

Educating social work managers for design

In recent years, the idea of “managing as designing” has gained ground across all sectors: private, public and not-for-profit. In simple terms, design can be defined as the creation of form, the translation of the abstract into the material. Everything a social work manager deals with has form, from office layout to business processes, and the need for design is therefore ubiquitous. Although design is integral to effective management, few social work managers would see themselves as designers, and have scant training in the methods of design. The imposition of rigorous performance management regimes have also left little space for design and innovation in the “day job”.

The consequences of this abdication can be profound. In children's social care, for example, the trials and tribulations of the Integrated Children's System are a direct result. In the “age of austerity”, such disengagement is even less an option. Only by taking responsibility for design will managers be able to maintain and improve services with diminished resources. The loosening of central control will also call for better design at the local level, as will rising expectations from citizens and service users. Concepts and methods have a part to play in developing this capacity, but it requires a shift in orientation. We will argue that curricula at all levels of professional education need to develop design skills in managers, and the capacity for design and innovation within the organisation as a whole. In this paper we share some ideas and experiences about educating for management by design.