how those in TA can best lift themselves out; one way is to find (good) work.

At the same time, there are local employers with jobs, but who are struggling to recruit or retain the right people in their teams, particularly, it seems, in industries like retail and the care industry.

And, at the same time our FE partner tells us there are skills programmes and funding out there, but we often struggle to fill courses and spend the money in the right place.

### **Design Lab kickstart - defining the problem**

Using the well established Design Council [double diamond](#) framework approach, we have been guided to step back and explore these challenges more deeply (divergent thinking) and to get ourselves ready for focused action (convergent thinking).

The principle of design is about opening up the problem and viewing it from different viewpoints, and with deeper inquisition. Whilst this sounds easy, it can run against the grain of the way we usually work (we are problem solvers and ‘experts’). Design approaches require us to try and suspend our views and to listen to different perspectives.

We were really struck by the quote from the anthropologist Margaret Mead: “What **people say**, what **people do**, and what **they say they do** are entirely different things...” Design research recognises this and is premised on quality explorations to see and understand what sits beneath people’s expressed desires in the context of their lives. We learned that you can

often gain more valuable research data from speaking deeply to a few people than you can from surveying 100.

We began with some hypotheses:

- There are some employers who have good sustainable work to offer but who cannot find or retain the right people;
- That people in TA might want to find good work but might need some help and support to access this;
- There are some people - not all - in TA with complex issues or additional barriers to finding work; and
- there are some people in TA that might be ready for work, and a shared understanding of “work readiness” might be helpful?

## **The research**

We wanted to explore what really matters to employers when they search for new candidates and to people in TA when they search for work. We spent our time in the territory of diamond one (exploration of the problem) with a cross section of people in TA (7 people), employers (10) and housing officers (5) and something called ‘alternative worlds’. This was essentially an inspirational example drawn from another sector area that might inform our work. In this case it was a charity worker who shared her story of finding work, moving from selling sex to becoming an outreach worker.

We also drew on other research that had been done around homelessness prior to this work.

Over this period, we got creative, in true design style, synthesising our insights and learning and stepping back (to see the big picture) and zooming in on ideas and key insights to refine our hypotheses and questions. This was creative (one idea per post-it, drawing to be creative) and exhausting, but lots of fun.

Our key discoveries (some of which you might guess and others not) are summarised below:

**People going into TA struggle to find their sense of place** and therefore access to information and other things that might help them progress. Securing TA is an important focus for officers, but for people it is their first step into a new life. We learned about people who feel isolated in TA and find it hard to navigate their way into key activities and services, which is often compounded by the size of accommodation (much of TA is tiny). We met one young mother from Lancing, accommodated in Worthing, who really struggled with the move, who felt lonely and who didn't know her local area. She knew where the Children and Family Centre was but had no idea about the range of activities in place there for her and her baby, beyond baby weigh-ins.

**The power of personal connections really matters.** Trusted peers are more powerful sources of information for people. We know this but were struck by what one woman told us, that her main source of information was her neighbour and that she felt that she had no contact with services now she was accommodated. Employers also told us about the importance of personal contacts to connect them to likely candidates, but that they did not routinely have access to such people. One employer said he had resorted to Google, to help find someone and came across a team in the Council who helped him with a recruitment drive.

**People can struggle to see their life skills** as marketable qualities and use them to help them find work. Many have some great life skills but did not identify these with the type of qualities that employers look for. One woman talked about having no formal qualifications and not finishing school and therefore wondering about how she could find work, but then she went on to tell us about her experience of caring for her father and another family member and her passion for caring for others.

**Life experience and emotional intelligence are highly valued by employers, more than formal qualifications and experience,** but employers don't routinely use these to recruit. It was particularly striking how employers consistently told us that what really matters is finding people with strong emotional intelligence and who will stay, yet they

continue to recruit based on formal qualifications and experience. One employer told us that he didn't care how many degrees a person had so long as they were not a 'flight risk' and could effectively engage with customers.

**Those in TA are viewed as a potential 'flight risk'.** Recruiting those in TA worries some businesses, as people in this accommodation are seen as living unstable and unpredictable lives. They are not aware that people can spend up to five years in TA and, on hearing this, began to change their views. This group can indeed be relatively stable regarding staying in the same place.

**Businesses aren't aware of their local workforce and how to tap into this** to find the right people. We learned that some employers struggled to find people or retain them, yet they were not thinking about the demographics of the local workforce and how they might use this to find a better suited candidate. For example one employer struggles to retain people but routinely secures young people, who move on quickly.

**Professionals are missing opportunities to talk about work readiness at the earliest points.** Often our focus is on sorting out the presenting problems and issues people in TA have and we don't think about asking what someone is good at or what they might want to do. Asking these questions early might help a person's work journey by tapping into skills, interests and passions. One woman told us about her love of singing, that had connected her to a local church and a peer network.

**Some people in TA may have complex issues or barriers to finding work - and need help - but not all do.** We therefore need to ensure we focus on the person and what they need and want and don't lump people together.

## **Getting ready to test the action: How Might We?**

The final step we made was turning our insights into actionable focus and getting ready to prototype. Using something called a Creative Matrix, we developed How Might We statements across our three key groups. How might we:

- Help people in TA to best access meaningful information and networks to help create their sense of place;
- Translate life skills into meaningful work, finding/securing currency for people and employers;
- Build a work first approach across our workforces so that work readiness and what people are good at is part of the first conversation we have with people (not one of the last).

We spent time doing quick fire [Logic Models](#) and creating visions for our work, to help project us into the future to see what might be possible (avoiding short-termism) and to consider evaluation cycles. Some of this takes months so please note: we did this in a day!.

## **Getting ready for prototyping**

We are now at the stage of getting ready to [prototype](#). This is about developing and testing ideas and concepts at an early stage, and enables you to build on and amplify what works and to stop what doesn't. Our next phase (and we are just at the beginning) is to prototype a welcome pack for those in TA, aimed at providing something that will help people find their sense of place and find and navigate meaningful information. We are currently in the process of doing this and testing it with those that we hope will benefit.

Our next prototypes will be about addressing our other How Might We's...

*This is a [SameRoom project](#), bringing people together around a shared challenge to create, test and grow solutions that work for our communities. We use human-centred,*

*collaborative approaches, listening to and designing with the people who live in Adur and Worthing, our staff and members, our partners and peers.*