



Service Design

A short playbook to get you started



by **Máire Cleary**
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WHAT THIS IS



This playbook is for public sector leaders, service managers and change leaders who want to make services work better for users, for frontline staff and for the organisations overall.

It offers a practical walk-through the key stages of human-centred design that helps you deliver strong services and illustrates how to strengthen the pillars of strong services as you progress.

WHAT IT MATTERS?

Most services weren't designed, they evolved shaped by legacy systems, siloed decisions, quick fixes and stretched teams. That's how we end up with services that waste time and fail to add value.

Design gives us a way to step back, look at the whole picture, and ask better questions:

- What's really going on for users?
- What are we assuming?
- What would better actually look like?

Done well, service design aligns frontline insight with strategic intent and helps us move from problem to possibility, one question at a time.

DESIGN THINKING IS NOT SOLELY FOR DESIGNERS.

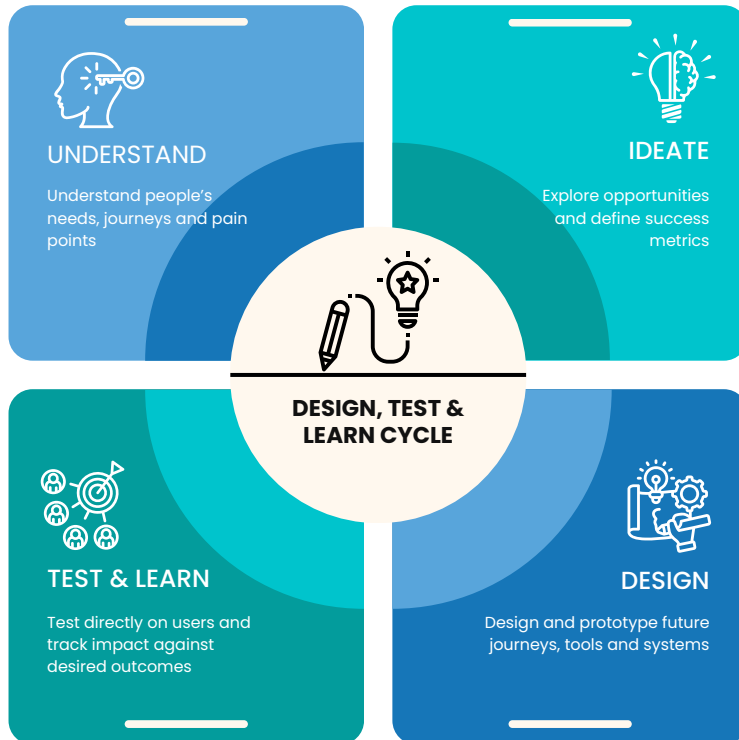


It's a process that
even the most
traditional thinkers
can adopt.

02

The Design Thinking Approach

Design is very iterative and goes through a continuous cycle of learning about users, ideating solutions, prototyping (designing) and testing results



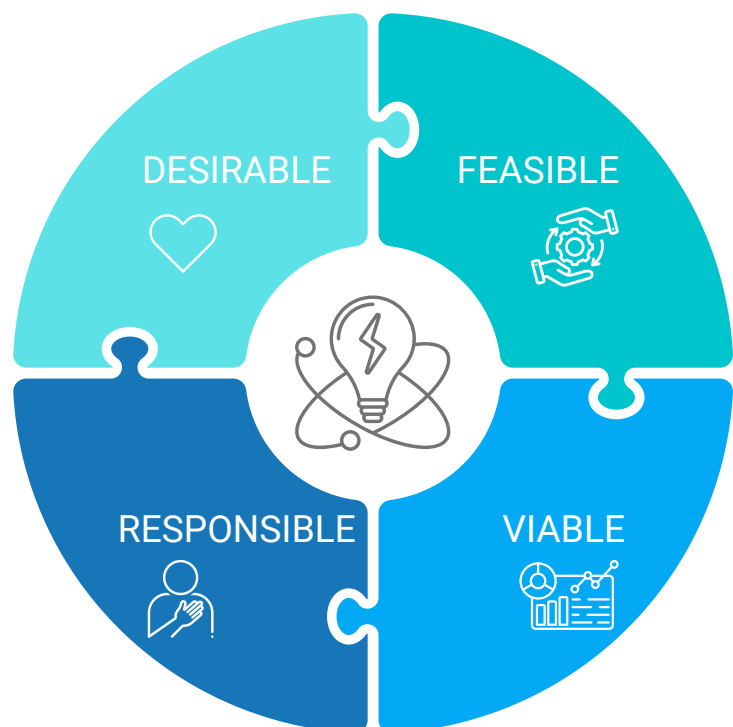
Use this process to work towards human-centred designs that are scalable and sustainable.

Strong services are based on 4 pillars working in synergy:

- Desirable for users
- Technically feasible
- Viable for the business
- Responsible and ethical for users



Track and measure your service against these pillars.



UNDERSTAND USERS



WHAT & WHY

This stage is about stepping into the shoes of your users and frontline staff, surfacing what's not working, understanding the wider constraints and reframing problems from the user perspective

ACTIVITIES

- Qualitative research - interviews, contextual inquiries, observation
- Journey mapping
- Insight sessions or reflective workshops with staff
- Synthesis of findings - find patterns
- Share early findings - create a common understanding

TOOLS

- Jobs to Be Done or needs frameworks
- Journey maps
- Service blueprints
- Affinity mapping / insight synthesis
- Root cause analysis (e.g. 5 Whys)
- Problem statements



Anchors design in real human experience



Visibility of operational constraints & gaps - design is more grounded



Identify hidden inefficiencies & workarounds - focus effort where it matters



Start conversations about fairness & unintended harms - surface ethical risks

OUTCOMES

- Clear articulation of user needs and pain points
- Shared understanding of the real problem(s)
- Evidence of journey and system-level pain points
- Foundational insight to shape better design

IDEATE



WHAT & WHY

Ideation isn't about jumping to "the answer." It's about creating space for teams to think differently - to imagine, test and refine new possibilities. This stage is collaborative by design and brings together the insight from users with the experience of staff and designers.

ACTIVITIES

- Frame opportunities using "How Might We..." statements
- Co-design or ideation workshops
- Creative techniques like Crazy8s, sketching or storyboarding
- Draft service concepts or value propositions
- Cluster and prioritise ideas - impact vs effort

TOOLS

- HMW ("How Might We") statements
- Digital safari
- Crazy 8s, brainwriting
- Idea sorting grids (impact/effort or desirability/feasibility)
- Design hypotheses
- Storyboards



Ideas are rooted in real user needs and co-created with the people most affected



Staff contribute directly — bringing delivery knowledge into the room



Teams begin to weigh the value, effort and long-term potential of different options



surface ethical risks - responsibility is designed in, not retrofitted

OUTCOMES

- A range of testable ideas
- Ideas grouped into themes or service components
- Early prioritisation of what to explore further
- A shift in team mindset — from constraints towards possibility
- Shared understanding of promising direction

PROTOTYPE

WHAT & WHY

Designing and prototyping means turning early concepts into tangible things - screens, journeys, process flows - so they can be tested and improved. You're creating just enough to learn with others. The further along the design cycle, the more high fidelity the prototype for more refined learning.



ACTIVITIES

- Sketch and storyboard journeys
- Create process diagrams or clickable prototypes
- Map user interactions alongside staff actions
- Use prototypes in feedback sessions
- Capture insight and iterate rapidly

TOOLS

- Journey sketching or service walkthroughs
- Low-code tools or paper prototypes
- Clickable mock-ups e.g. Figma
- Service blueprints mock-ups
- Defined success metrics for testing



Defined user outcomes rooted in real experiences



Staff informed concepts that can test feasibility



Concepts that will test demand and shape investment



Concepts and tools to test access, consent & surface potential risks

OUTCOMES

- Concepts with user and staff input
- Shared understanding of desired UX / outcomes
- Defined success metrics for testing
- Test plans
- Better cross-team alignment

TEST & LEARN

WHAT & WHY

This stage is about putting your service in front of real users in a safe, structured way and learning from what happens.

You're not aiming for perfection, you're testing whether the service works as intended, how people actually use it and what gets in the way. Outcomes inform continuous improvements.



ACTIVITIES

- Scenario or usability testing
- Pilot key service components or journeys
- Collect and synthesis feedback
- Measure what matters: completion, effort, outcomes
- Playback sessions to reflect and decide next steps

TOOLS

- Usability testing scripts
- Experience capture tools (feedback forms, observation logs)
- Outcome tracking frameworks
- Decision logs (e.g. "what we learned → what we changed")
- Pilot evaluation plans



Evidence whether the experience meets real user expectations



Understand how the service fits with real delivery



Qual and quant indicators if services reduces cost or grows profit



Learn in practice if the service handles inclusion, consent appropriately

OUTCOMES

- Evidence of what works and what doesn't
- Adjusted designs or journeys based on feedback
- Greater clarity on adoption risks
- Documented learning to share with wider teams
- A stronger case for scaling or further investment

03

Use Case: Accessing healthcare records

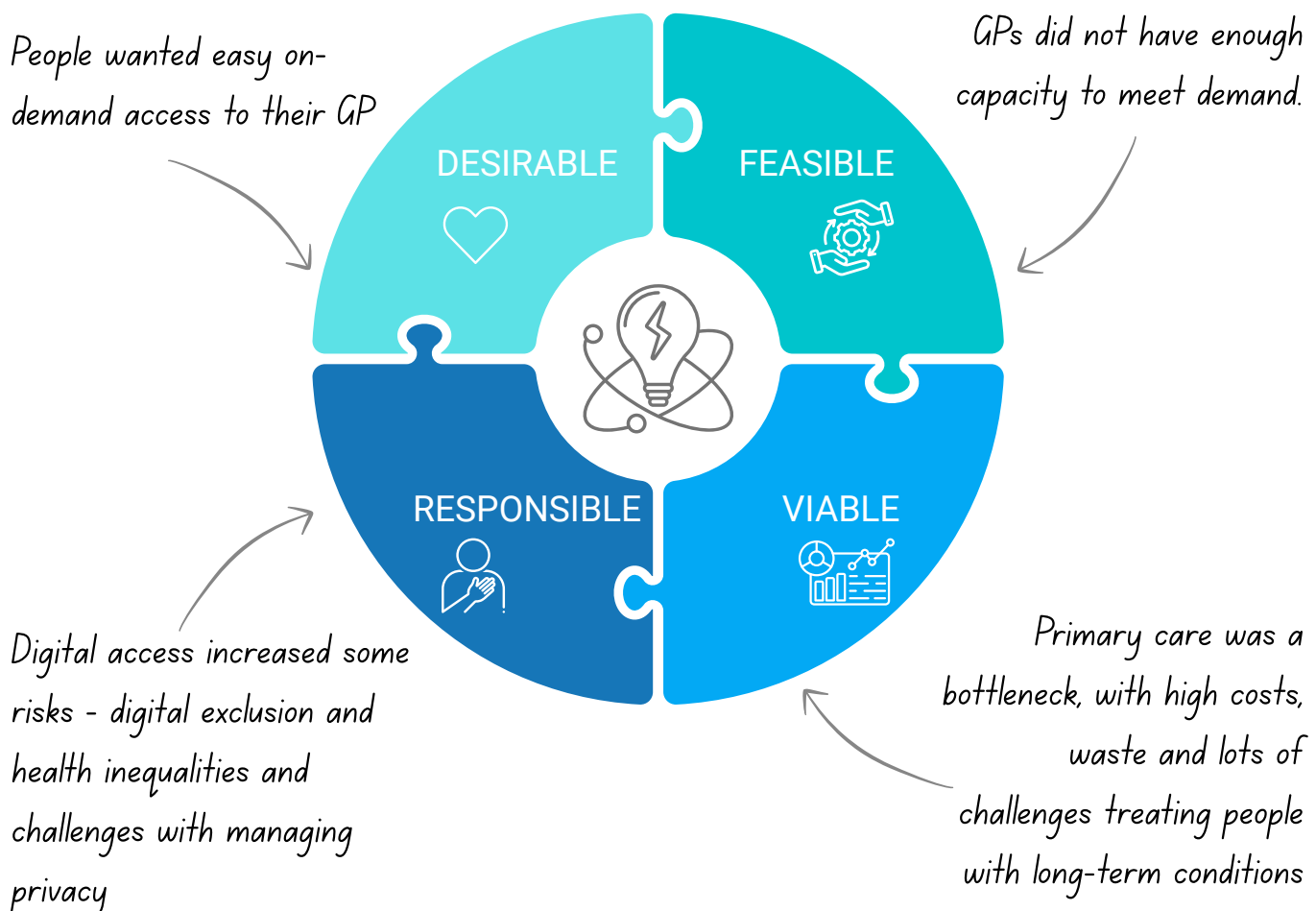
The Challenge

A council and NHS team needed to give people access to their healthcare records, ideally via the NHS app, but were concerned about the pressures on the NHS, especially GPs and primary care generally.

This wasn't just a digital delivery challenge. The new service had to demonstrate measurable public health benefits while also delivering efficiency gains across a stretched NHS system. We needed to address:

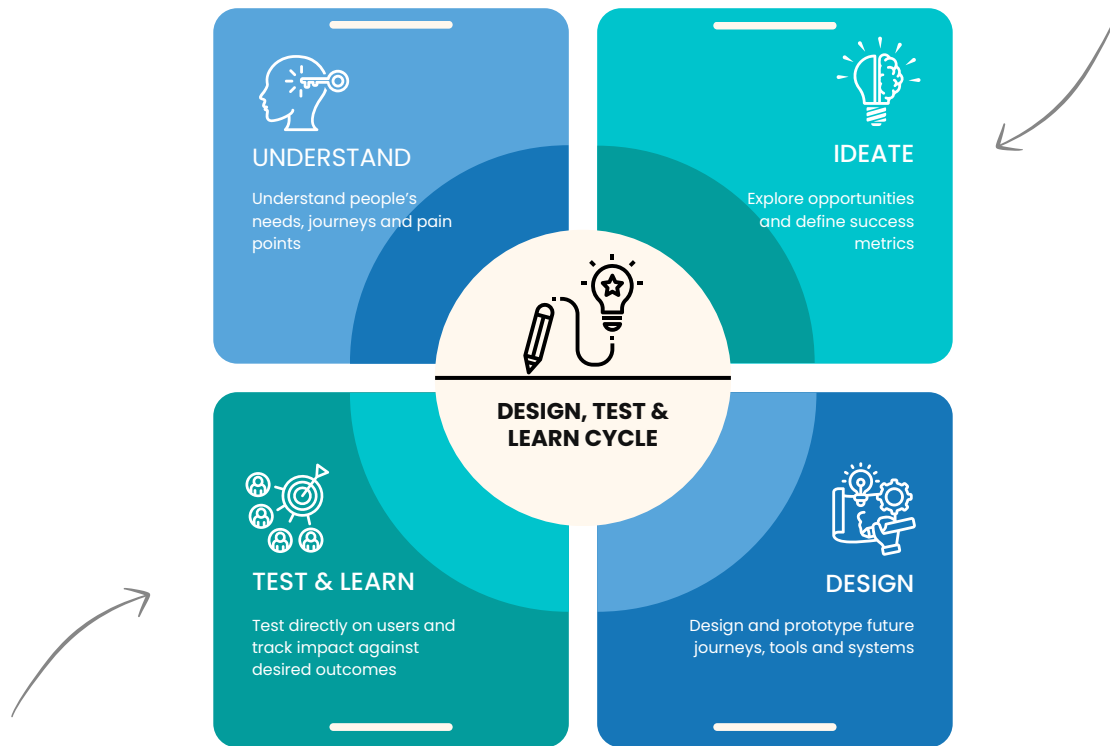
- How could easy access and clear signposting to services improve individual health outcomes?
- How could the same solution reduce systemic waste, by helping people navigate care more effectively?

The solution wasn't just a digital fix. It was a whole-service redesign, with data, processes and trust at its core.



Developed user profiles rooted in user needs and Jobs-to-be-done. Identified common frustrations across pathways. Identified transactional vs complex needs to help prioritise use cases.

Formulated hypotheses and reframed user problems as opportunities using How Might We framework. Worked with front-line to brainstorm features and storyboard potential future states, rooted in operational knowledge.



Tests ideas directly on patients, patient representatives and with front-line staff to verify demand and stress test operational and patient risks.

Developed proposals, mapped aspirational journeys and defined success criteria for citizens, patients and front-line staff.

Benefits

The proposed future-state journeys we tested showed how the proposed service could let people:

- Access the medical records they needed, in a language and format that made sense to them
- Book and manage their own appointments
- Understand care plans and referral steps
- Learn more about their condition and what to expect

This gave people more visibility and control over their healthcare and helped reduce waste and duplication from the health system.

04

Glossary

User

Anyone who interacts with your service

Desirability

Do people want, understand and trust this service?

Feasibility

Can we deliver this with our current systems, people and processes?

Viability

Is this sustainable financially, operationally, and strategically?

Responsible

Are we designing fairly and ethically — especially with data and decisions?

Journey map

A visual that shows how users experience a service step by step. Highlights what works and what doesn't

Service blueprint

A map of the full service, including user actions, staff roles, systems and data

Prototype

A rough version of an idea you can test like a sketch, mock-up or role-play

Touchpoint

Any moment where someone interacts with your service — online, on the phone, in person

End-to-End

Seeing the full journey, not just a single channel, tool or step

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www.mairecleary.com
hello@mairecleary.com
+44 7944 192 101



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