The story of the age inclusive bench

The vision
Newcastle University and Design Network North joined forces to commission a project that would showcase the value of a design process which, was not only age inclusive but, involved multiple partners.

The goal was to purpose-build a product that was co-designed with the public, as well as with the knowledge and expertise from research, design and manufacturing partners.

Design Network North, a Gateshead-based design centre of excellence who, provide expertise to businesses, paired Newcastle University with a designer who had a keen interest in innovation and ageing – Jonathan Butters. Jonathan, from Butters Innovation, enabled the ideas to take shape.

For the collection of ideas a panel of consumers, within a target age range, were recruited from VOICE (an organisation which involves citizens in research and innovation projects).

Miko Engineering, a Jarrow based company that design, manufacture and install street furniture, were asked to build the prototype bench.

How we worked
A programme of consumer-led workshops were organised to establish the goal of the design project. These meetings included VOICE members who were given the brief and ask to decide on a product that would be valuable to the public. After much debate, VOICE decided that the project would focus on public seating; more specifically a bench that would be suitable for all ages.

The rationale for the project came from VOICE members. They explained that, if you found walking distances challenging, without the right seating, at the right places, you quickly found yourself excluded from many public places and this could lead to isolation and loneliness. Their observation was that benches for the public realm did not suit their requirements and had not been designed with their needs in mind, often being designed to deter ‘rough sleeping’ or with a primary soft security objective. It was decided therefore, that re-thinking the design of a public bench could have significant benefits.

The needs
Jonathan working closely with VOICE and the following requirements were identified: easy to get in and out of, comfortable (warm and dry), a good social space, suitable for all generations, easy to clean and maintain, and a safe space.
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The solution
The image below shows the prototype bench and explains each new function.

The bench has been a huge success, with all age groups, and has demonstrated the value of collaboration in the design process, particularly in the involvement of the public. The success of the project highlights the possibilities involved in inclusive design for all products. If we can create such fundamental social impact through redesigning something as traditional as public seating, imagine what could be achieved if we applied this approach to all new products and services.

The future
This product is now available commercially, manufactured by North East SME, Miko Engineering as the Vitality Bench: www.mikoengineering.co.uk/products/street-furniture/benches

What can the public do?
• get involved in exciting projects like this in the future, join VOICE www.voice-global.org
• learn more about ageing and the bench, contact the National Innovation Centre for Ageing www.ncl.ac.uk/nica

Contributors
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Key:
Easy access
Comfortable
Safe space
Social space

Handles at the rear
Warm materials
Upright back
Easy draining

Greater seat height
Forward reaching handles

Notch for umbrella/walking stick
Handles at each seat

Modular design – easy to install and maintain
Small table – social space

Highly contrasting colours
Safe space – individual seat

“With two young children and a dog, the features of this bench make it ideal seating for my family”.

“Given that I have poor eyesight and a bad back this seat is much easier for me to use and I think the design is very contemporary”.

Voice
Miko Engineering
Design Network North
Butters

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