Design Economy FAQ

Why has Design Council published Design Economy 2026?

Design Economy is Design Council's flagship research programme, which started in 2015. It provides an evidence base on the size, value and impact of design across the UK economy, helping policymakers, businesses, educators and designers understand how design contributes to economic growth, innovation and societal outcomes.

The report helps identify opportunities to strengthen the UK's design capability and supports Design Council's vision of improving lives through design.

Where can I find the data/what data sources were used?

A list of sources can be found on p48 of the full report, and on the data tables, which can be downloaded here.

How does the design economy relate to the creative industries?

The creative industries are an important part of the design economy, but design extends far beyond the creative industries alone. Creative UK estimates that the UK's cultural and creative industries generate £146 billion in GVA and support 2.4 million jobs.

However, the Design Economy research takes a broader view, capturing not only designers working in creative industries, but also those working across sectors such as finance, manufacturing, energy and healthcare. This demonstrates that design's contribution extends well beyond the creative industries alone.

What does Design Economy 2026 tell us about the UK's Industrial Strategy?

The case stories in the report show that design capability can help organisations across the economy commercialise innovation, adopt new technologies and embed sustainable practices, while experiencing business growth. This demonstrates that design is crucial to several priority sectors identified in the Modern Industrial Strategy, including clean energies, digital and technologies, and advanced manufacturing, as well as the creative industries.

Additionally, the notable presence of design across economies in all regions of the UK reinforces the importance of strengthening regional design capability to translate Industrial Strategy aims into productivity gains, innovation adoption and high-quality jobs.

How are design occupations and industries defined for the research?

We used the same definitions of design occupations and industries as the previous iteration of this research in 2022. These are based on ONS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) Codes for occupations, and Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) Codes for industries. A full list can be found in the data tables.

To identify which occupations are design occupations we reviewed the selection of SOC codes used in Design Economy 2015 and 2018 and consulted with designers for Design Economy 2022 to find the most appropriate SOC codes to identify design occupations in the ONS data.

From this we calculated the intensity of design employment in the industries set out in the SIC codes. Any industry which has 30% or more of its employment in a design occupation is a design-intensive industry. From this, we can then work out the proportion of designers and support staff working in those industries.

This report uses the 2007 SIC and 2010 SOC classifications because at the time of analysis the new codes had not been fully adopted into all the datasets used to calculate the design economy.

While SIC and SOC Codes allow for comparison between sectors in the economy, they do not perfectly map to all occupations and roles within the design economy, especially newer roles.

What are the main limitations of the data?

ONS datasets do not fully capture all design roles, especially newer occupations, freelancers, sole traders and some craft practices. Data for Northern Ireland is less complete than for other UK nations and regions.

The ONS data we used to understand the demographics of the design economy limited the categorisations we could use in this research. For example, ONS data on gender is still male/female and does not cover non-binary genders.

Ethnic categories are also high-level due to the way ONS data is collected as well as statistical disclosure rules which mean we cannot report on levels of data that could be used to identify an individual (for example when sample sizes are small).

Why is some of the data only up to 2022/2023/2024?

All the data in the report draws on the latest release available from the ONS at the time of the research. Complete GVA data (and therefore also the productivity figures) was only available up to 2023, service exports data is only available up until 2022. Data on design clusters was available up to 2024. The remaining metrics were available up to 2025.

How was GVA calculated?

GVA is defined as the value of the goods and services produced minus the value of the intermediate inputs that were used to produce those goods and services.[1]

For this report, Gross Value Added (GVA) was estimated for design and non-design industries using data from the ONS Annual Business Survey. The GVA for design industries was apportioned between design and non-design occupations according to each group's share of total gross earnings within those industries.

The gross earnings shares were estimated by calculating the weighted number of employees in the design and non-design occupation groups and multiplying these by the corresponding median salaries for each group.

Has growth been adjusted for inflation?

No. GVA is reported in current monetary terms, and it should be noted that inflation was particularly high during 2019-2023, at around 22%, which readers should bear in mind when interpreting growth figures.

[1] https://whatworksgrowth.org/insights/understanding-gva/

If the design economy is growing, why are design firm counts down?

There are several possible explanations, including firms scaling up, mergers, relocations, and the increasing use of designers within non-design businesses rather than specialist design firms. We know that a higher proportion of designers are working in large firms of more than 500 employees in 2025 as compared to 2020.

How does this report compare with previous Design Economy reports?

Design Economy 2026 builds on previous editions of the research and uses a largely consistent methodology to allow for long-term trends in employment, productivity, business activity and economic contribution to be tracked over time. Explore previous Design Economy reports here.

What is Design Council doing to support the design economy?

Design Council works with government, industry, local authorities, educators and designers to strengthen the UK's design capability. We use evidence from the Design Economy research to advocate for policies and investments that support innovation, skills development, productivity, place-based growth and sustainable economic development.

The findings from this research provided the basis for our policy recommendations, which advocate strengthening the UK's design sector and design capability across the wider economy. Read our policy briefing here.

How can I learn more about Design Council's work and stay updated on future research?

Design Council works across research, policy, place, skills and capacity building to demonstrate the value of design and support positive change across the UK. Alongside the Design Economy programme, we publish research, insights and policy analysis, and work with partners across government, industry, education and the built environment.