

Design Economy 2025/26

Invitation to Tender

1. Introduction

The Design Council is seeking a research partner to undertake the next iteration of its flagship **Design Economy** research programme. This work will provide a refreshed national picture of the economic contribution of the UK's design economy, building on an established methodology used in previous editions.

This invitation to tender includes three components:

- **Package A:** Core national analysis (employment, GVA, productivity, business count figures, and a very high-level regional breakdown of these core figures at NUTS1¹ level)
- **Package A+B:** Expanded analysis including detailed regional and cluster-level analysis
- **Annual repeat of Package A** (an Annual Tracker) for four years

We have confirmed internal funding for Package A. Inclusion of Package B and/or the Annual Tracker is subject to securing additional external sponsorship or partnership.

Suppliers are therefore asked to provide **three separate costed options**.

2. Background

About Design Council

The Design Council is the UK's national Champion for Design. We are an independent not-for-profit organisation, incorporated by Royal Charter, that works to demonstrate and unlock the power of design to improve lives and sustain the planet.

About Design Economy

Design Economy is the Design Council's flagship evidence and data programme. It is the UK's only dedicated national research series tracking the scale, value, and character of design across the economy and society. Its outputs are used by policymakers, businesses, funders, and the design community to demonstrate the role of design in supporting economic growth, place-based regeneration, and the transition to net zero.

The Design Council has been championing the role of design for over 80 years – and publishing evidence of its economic impact has long been part of that mission. Since 2015, we have adopted a **consistent methodology** to define and measure the design economy, resulting in major national reports published in **2015**, **2018**, and **2021**.

This tender seeks to build on that foundation, delivering a refreshed and timely snapshot of design's economic contribution today, while enabling comparison over time.

¹ **NUTS1 regions:** The highest-level statistical regions in the UK as defined by the Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics (NUTS). There are 12 NUTS1 regions, which include Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and nine English regions.

3. Project Scope

We are looking for a research partner with experience of conducting economic analysis in the creative industries or related fields. The successful supplier will update the Design Council's national economic data using our established methodology and, if funded, extend this work to include a regional and spatial analysis of the UK design economy.

We are open to proposals on how case studies could complement the quantitative analysis, for example by illustrating the data through examples of design's role in different regions, sectors, or business types.

Package A: Core National Analysis

This work package involves updating headline national figures on the scale and contribution of the UK design economy over the last circa 10 years. It includes the following, which should be disaggregated by design sub-sector:

- Gross Value Added (GVA) and proportion of which is generated through exports
- Employment
- Demographic breakdown of design workforce (gender, ethnicity, age) where available
- Business counts
- Productivity
- A very high-level regional breakdown of the above figures (NUTS1 level only)

This streamline national snapshot is aimed at strengthening the evidence base for government, business, and investor understanding of design's role in the UK economy. The inclusion of a simple NUTS1-level disaggregation will provide additional context on geographical distribution while remaining high-level in scope.

Package A+B: National + Regional Analysis

Design Economy looks at the UK design economy across the four regions drawing on NUTS-1 data. In addition to the core national metrics, this extended package – subject to external funding – offers a deeper analysis of regional design economies beyond that provided at a national level.

The aim is to provide more granular insight to support place-based policymaking and demonstrate the value of creative clusters to inform regional economic and creative innovation development initiatives across the UK.

This package includes:

- More detailed regional breakdowns: We are interested to hear from applicants as to how they would best construct the evidence based on the data sets available.
- Spatial analysis of design clusters
- Regional productivity and sectoral concentrations

Annual Tracker

Applicants are also asked to provide a separate costed proposal for producing **Package A's core outputs as an annual tracker** for four subsequent years, using a consistent methodology. This regular output is intended to align with funding and policy cycles and to strengthen year-on-year visibility of the design economy.

The quote for the GVA Tracker should be treated as **indicative only**. It will help us assess the potential cost of ongoing updates but will be subject to separate discussion and agreement (– likely with the supplier appointed for Package A or A+B –) if and when we commission this work.

Proposal Requirements

Suppliers should submit **three quotes**:

1. For Package A
2. For Package A+B
3. For the annual GVA Tracker (indicative only)

All proposals should reflect the specifications set out in the relevant work packages. A full list of expected outputs is provided in the [Deliverables and Outputs](#) section below.

The intended delivery timeline for this research is approximately **4 to 4.5 months** from contract initiation for **Package A**, and approximately **5 to 5.5 months** for **Package A+B**. Final delivery deadlines will be confirmed upon appointment and may vary depending on the commissioned package. Publication is currently planned for **late March – early May 2026**.

4. Methodology Overview

The successful supplier will be required to implement and, where necessary, update the proven methodology developed by the Design Council across three previous Design Economy publications. The approach includes:

1. Taxonomy Development and Validation:

- Review and update the existing taxonomies for design occupations, design industries, and design-skilled occupations/industries.
- Agree disaggregated categories for analysis, building on the existing SIC and SOC classifications used in previous iterations of design economy (e.g. by design discipline, employment type, region, or workforce demographics, depending on data availability).

2. Data Acquisition and Modelling:

- Extract the latest available data from key ONS datasets (e.g. the Annual Business Survey, Annual Population Survey, and Supply & Use Tables).
- Apply the ‘DCMS+’ design intensity model to identify design-intensive sectors (defined as those with 30% or more design roles).
- Calculate core metrics, including Gross Value Added (GVA), employment, business counts, and productivity across the national economy.

3. Quantitative Analysis:

- **For Package A (Minimum Viable Product):** Provide a national-level snapshot of the design economy—updating headline metrics such as GVA, employment figures, productivity, plus a simple NUTS1-level disaggregation of these core metrics. This should be benchmarked to data over the last circa 10 years (depending on data availability) to allow for analysis of trends over time.
- **For Package A+B (Expanded Scope):** Include additional regional disaggregation and cluster mapping (using approaches such as Location Quotient analysis, regional breakdowns, and cluster mapping) to detail how design activity varies across UK geographies.

- Update trend analyses against data from 2015, 2018 and 2021, re-extracting data where needed to allow for most current estimates to identify changes over time.
- If possible and relevant, draw on additional data sources (such as devolved survey data) to ensure representativeness of design data across the UK nations and regions.

5. Research Questions

This section outlines the key research questions that suppliers will be expected to address, aligned to the two potential work packages described above. These questions reflect the Design Council's strategic priorities and long-term research framework.

Work Package A (Core National Update)

This work package focuses on updating the national picture of the UK design economy. Core research questions include:

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- What is the current economic contribution of the UK design economy?
 - How has this contribution changed since previous publications in 2021, 2018, and 2015?
 - How is the design economy structured by industry and occupation?
 - What is the relative 'design intensity' of the UK economy, and how does it compare over time?
 - What is the spread of designers working in non-design sectors?
 - What is the composition of the design workforce (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) where available?
 - How are these headline figures distributed at a high-level across NUTS1 regions?
 - Which headline figures and trends should be featured in an annual GVA Tracker update?
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Work Package A+B (National + Regional Picture)

In addition to all the above, this package expands the analysis to offer more geographically granular insight. Additional research questions include:

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- What are the regional and local contributions of the design economy across the UK?
 - Where are the strongest design clusters, and how do they vary by sector, specialism or growth rate?
 - What regional disparities or concentrations exist in terms of employment, GVA, or business activity?
 - How might regional design strengths relate to wider local economic strategies (e.g. green economy, innovation, wider local creative economies)?
 - What insights can inform regional and national policy to support the future growth of the design economy?
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6. Deliverables and Outputs

Suppliers are expected to provide three separate quotes, covering: **(1)** Package A; **(2)** Package A+B; and **(3)** the Annual GVA Tracker. The following are the expected deliverables and outputs for each component.

Suppliers should demonstrate their ability to meet these requirements as part of their proposal and may suggest refinements or additional outputs based on their experience.

For Package A

Quantitative Outputs:

- Updated national-level metrics and very high-level (NUTS1) regional breakdown for:
 - Gross Value Added (GVA)
 - Employment – type, industry and occupation, including design roles embedded in non-design sectors (via the design intensity model)
 - Business counts
 - Productivity
 - Demographic breakdown
- Time-series comparison with Design Economy data from 2015, 2018, and 2021
- Recommendations for core indicators to be used in an annual GVA Tracker

Written Outputs:

- Final written report (maximum 15 pages) with light-touch visualisations (e.g. graphs, tables)
- Executive summary (maximum 2 pages)
- Separate methodology document describing data sources, definitions, and analytical steps
- Clearly labelled and accessible data tables (Excel or CSV) suitable for publication on the Design Council website

Engagement Activities:

- Up to two workshops or roundtables with the Design Council and stakeholders during the research process
- Potential for up to two presentations of the final findings, including at a public launch event

For Package A+B

Includes **all Package A deliverables**, plus the following:

Quantitative Outputs:

- Regional breakdowns at greater detail than NUTS1 (NUTS2/Local Authority level, subject to disclosure rules)
- Location Quotient analysis to identify design employment and sectoral concentrations
- Identification and profiling of design clusters across the UK
- Analysis of regional trends, disparities, and productivity differences

Written Outputs:

- Additional regional and cluster analysis integrated into the final report or as standalone chapters (total ~30 pages)

- Recommendations for engaging regional and local policymakers

For Annual GVA Tracker

Quantitative Outputs:

- Annual updates of core headline indicators (GVA, employment, business count, productivity)

Written Outputs:

- Basic summary narrative (no full report required)
- Delivery in a standardised, efficient format that enables year-on-year tracking and public release

7. Policy Context and Influence

Design Economy provides the evidence base that helps position design within key national policy agendas. Previous editions have informed the Creative Industries Sector Plan, the UK's Industrial Strategy, and initiatives around economic growth, net zero, and skills.

The findings have supported the Design Council's role on forums such as the Net Zero Council and Creative Industries Council, and continue to shape engagement with government departments, combined authorities, and funders.

This next phase will strengthen our ability to influence policy by providing timely data on design's contribution to economic growth, regional development, and the green transition.

8. Timeline

Application timeline

30 September 2025	Invitation to tender issued
13 October 2025	Deadline for submission of expressions of interest
27 October 2025	Deadline for applications
3 November 2025	Shortlisted applicants contacted
w/c 10 November 2025	Interviews with shortlisted applicants
21 November 2025	Outcome announced
w/c 1 December 2025	Work commences

Delivery timeline

w/c 1 December 2025	Project initiation meeting with Design Council
w/c 8 December 2025	Project meeting with Design Council to review and sign off final research design and approach. Thereafter, monthly project update meetings

w/c 16 February 2025	Preliminary findings submitted
w/c 23 March 2025	Publishing of final outputs for Work Package A
w/c 27 April 2025	Publishing of final outputs for Work Package A+B

9. Budget

As a charity in receipt of public funds we need to ensure that all spend delivers best value.

Total available budget is (depending on fundraising success) expected to be

- **Up to £35,000 for package A**
- **Up to £80,000 for package A+B**

All quotes should be inclusive of expenses and exclusive of VAT.

Supplier should submit **three** quotes:

- One for undertaking Package A (up to £35,000)
- One for undertaking Package A+B (up to £80,000)
- One for the Annual Tracker – an indicative quote for repeating Package A annually until 2030. **Please note:** *This is an exploratory request and not part of the current commissioning budget.*

Payment schedule: 50% on commencement; 30% after mid-project review; 20% 30 days upon successful completion.

Applications should provide an overview table for Package A and Package A+B itemising how many days each consultant/researcher/administrator will spend on the project, daily rates, and what each person's key responsibilities will be.

10. Selection Criteria

The successful supplier will be selected based on a combination of quality and value for money. Proposals will be evaluated against the following weighted criteria:

Criteria	Weighting
Understanding of the brief We are looking for a clear and insightful interpretation of the project aims and challenges, including the distinction between Package A and Package A+B, and the potential for an annual GVA Tracker.	20%
Technical approach and methodology This includes how the supplier will apply the Design Council's established methodology and deliver high-quality analysis within the given timeline. We are particularly interested in innovative yet robust approaches to working with official statistics, classification frameworks (SOC/SIC), and geographic data. We are open to proposals on how case studies could complement the quantitative analysis.	25%

Relevant experience and expertise Demonstrable experience in delivering similar economic research projects, especially in the creative industries or related sectors. Familiarity with ONS datasets and economic modelling is essential. Experience with Design Economy or similar methodologies is desirable.	20%
Value for money We will assess whether the proposed costs are appropriate and proportionate for the level and scope of work proposed. Proposals should include clearly broken-down estimates for: (1) Package A; (2) Package A+B; and (3) Annual repeat of Package A (GVA Tracker).	20%
Project management, staffing, and capacity Proposals should include a clear plan for project delivery, including key personnel, availability, timeframes, and quality assurance processes. We are particularly interested in capacity to begin promptly and deliver efficiently.	10%
ESG Proposals should clearly outline the organisation's ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) credentials, including policies, practices, and evidence of implementation. We are particularly interested in demonstrable commitment to sustainability, ethical working practices, and diversity and inclusion, as well as how these principles will be applied throughout the delivery of the research.	5%

11. Submission Requirements

- Expressions of interest should be submitted by **13 October 2025**. A brief email notification to info@designcouncil.org.uk is sufficient.
- Any queries should be submitted by **20 October 2025** to info@designcouncil.org.uk.
- Final proposals should be submitted by **27 October 2025** to info@designcouncil.org.uk.

Suppliers are asked to provide a clear and concise proposal that includes the following:

- **Approach and Methodology**
A description of your proposed approach to delivering the research, including your understanding of the brief, any adaptations to the established methodology, and how you will address each research question. Please indicate how you will ensure data quality, transparency, and comparability with previous Design Economy outputs.
- **Team and Relevant Experience**
An overview of your team, including named researchers and their roles in the project. Include brief bios and relevant experience delivering comparable

research (especially within the creative industries, economic analysis, or place-based research).

- **Work Plan and Timeline**

A clear and realistic timeline, outlining key phases of work, milestones, and deliverables. This should align with the estimated 4 to 4.5-month delivery window for Package A and the estimated 5 to 5.5-month window for Package A+B.

- **Budget and Quotes**

A breakdown of costs, including:

- A quote for Package A
- A quote for Package A+B
- A quote for annual replication of Package A (the “GVA Tracker”) for four additional years (**indicative only**)

The Annual GVA Tracker quote will not be evaluated for contract awarding but will inform potential future commissioning.

Budgets should be inclusive of all fees, travel, incentives, and incidental costs but exclusive of VAT.

- **Risk Management**

Identification of any risks that might affect delivery (e.g. access to data, project dependencies), and your proposed mitigation strategies.

- **Outputs and Reporting**

Confirmation that you can deliver all outputs listed in the “Deliverables and Outputs” section of this brief, including final datasets and visualisations in an accessible format.

Appendix: Detailed Methodology

The successful supplier will be expected to implement and, where necessary, refine the established Design Economy methodology developed by the Design Council since 2015. This approach enables consistent and comparable analysis of the economic value of design across multiple dimensions. It includes three interlinked components:

1. Taxonomy Development and Validation

The foundation of the Design Economy analysis is the development and use of robust taxonomies that define which occupations and industries are considered part of the design economy. This includes:

- **Design Occupations:** Based on SOC codes that represent core design roles (e.g. architects, graphic designers, product designers).
- **Design Industries:** Based on SIC codes where the majority of business output relates to design services.
- **Design-Skilled Occupations and Industries:** Captures roles that require design skills but are not formally labelled as “design,” and industries that use design as a key enabling capability.

The taxonomies must:

- Be consistent with previous Design Economy studies to enable time series analysis.
- Be cross-referenced with ONS classifications (SOC/SIC).
- Be peer-reviewed or validated through expert consultation where feasible.

2. Data Acquisition and Modelling

This component involves acquiring, cleaning, and modelling large-scale datasets to quantify the size and shape of the design economy.

Key activities include:

- Accessing the most recent data from public ONS datasets including:
 - Annual Business Survey (ABS)
 - Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES)
 - Annual Population Survey (APS)
 - Labour Force Survey (LFS)
 - Supply and Use Tables (SUTs)
- Applying the ‘DCMS+’ design intensity model:
 - This approach identifies “design-intensive” industries as those where design occupations account for 30% or more of the workforce.
 - These sectors are then included in estimates of GVA, employment, business count, and productivity.
- Performing data matching, cleansing, and normalisation to ensure comparability across years and datasets.
- For Package A, data acquisition and modelling must also enable a very high-level geographic disaggregation of core metrics (GVA, employment, business counts, productivity) at NUTS1 level. This should be methodologically straightforward and based on available ONS datasets, noting and disclosing any limitations.

Where data is not available at the desired level of granularity (e.g. Local Authority), suppliers may need to use statistical estimation techniques and disclose any limitations.

3. Quantitative and Spatial Analysis

The core outputs of the project will be generated through detailed quantitative and, where applicable, spatial analysis.

For Package A:

- National estimates of:
 - GVA (including trends over time)
 - Employment by role and industry
 - Business counts
 - Productivity (GVA per job or per hour worked, as per ONS methodology)
- Very high-level geographic breakdown at NUTS1 level for all core metrics
- Disaggregation by:
 - Occupation
 - Industry
 - Demographic breakdowns (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) where available

For Package A+B:

- **All of the above**, plus:
 - Geographic disaggregation: ideally at NUTS1, NUTS2, and Local Authority level.
 - Cluster analysis using:
 - Location Quotients (LQ) to identify concentrations of design activity.
 - Comparative growth rates by region or sector.
 - Mapping and spatial visualisation of the UK's design clusters.
 - Regional productivity and sector concentration metrics.

For All Packages:

- Trend analysis across through reference points (2015, 2018, 2021, 2025/26), enabling longitudinal comparison.
- Identification of data anomalies, caveats, or limitations clearly stated in the report.
- Recommendations for indicators that can be updated annually for an Annual Tracker product.

This methodology will produce a comprehensive and comparative account of the UK design economy and support wider applications for policy, funding, investment, and strategic planning. Suppliers may propose refinements, but any substantive changes to the methodology must be discussed with and approved by Design Council.