For Clerks with BIG ideas!

Notes from a workshop at SLCC national conference. November 2022

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Introduction

I recently facilitated a workshop for 'Clerks with BIG ideas!' at the SLCC 50th Anniversary National Conference. The workshop was held as a breakout session on the morning of day 2 of the conference, and I was nervous about whether the short summary introduction that appeared in the conference pack would entice any colleagues to drag their hungover bodies and brains from the comfort of the main conference auditorium up the stairs to the breakout room.

I needn't have worried! The room was set up with around for around 80 delegates, and within minutes all seats were taken and colleagues were pinching new seats from an adjoining room. Literally 'standing room only'!

The 100-ish colleagues who joined the session had come to get an update on the work that I've been leading with the support of SLCC on identifying and addressing some of the most impactful 'wicked' problems facing professionals in our sector today. I'd also promised them the opportunity to take part in a practical activity using a really simple technique for thinking laterally about tricky problems that they might be facing in their workplace.

With an overall rating of 4.6/5 stars and 73% of post-event survey respondents giving the workshop a '5-star' rating (n=40), it would seem that the content and process of the workshop really resonated with a majority of colleagues who attended. This short report is intended to provide a summary of the workshop session, a pointer towards some of the resources that were discussed in the session, and the output from the practical creative thinking activity.

About 'wicked' problems

The term 'wicked problem' is attributed to two professors of design and planning, Horst Witter and Melvin Webber, with the term being discussed in length in their publication "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning" in 1973. Wicked problems are contrasted with 'tame' or 'benign' problems where the problem and the goal are known e.g. solving a maths problem; completing a jigsaw when you have the image on the box; or pulling a committee meeting agenda together.

In an excellent 2017 publication by the RSA about design thinking for social impact, Conway *et al* describe wicked problems thus:

PROBLEM TYPE	DESCRIPTION	SKILLS
Type I 'Tame' problems	Clearly defined problem, solution is known.	Technical skills to fit the solution to the problem.
Type II problems	Clearly defined problem, solution is unclear. Some form of learning required to solve the problem.	Technical skills to 'fix' the problem, may also require adaptive skills to work with other people in a shared journey to a solution
Type III or 'Wicked' problems	Both the problem and the solution are unclear, and learning is required to discover both.	Technical fixes are not available and adaptive skills are required.

Figure 1: summary of problem types and skills needed to resolve them, adapted from Conway et al (2017) 'From Design Thinking to Systems Change: How to invest in innovation for social impact'

The key message here is that when we're dealing with 'wicked problems' in our localities, in our sector, or in society in general, we can't rely on technical skills and fixes alone. We need a more adaptive approach. We need curiosity, flexibility, humility, diplomacy, learning, courage, innovation and entrepreneurism. Bureaucratic and technical knowledge aren't enough. We need to understand and work with the system that surrounds and permeates the problem, and to have the courage to challenge the old ways of working that created the problems in the first place.

One of the world's leading thinkers (and do-ers!) on systems thinking and systemic change, Myron Rogers, has a well-known set of six 'maxims' for achieving change in living systems. The sixth of these maxims really strikes a chord with me, and we discussed it in the workshop session. Please take a few minutes to read this simple maxim and let it rumble around your brain:
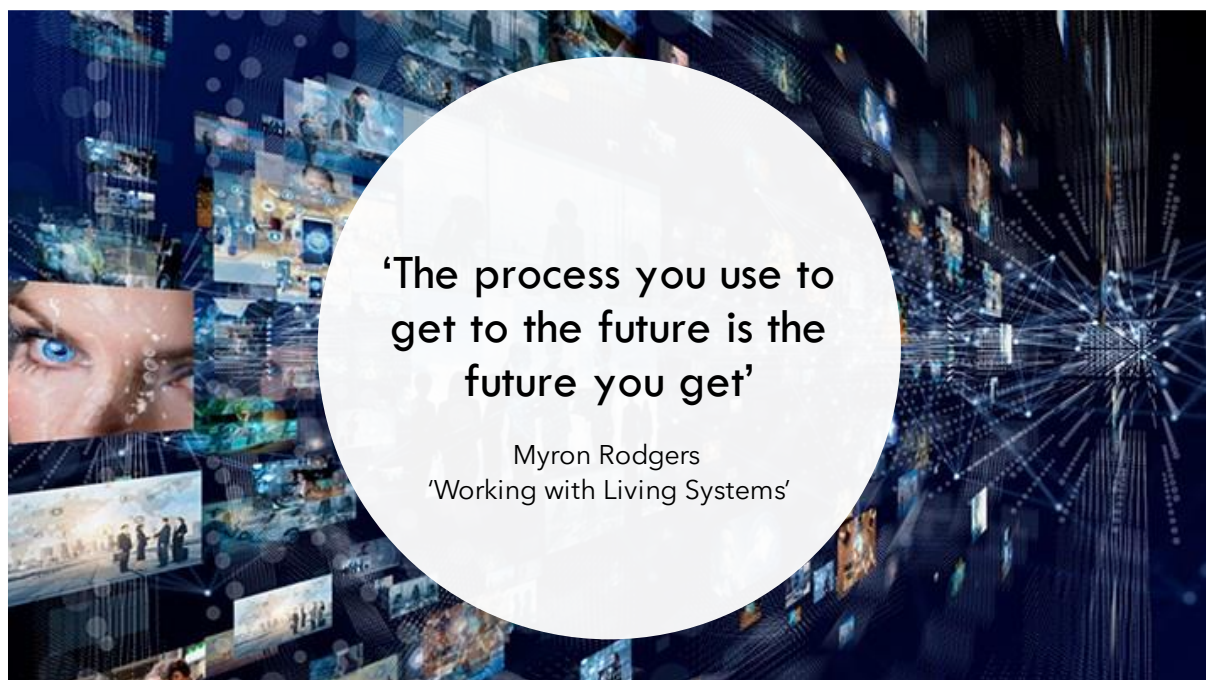

Figure 2: just spend a few minutes with this thought! credit Myron Rogers
https://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/artofchangemaking/theory/living-systems/

In the workshop session I held up a copy of the NALC sector magazine Local Council Review from 1998 – almost a quarter of a century ago! The magazine contained a couple of articles that really speak to the fact that we have some 'wicked' problems in our sector that we need a new approach to.

In one article, LCR celebrated the news that the new HM Government Minister for Local Government Hilary Armstrong MP had confirmed that government was committed to working with and listening to our sector (etc. etc.). Another article provided a summary of a number of resolutions passed at a recent NALC annual conference, including a resolution that the sector would quite like better access to powers and funding from government (I paraphrase, of course).

Do those issues feel familiar to you? Do you think that polite chatting with a government minister and passing a resolution at a conference achieved much by way of change? Or are we stuck with the same problems a generation later? I extended the following challenge to colleagues in the room: if we keep on using the same technocratic processes to get <u>to</u> the future, we will get the same technocratic problems <u>in</u> the future. We need to try something very different if we have a hope of achieving a very different future.

Introducing creative design thinking and the Stanford Design Methodology

I've previously blogged about how [wicked problems are well suited to creative design thinking](#) and introduced the Stanford Design Methodology, a creative problems solving process from the prestigious Institute for Design at Stanford University, USA.   Feel free to step out of this report to read that blog if it would help to have some more background.

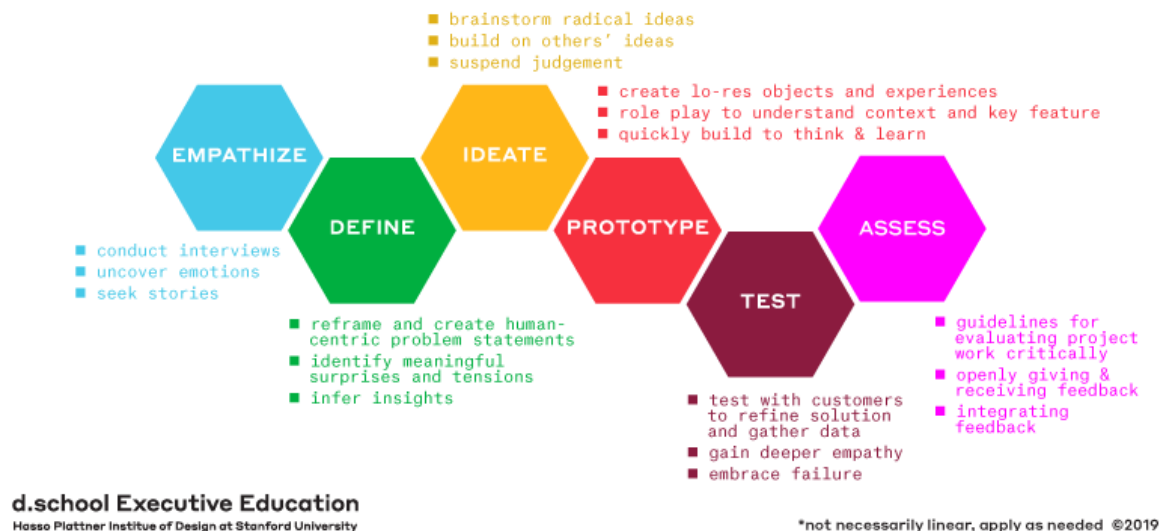*Figure 3: a summary of the Stanford design thinking methodology, for more resources see*
https://web.stanford.edu/~mshanks/MichaelShanks/files/509554.pdf

For me, the key difference that makes a difference from the Stanford approach is the amount of time and energy dedicated to immerse in the problem, taking a truly human-centric approach to empathising with the people who live the problem. The process specifically looks for emotion – the pain and pleasure that real people are fighting or seeking when they are living in the problem.

In April 2022 a group of around 25 senior practitioners from our sector got together in London for a whole-day workshop focussing on the empathise and define stages of the Stanford process. [You can read about the workshop in more detail here](#). The workshop produced a long-list of 9 'problem statements' that we then took to a workshop at the SLCC Management In Action conference at Kenilworth in June 2022.

In this second workshop around 40 senior practitioners from our sector worked together to consider which of the problem statements they felt offered the most value in solving. [You can read the detailed report from that workshop here](#). The key output from the workshop was a shortlist of 4 wicked problems that colleagues were most motivated to work towards resolution(s).

Four wicked problems facing us at work today

Colleagues in the Management in Action workshop sorted the long list of 9 to a shortlist of 4 problem statements and also indicated whether they would be personally willing to commit time and energy to resolve the problems. The results were:

	I am willing to commit my time and energy to resolve this problem...	👍	👎
1	How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?	26	9
2	How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?	29	7
3	How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?	25	11
4	How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?	20	17

These four problem statements are being taken forward into the Ideation and Prototyping phases of the Stanford process.

Let's talk about IDEATION

- Taking the top four problem statements
- Brainstorming 'radical' ideas
- Building on each others ideas
- Suspending judgement
- Anything is possible!

IDEATE

PROTOTYPE

- Creating 'low-res' objects and experiences
- Role playing to test solutions
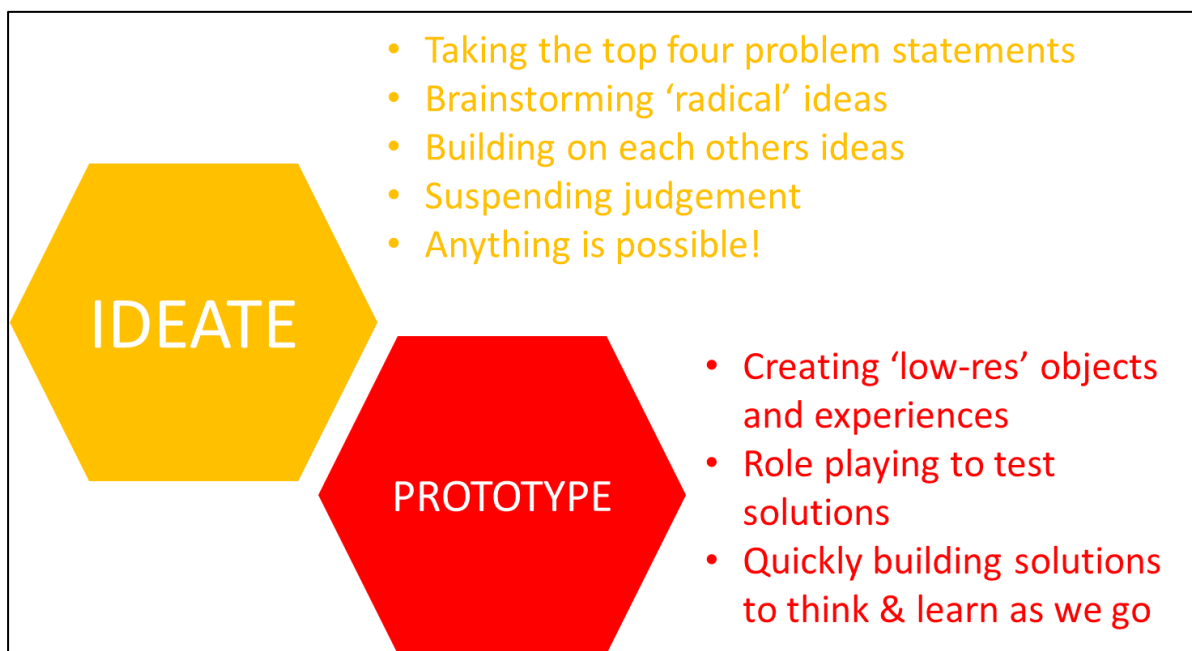- Quickly building solutions to think & learn as we go

Figure 4: A summary of the ideation and prototyping phases

The Ideation and Prototyping phases are all about suspending our judgement and well-worn-ways of working and letting the creative juices flow. We will come up with a wide range of ideas of ways to deal with the 4 problem statements. Many of them will be too 'out there' to practically achieve; some of them will be downright heretical! If we don't make mistakes and we don't fail with some of these ideas then we're not learning or adapting either, and we need to learn and adapt to deal with these wicked problems that have plagued our sector for years. And some of them, some of them might just work.

I've recently finished reading the excellent 'The Airbnb story', an account of the rise of AirBnB from a few airbeds in a couple of students' spare rooms to a $130billion dollar business that turns over $2billion a month in revenue. The founders of Airbnb, three student friends with a design school background, absolutely enshrined the principles of design thinking into the way that they founded, saved and grew the business.

One particular thing that struck me from the Airbnb story is how many people told the three friends that their idea would never work; how many times they were knocked-back by potential investors. They dared to dream, they had courage and they tried and failed and learned, and they came up with a terrible idea that has transformed the hospitality sector and is currently worth over $130billion. If three geeky students from the west coast of America can do that, I wonder what a group of motivated parish & town Clerks could come up with?!

'A number of people have told me that Airbnb is the worst idea that has ever worked'

Brian Chesky
Co-founder of Airbnb

Figure 5: I am curious to discover which of our Ideation ideas will be the worst idea that ever worked for our sector...

So, what would happen if we applied ideation thinking to the four problem statements? If we suspended judgement, and dare to dream. I wonder…

Wicked Problem statement	What if...?
How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?	I wonder what the model standing orders would look like if we'd been successful in getting Government to legislate to get rid of LGA '72? How would we re-write standing orders to be fit for purpose for the next 50 years?
How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?	I wonder what guides to the Local Council sector co-produced with CIPFA, SOLACE, RTPI, CIEH, BASW, etc would look and feel like?
How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?	I wonder what a Local Council Sector guide to applying for the next round of the Towns Fund capital regeneration programme would read like?
How can I stop Councillor micromanagement of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?	I wonder how a new sixth module in CiLCA, 'Understanding self and others' might be structured and what sort of additional knowledge and skills it might include?

The examples in the table above are just throw-away examples, random speculations to start the conversation going. The point is that we are going to Ideate some radical new proposals to deal with our problem statements, and some of the radical proposals are going to be taken forward in prototyping where we build 'cheap and cheerful' versions of the ideas to allow us to test them with intended audiences.

So, how do we go about this Ideation process?

I'm currently talking to colleagues at De Montfort University about them putting in some resources to facilitate and support the ideation work. More to come on that as soon as I have it confirmed! For the purposes of the workshop I introduced the work of Paul Sloane, a leading lateral thinking guru, and we worked through one of his many simple lateral thinking tools as a fun way to start to explore the 4 problem statements from new perspectives.

Reversing the problem: some creative ideas from Parish & Town Clerks at national conference

The 'Reverse the Problem' technique is very, very simple and a great one to use in a team environment. To unlock new insights into problems we simply get a group of people together, state the problem in reverse, and then 'brainstorm' how to achieve the reverse of the problem.

Say the question is 'How can we reduce customer complaints?'; then for this exercise it is restated as 'How can we increase customer complaints?' and we go from there. We think about how many weird and wonderful ways that we can actively increase complaints. Once we have a good list of ways we can reflect on it and take insights. Maybe we're already accidentally doing some of those things. Or if we're not, we can look at how to do the opposite of them. A double-negative, if you will.

It can be real giggle, as I'm sure colleagues who attended the workshop will agree. It's strange how easy it is to come up with ways to do make the problem worse, even when we've been stuck for ages on ideas to make it better.

So, on the next few pages I've set out the output from the Reverse the Problem session in the workshop. The ideas are all from colleagues in the room – none of them came from me, I promise!

Next steps are confirmation of the Ideation sessions with De Montford University in early 2023. Until then, if any of this strikes a chord with you then please do get in touch by either interacting my blogs https://iamianmiam.uk or dropping me a line at ian.morris@peterlee.gov.uk

I look forward to hearing from you.

Original problem statement: How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?

Reversed problem statement: How can we maximise **and** maintain **the restrictions imposed by our current legislation**

Suggestions from the workshop participants!

- **Introduce big fines for getting anything wrong**
- **Make our sector subject to the Local Government Ombudsman regime**
- **Ensure all legislation applies to everyone regardless of relevance**
- **Provide a simple-English citizens' guide to legislative restrictions – for free!**
- **Introduce Local Council 'cops' and a Clerks' clink**
- **Introduce a duty to publish donations to local groups, and a league table**
- **OFSTED-style inspections for Local Councils, where the inspectors turn up without notice**
- **Add new legislation every year and don't take any away**

Original problem statement: How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?

Reversed problem statement: How can we reduce **our perceived value to principal authorities?**

Suggestions from the workshop participants!

- **Ensure seats are only filled by co-option, at Clerks' discretion**
- **Don't respond to them**
- **Don't raise a precept**
- **Slag them off at every opportunity**
- **Don't do anything of any importance, just stick to allotments, litter bins and meetings – and do that badly!**
- **Insist that they get back to you in 24 hours**
- **Don't help them out – don't accept transfer of assets**
- **Ban their councillors from our meetings**
- **Ask them to take over our playing fields to reduce our precept**
- **Ask the Parish Meeting to petition to disband the parish council**
- **Say no to partnership working**

Original problem statement: How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?

Reversed problem statement: How can we make sure that we can't and don't **get access to central government funding?**

Suggestions from the workshop participants!

- **Don't do any partnership working**
- **Don't apply for it and don't lobby for it**
- **Highlight examples of how PCs are failing**
- **Block all government emails so we don't even see the opportunities**
- **Claim the Green Book is irrelevant and refuse to engage with it**
- **Don't talk to your local MP**
- **Mismanage your finances**
- **Don't come up with any big projects**
- **Don't spend central funding when you get it**
- **Spend it on something else instead!**
- **Mess up applications**
- **Avoid quality benchmarks**

Original problem statement: How can I stop Councillor micromanagement of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?

Reversed problem statement: How can I ensure more **Councillor micro-management of staff?**

Suggestions from the workshop participants!

- **Don't do anything when they ask you to do it**
- **Give them a desk each in your office**
- **Allow them access to your emails**
- **Phone them every day and ask them what they want you to do today**
- **Give them all your personal phone numbers**
- **Turn up to meetings as and when you feel like it, don't participate, don't offer apologies if not attending**
- **Put posts on facebook saying things like "not my fault, I didn't vote for that…" etc**
- **Only work your contracted hours**
- **Give them all full access to HR files**
- **Allow them to make all the operational decisions**
- **Ask them to ? you**
- **Let them run the weekly team meetings**
- **Don't get qualified or remind them that you are qualified**
- **Don't do an continuous professional development**