

Design Economy 2021

Scoping Project

Public Sector Understanding and Use of Design and Design Skills

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1.Introduction	3
2.Key concepts	6
2.1. A pluralistic concept of design	6
2.2. People, practices, procurement (and not projects)	6
2.3. Public sector domains and functions	6
3.Research questions	8
4.Approach	10
4.1. A combination of methods	10
4.2. Analysis of data	10
4.3. Equality, diversity and inclusion	11
References and reading list	12
Credits	14
Acknowledgements	15
Appendix 1. Previous studies	16

1.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a flourishing of design practice with, in and for the public sector, and associated research endeavours tracking the development and progress of this phenomenon. The Design for Europe project (2014-2016) mapped almost 150 organisations working in the field of design and the public sector, in Europe and beyond¹. Fuller and Lochard's (2016) review of public policy labs in European Union member states identified 78 teams, structures, or entities focused on designing public policy through innovative methods that involve all stakeholders in the design process. Recent mapping activities in Canada (Centre for Policy Innovation and Public Engagement, 2018) and Australia and New Zealand (McGann et al., 2018) have identified 40 policy innovation labs and 26 public sector innovation units in those regions respectively. Within the UK, the Design Council's last major survey of the UK design industry identified that around half of the industry had the public sector as a client (Design Council, 2010).

In 2010 the UK government established the design-award winning Government Digital Service, whose employees, which included an influx of designers, numbered 500 by 2015² and 800 by May 2021³. In 2014 the Policy Lab was established in the Cabinet Office with a remit to bring design thinking to policymaking⁴, and in their first years developed close working sub-contracting relationships with a number of design businesses and consultants. Developments in

local government are harder to track because of the distributed structure, but both Nesta⁵ and the Design Council⁶ have been running design-led innovation programmes for local authorities and public services for two decades now, brokering relationships with design practitioners. There is a growing design consultancy sector working on public service reform (Sangiorgi, 2015). There are sufficient numbers of designers in and around the institutions of government in London to warrant a regular series of 'meetups'⁷. The Scottish⁸, Welsh⁹ and Irish governments¹⁰ have all developed their own national approaches to the use of design in the public sector.

Although it is hard to name an exact origin point for all of this, a number of institutional shifts (which came with associated publications) seem to be significant. From 2004 to 2006, Design Council ran the 'RED Unit', which published a paper called Transformation Design that put forward a case for the transformative potential of design in different settings, including the public sector, to deal effectively with 'complex' problems (Burns et al., 2006). At around the same time, the UK think tank Demos published two reports on design in relation to the public sector, The Journey to the Interface: How public service design can connect users to reform (Parker and Heapy, 2006), and Making the Most of Collaboration: An international survey of public service co-design (Bradwell and Marr, 2008), written in partnership with consultancy Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

¹ The Design for Europe website has recently disappeared, however some information about the project is available via Nesta and other project partners, e.g., <https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/design-for-europe/>

² <https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/17/gds-mission-the-next-phase/>

³ https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2021/05/20/government-digital-service-our-strategy-for-2021-2024/?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=blogaboutpage&utm_campaign=gdsstrategy

⁴ <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/category/policy-lab/> and <https://www.slideshare.net/Openpolicymaking/introduction-to-policy-lab>

⁵ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/creative-councils/>

⁶ <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081202143807/http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/Design-Council/1/What-we-do/Our-activities/Public-services-by-design/> and <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/design-training-and-education/design-public-sector>

⁷ <https://www.meetup.com/London-Gov-Design-Meetup/>

⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/the-scottish-approach-to-service-design/>

⁹ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/y-lab-a-new-public-services-innovation-lab-for-wales/>

¹⁰ <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/introduction-innovation-lab>

In 2006 the Danish government's MindLab, an outfit that had been established in 2002 as an internal incubator for creativity and innovation (Carstensen and Bason, 2012), was evaluated and set on a new course. Previously, the focus had been on creative facilitation and supporting collaborative working in the policy process. Its new ambition was to become a Danish 'centre of excellence' in user-driven innovation based on user needs, testing ideas, and evaluating and measuring the impact of new action". Although 'design' had been a prominent part of MindLab's reputation from the start – the design of their innovative workspace had been much publicised – in the second iteration of MindLab, 'design thinking' became firmly established as part of the methodological mix until its closure in 2018.

This new expansion of public sector design practice in fact builds on a long and rich history of design being deployed by the state in different ways. During the period of post-war reconstruction, around half of architects were employed by the public sector. Urban design continues to be a substantial field of public sector investment in design. Graphic designers have long been employed to communicate policies, services and visions. Product and industrial designers produce life-saving devices for hospitals, furniture for public buildings and clothing for employees. In a review of design for the public sector and for government commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, researchers

identified several opportunities in government and public policy to which design research, could contribute (Malpass and Salinas, 2020; Whicher, 2020).

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to set out a research methodology that can capture a nuanced picture of this rich mix of design activity in the public sector across the four nations of the UK, its scale, scope and contribution. It also offers an approach to assessing the 'understanding of design' across the public sector. The desire to assess perception and understanding suggests an assumption that there is confusion, a lack of clarity, or simply a pluralistic understanding of design. This may vary with respect to design professions and practices too. Although many people may not know the full range of things that architects do, 85% understand that they, essentially, design buildings and spaces¹¹. Does this same level of basic understanding exist across other design disciplines?

On both fronts – understanding and use – this would represent an original piece of research. There is no comparable quantitative work to build on here, and so the methodology proposed will establish a baseline.

¹¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2012/09/03/archi-what>

2.

Key concepts

2.1. A pluralistic concept of design

Design is not one coherent or unified practice, but rather a cluster of related disciplines and practices. However, recent discussion of design in the public sector – in academic literature and policy reports – has been overwhelmingly focused on the role that design thinking (one kind of design practice) can play in delivering innovation. This is a narrow interpretation of design, when compared with, for example the breadth and type of activity captured by the SIC/SOC codes in previous versions of the Design Economy report (2018). And the demand for innovation within the public sector, while a dominant discourse, is also a narrow lens through which to view the activities of public administration organisations. Starting with a wider view of design, and of its uses across the public sector, would lead to a more diverse and inclusive picture, and may also reveal design playing a more systemic role than previously demonstrated. The methodology is designed to holistically map the intersections between design and the public sector. The resulting data could be used to produce a series of heat maps, showing design disciplines mapped against the four nations, public sector organisations, policy domains and purposes.

2.2. People, practices, procurement (and not projects)

Data about public sector design work is not routinely collected. Government and public sector organisations do not necessarily have the figures to hand to demonstrate how many design projects they have undertaken, or even how many designers, broadly defined, they employ. Therefore, this information will need to be collated via multiple strategies. Further, we suggest that the ‘design project’ is not a helpful unit of analysis in estimating ‘design use’, even though that tends to be the colloquial framing for understanding design activity. Instead, we recommend looking for evidence of ‘people, practices and procurement’.

People: Design activity might be identified through looking at people with design skills or in design occupations, either working for the public sector or in businesses contracting with the public sector.

Practices (and skills, mindsets): People who do not consider themselves ‘designers’, or who do not work in occupations that would typically be classified as professional design, may nevertheless possess some technical design skills, or be familiar with and/or are using design practices.

Procurement: Design activity might also be identified by ‘following the money’, looking at public procurement of design. (This will only capture procurements above £10,000, which are public; commissions under this amount do not have to follow public procurement processes.)

2.3. Public sector domains and functions

How might we conceptualise public sector use of design? We can identify types of design according to established classifications (e.g., the definition of design industry SOC/SIC codes used in previous iterations of Design Economy research). In the business methodology paper accompanying this one, we have already proposed the design saturation model and a typology of organisational innovation outcomes (product, process, organisation and marketing), both of which can be applied here. However, there are a number of other variables in the case of the public sector that questions can be asked about. These are:

2.3.1. Type of public sector organisation

The public sector is not one single organisation but a complex of different kinds, which have quite distinct forms and purposes, work practices, funding and governance arrangements, and it would be valuable to find out which types of organisation are using what kinds of design, and

to what ends. A typology might include UK central government departments, the three devolved governments (Northern Ireland Executive, The Scottish Government and Welsh Government), local authorities, legislative bodies (Parliaments/Assemblies), the judiciary, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies.

2.3.2. Policy domains

Policies, public services, and work generally within the public sector is categorised according to which area of public life it is concerned with or responsible for, e.g., health, education, care, defence, etc. The names of the 23 ministerial UK government departments reflect how administrations conceptualise and organise their different policy domains, with an additional 20 non-ministerial departments and 414 agencies and public bodies¹². Looking across the four nations, these could be used to generate a list of the major policy fields with which design might conceivably be interacting, taking care to name the domains in such a way as to avoid continuity issues in the research if departmental names change between political administrations.

2.3.3. Public sector functions

Different elements of the public sector are responsible for some discrete kinds of activity, such as policymaking, public service delivery, law-making, regulating, placemaking and so on. At a more granular level, within the civil service there are 12 identified functions (digital, communications, finance, etc) and 28 policy professions (policy, procurement, data, digital and procurement, and planning, etc)¹³. Design use could also be mapped against these different functions.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations>

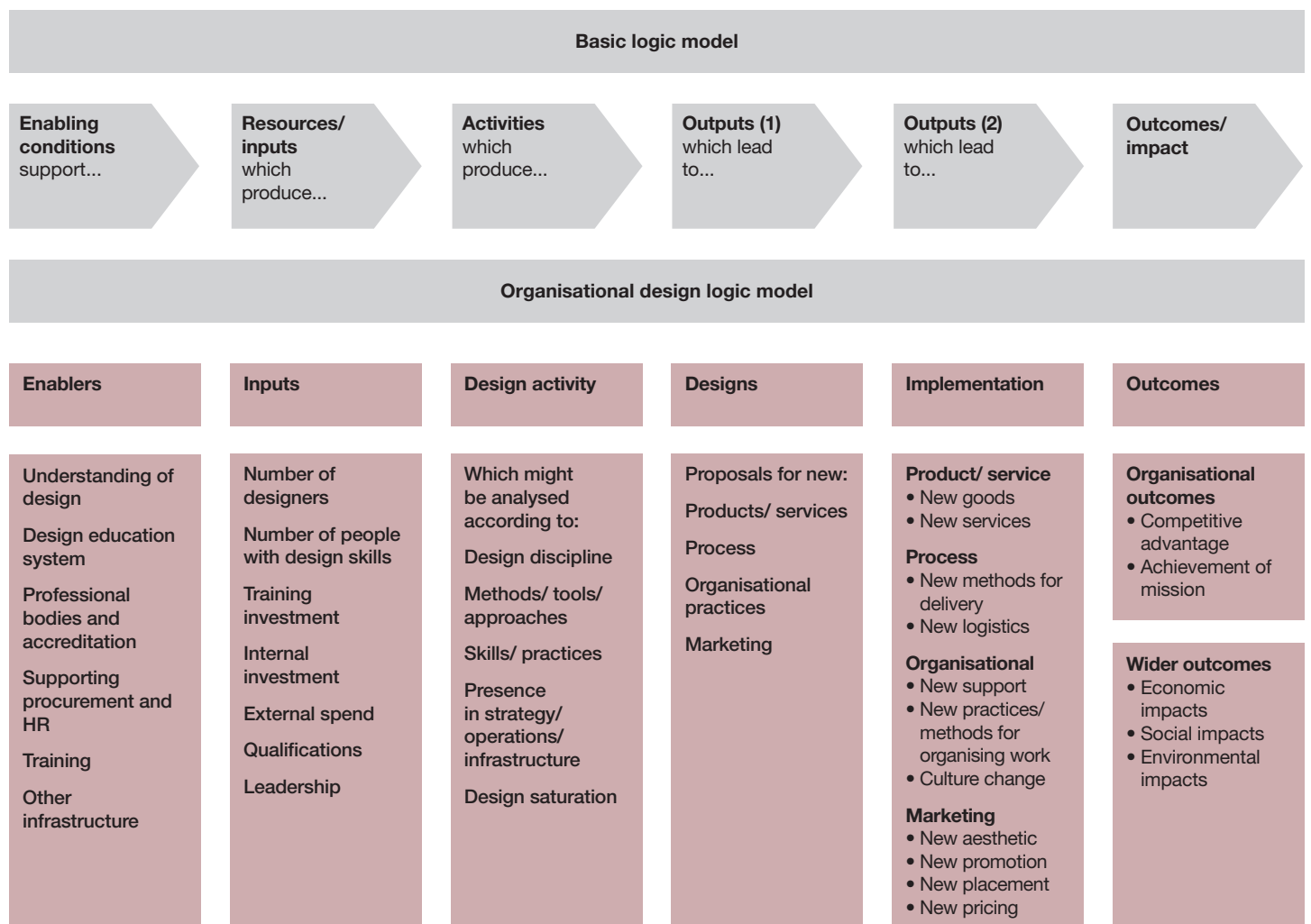
¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service/about#functional-model>

3.

Research questions

The research questions are associated with the Organisational Logic model (Figure 1) outlined in the introductory paper accompanying this one.

Figure 1: Design in organisations logic model



Source: UAL Social Design Institute (2021)

1. Enabling factors

- 1a. How do public sector professionals understand design?
- 1b. How do public sector organisations enable and support design?

These questions are designed to explore the left-hand end of the organisational design logic model, assessing the enabling factors that underpin the use of design – and, ultimately, design impact – in public sector organisations.

2. Public sector use of design

- 2a. Where in the public sector is design used?
- 2b. What kinds of design are carried out?
- 2c. What specialist design skills are deployed?
- 2d. What design mindsets and practices are deployed?
- 2e. Who uses design skills and practices?
- 2f. Is the use of design in the public sector changing?

These questions are designed to draw out a picture of design activity in the public sector across the four nations of the UK (recognising there might be significant differences between each) – the middle part of the organisational logic model. They address the challenge of assessing more diffuse forms of design carried out by those who might not be classified professionally as ‘designers’ by asking about design mindsets and practices.

3. The impact and value of public sector design

- 3a. What public sector organisational purposes is design used to address?
- 3b. What are the outcomes of design for public sector organisations?

These questions explore the right-hand end of the organisational design logic model – outputs and outcomes. They help answer the question of ‘why’; why is design used, what is it used for, and what impact is it seen to achieve? These questions begin to intersect with the economic, social and environmental impact methodology.

4. The future prospects for design in the public sector

- 4a. What enablers and barriers impact on understanding and use of design in the public sector?
- 4b. What might the future use and impact of design in the public sector look like?

These questions build on the picture of the present established by previous sections, to explore what the future might look like; where could we be in ten or twenty years’ time? What could be done to ensure the positive value and impacts of design are maximised? How can design contribute to emerging political agendas: for example Build Back Better, Levelling Up, Net Zero, and so on.

4.

Approach

4.1. A combination of methods

To answer these questions, the proposed approach is both retrospective (looking backwards) and anticipatory, enabling making assessments about the future. The combination will enable production of a nuanced account of how public sector professionals and organisations understand and use design and how this is changing. A combination of data collection methods will generate insights at different scales, enabling identifying large scale patterns as well as rich, qualitative insights, including about emerging developments, barriers/enablers and futures.

To deliver this approach, a combination of methods is needed.

4.1.1. Desk research

- A small amount of desk research to source data about public sector procurement of design.
- Analysis of Labour Force Survey data should reveal the number of designers working with or in the public sector, and the range of different design disciplines that interact with the public sector.

4.1.2. Surveys

The Design Council's Design Industry Survey 2010 (Design Council, 2010) noted that half of the industry had public sector clients, a tantalising headline but without much more detail behind it – yet. This highlights that there are, in fact, two potential groups of informants, public sector professionals and designers. In the latter case questions about public sector commissions could be rolled into a more general design industry survey.

In the case of public sector professionals, with some of these questions it would be important to take a randomised sample of professionals across nations, types of organisation, levels of governance

and policy domains to ensure a representative picture of understanding and use across the sector as a whole. In other cases, it may be more efficient to target individuals known to have worked with design. For this reason, the methods below distinguish between a randomised and a targeted group of public sector professionals.

4.1.3. Workshops with expert practitioners

Some of the research questions will require more expert knowledge to answer, or have a more anticipatory orientation, in which case we recommend a focus group with a diverse sample of expert practitioners taking into account Equality, Diversity and Inclusion principles.

4.1.4. Impact case studies

While much is discussed in the social and environmental impact paper accompanying this one, there are no existing, widely accepted measures, datasets or indicators that can give a holistic picture of design's impact in the public sector. Although it might be possible to achieve an economic estimate of return on investment, it is highly unlikely that the data to support this analysis is collected – and, in any case, costs and savings are only a small part of the picture of design's value. Accordingly, we recommend an approach to assessing impact which looks in depth at a small number of cases.

4.2. Analysis of data

As well as analysing the responses to each question individually, this set of questions should allow analysis of the extent to which there is a correlation between understanding of design, use of design, and positive outcomes/impact from designing. Does a higher degree of 'saturation' make a difference in terms of outcomes? Do some design disciplines more reliably lead to implemented results? Do organisations that have been working with design for a longer period of time show a greater degree of saturation? Although

causal relationships would be hard to prove, the data should at least show whether there is a connection. Qualitative data will help illuminate the type and nature of such relationships, and the contexts in which these exist and the consequences which result.

The similarity of approach with the business-focused research should allow comparison between the two sectors. And survey questions should be structured in such a way as to allow comparison between the public, businesses, and the public sector when it comes to ‘understanding’ of design (although specific wording may need to vary for different groups).

This research would produce a new depiction of the landscape of design in the public sector, one that has never before been attempted. As such it would generally provide a baseline, although it would be interesting to compare with the headline statistic in the Design Industry Survey 2010, i.e., has the overall percentage of the design sector working in, with, or for the public sector decreased or increased in the intervening period?

4.3. Equality, diversity and inclusion

This methodology explores issue of equality, diversity and inclusion first by inquiring into who is designing (the individual) and where they are based (organisationally, geographically) as part of the survey: do some groups, organisations, or regions have better access to design than others? Second, in conjunction with the social and environmental value survey, and through the impact case studies, the methodology will identify how advancements in equality, diversity and inclusion are (or are not) outcomes of designing.

In terms of delivering the research, each of the four nations must be represented in the survey, workshops and impact case studies. Accessibility must be considered with regard to each research method, ensuring that the format does not exclude certain groups or voices or privilege others.

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Credits

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About BOP Consulting

BOP is a research and strategy consultancy specialising in culture and the creative industries. Over 20 years it has supported government bodies, leading arts and cultural organisations, property developers and international agencies through over one thousand assignments resulting in strategies, programmes and impact.

About the Social Design Institute, University of the Arts London

The Social Design Institute is one of UAL's new institutes. Its mission is to develop and use research insights to change how designers and organisations go about designing, resulting in equitable and sustainable outcomes. Its focus areas are the intersection of design and value, systems and public policy through original research, knowledge exchange and collaboration.

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Appendix 1. Previous studies

We did not find comparable studies or methodologies for assessing the understanding and use of design in the public sector. However, there are clusters of studies in adjacent fields that offer some insights. A rapid review was undertaken to build understanding of attempts to measure public sector innovation, and assessments of design for the built environment in the public sector.

There is a substantial body of research and practice concerned with how one might assess public sector innovation (Bloch, 2013; OECD/Eurostat, 2018; OPSI, 2018). Public sector innovation studies typically take the form of surveys (e.g., the Nordic MEPIN project, the EU Innobarometer 2010 and the Nesta Public Sector Innovation Index). On the face of it, this might be a good place to start when trying to assess public sector design. However, there are two main challenges. First, measuring public sector innovation is notoriously difficult, as the metrics used to identify successful innovation in the private sector are not straightforwardly applicable in the public sector (sales, repeat business, etc). Second, indicators of innovation would only be a proxy for design, and not direct evidence. It might be possible to connect design use with innovation performance, but this would be quite complicated for the scope and scale of this research. However, from this general work on innovation comes the framework we advise using for categorising the outputs of designing (Bloch, 2010).

Relatedly, there has been a flurry of studies looking at the emerging phenomenon of public sector innovation labs, including several efforts at 'mapping' labs (Gryszkiewicz et al., 2016; Tönurist et al., 2017; Fuller and Lochard, 2016; McGann et al., 2018). But – again – these are not necessarily synonymous with design activity. Some labs

emphasise design practices, others favour other methodological or disciplinary approaches. The discursive community around design for policy has grown out of a longer-standing conversation around 'design policy', with large-scale, multi-year and multi-country EU-funded studies such as 'Sharing Experience Europe', which mapped and campaigned for design policies across Europe, and 'Design in European Policy', which sought to develop frameworks and indicators to evaluate the impact of design innovation policies. In these studies, the focus is primarily on policies that support the design industry or encourage the use of design by firms. However, an offshoot of this is the recommendation that governments support the design industry through procurement, and by becoming more sophisticated users of design themselves (Thomson and Koskinen, 2012).

There are increasing numbers of studies of discrete design disciplines and their application and effects in the public sector. For example; co-design (Blomkamp, 2018; Bradwell and Marr, 2008), service design (Buchanan et al., 2017; Mager, 2016) 'digital government', design thinking (Liedtka et al., 2020) and experience-based co-design in health (Robert et al., 2020)

There are many policy reports that include examples of practice (Design Commission, 2013; Design Council, 2018; McNabola et al., 2013) and organisational strategies and statements of practice (e.g., 'The Scottish Approach to Service Design').

More precise data is available on design in the built environment, partly because these professions are regulated and therefore data is routinely collected by representative bodies such as the RIBA, the Architects' Registration Board, the RTPI, and so on. The RTPI (2019) used Annual Population Survey

data to estimate the number of Town Planners in the UK¹⁴. And recent research by the Architects' Journal, looking at the Architects' Registration Board, found there were 380 Architects working in-house for local authorities¹⁵.

Overall, in the literature there is an emphasis on design thinking for policy or service innovation – but this is probably a small fraction of all the design work that goes on. A more inclusive account would give a bigger number and show more systemic involvement of design in the public sector, including in the built environment, and presumably greater impact. There is also minimal routinely collected data on design in the public sector, outside of the built environment professions. What research exists tends to be based on qualitative accounts of individuals projects, with a focus on how design works or delivers value. Thus, some primary research is required to establish a quantitative picture of scale and scope.

¹⁴ <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2019/june/the-uk-planning-profession-in-2019/>

¹⁵ <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/fall-in-number-of-architects-working-for-local-authorities>



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