

---

Making life better by design

# Supporting the design of better places.

---

## What's the challenge we've identified?

Design is not necessarily prioritised among all stakeholders working in the built and natural environment, so we miss opportunities to create high quality housing and neighbourhoods

---

## What did we do and what have we achieved?

Influenced guidance and developed tools that prioritise higher standards of design quality of place

Provided strategic advice and design support, locally and nationally

Built the design skills of built environment professionals

---

## What have we learnt?

There's a need for national coordination on design quality

There's value in thinking about design earlier in the process

The value of design in the built environment is not purely economic

## Our key achievements over the last 15 years

### Supporting the design of better places

**1,000** unique schemes supported

We have provided design support to more than 1,000 unique schemes in local authorities and NGOs since 2011.

#### Pioneered the use of design review

In 2009 Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE) pioneered the design review: a site-specific, peer-reviewed scheme for architecture and built environment planning.

This quickly became the industry standard, and the practice was formally written into the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012 and the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, and informed the Greater London Authority Design Review Charter.

#### Enabled government to prioritise design quality

We have provided independent and impartial recommendations to prioritise consideration of design quality by government.

Key examples include our work on the National Design Guide, High Streets Task Force, as well as calling for a national Design Quality Unit.

#### Supported the development of design principles for infrastructure

For example, our work with Network Rail and Highways England.

#### Worked across a diverse range of major policy areas

We have worked across all the policy areas of key interest to national and local government, as well as NGOs and charities, including: crime reduction, building beautiful places, community engagement, housing for ageing populations in rural areas.



## What's the challenge we've identified?

The quality of the built and natural environment around us has a significant impact on our lives. It can transform people's quality of life, stimulate the economy, enhance the environment and help address the climate emergency.

However, the complexity of development projects and the variety of stakeholders involved can make it challenging to realise this potential and create places that work for everyone.

The value of an inclusive design process is in putting people at the heart of decision-making. However, more needs to be done to enable this to happen consistently and meaningfully. Design needs to be better integrated into strategic planning at a local authority and national policy level, so we create places that work for everyone.

- [Our Healthy Placemaking](#) research highlights the barriers faced by built environment professionals in prioritising healthy placemaking, such as differences in ways the public are consulted, the perceived cost of implementing healthy interventions, and less emphasis being given to our indoor environments.
- [The Place Alliance Housing Audit](#) (2020) found that three-quarters of new builds in England were 'mediocre' or 'poor'. Developers are not incentivised to build well-designed projects. Additionally local authority staff still lack design skills and can be reluctant to change or slow to implement new guidelines.





# What did we do and what have we achieved?

Design Council has been delivering independent and expert design consultation to professionals in the built environment for decades, supporting them to overcome design quality challenges.

The Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE) was established in 1999, and later integrated into Design Council in 2011. During that time, we have built up a world-class expertise in the built and natural environment, local knowledge and a specialist network of 450 built environment experts to help clients achieve their objectives, drive growth and create more sustainable, equitable developments here in the UK and overseas.

We have worked across all the policy areas of key interest to national and local government, as well as NGOs and charities, from creating sustainable communities, protecting heritage, reviving high streets and instating design principles for key infrastructure partners.



Past CABE and current Design Council publications on place and environment consistently in demand: 151,700 people have viewed our Architecture and Built Environment content online, and the most popular categories were 'places', 'inclusive' and 'environment'.



# 01

## Influenced guidance and developed tools that prioritise higher standards of design quality of place

**Delivered key guidance for the sector, such as:**

- The National Design Guide (2019): this was co-delivered by Design Council and Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design as part of the revised suite of planning practice guidance for the National Planning Policy Framework. This guidance sets out the characteristics of well-designed places and demonstrates what good design means in practice.

**Provided recommendations and influenced policy and practice, such as:**

- The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Significant changes were made to the NPPF following our recommendations that it needed to have design as its heart.
- The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, an independent body set up to advise government on how to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods. Their final report, Living with Beauty (2020), reflects much of our evidence, and the publication positively references Design Council's contribution on several occasions.
- The High Streets Taskforce, where we are working to support local leaders to breathe new life into high streets and town centres, as they adapt to new consumer habits.



**Developed practical tools to support the sector, such as:**

- Design review: Research from Place Alliance's Housing Audit found that the most impactful tool for ensuring good design is embedded into site-specific and peer-reviewed schemes. First proposed by CABI in 2009, the design review quickly became the industry standard, recognised by all three professional architecture and planning bodies: the Landscape Institute (LI), Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). At CABI's recommendation, design review panels were set up in every London Borough with dozens of private and public sector organisations affiliated and an extensive design network that delivers them around the country at a regional level. Widely regarded as best practice in inspiring higher quality design, the design review process is now formally embedded into the National Planning Policy Framework.
- Where we have delivered design reviews:
  - 9 in 10 said the scheme had improved as a direct result of the design review.
  - 94% said that their designs have changed to some extent following design review, and 1 in 5 had changed significantly in light of the design review.
  - 83% of design teams, 79% of Local Planning Authorities and 73% of planning consultants agreed that the design review had inspired higher quality design.

First proposed by CABI in 2009, the design review quickly became the industry standard.





## Case study

### Developing a public vision for the Home of 2030

Design Council is part of a consortium delivering the Home of 2030 initiative, to develop practical and scalable ideas for future homes which are suitable for all ages and environmentally sustainable over their entire lifespan. We have developed the public vision for the initiative: encouraging local people to think innovatively about the homes that they, their friends and their family might want and need in the future. This was done through a series of local design workshops and testing insights with a larger representative cohort, to gain perspectives from over 2,000 people in 2019.



“Great to be a part of how we might meet the challenges of affordable, low-carbon homes and climate emergency. The rate of change we have to achieve is daunting and workshops like this gives us the space to imagine how this can be done.”

Craig White, Home of 2030 workshop attendee

98% of participants said they had thought differently about what's needed from homes in the future.



100% of participants said they had a chance to contribute their perspective.



## 02

**Provided strategic advice and design support, locally and nationally**

Design can be the golden thread running through the planning and development of all UK infrastructure, ensuring that people are put at the heart of decision-making.

We support a wide range of clients – including major infrastructure bodies, local authorities, housing authorities, foundations and trusts – working across business support, design advice, development support and policy.

Our work with organisations such as Network Rail supports them to use design strategically within their organisations. Well-designed infrastructure can bring us closer together, create cohesive communities and stimulate local and regional growth across the UK.

We also work locally through a number of local authorities, supporting them in their work, while gathering insight into how the planning process is working on the ground and identifying key barriers and opportunities. For instance, we produced an annual review for Oxford's Design Review Panel, reflecting key themes important to their locality, including balancing increasing density with the vernacular and character of Oxford and designing for an ageing population. From 2017/18, the Design Review Panel, which includes 40 built environment experts, undertook 52 reviews and two policy reviews for Oxford City Council.





## Case study

### Putting passengers and stakeholders at the heart of railway design

Since 2017 we have worked with Network Rail providing independent design advice, support and capacity-building to help enable a design-led approach to rail infrastructure.

- From an initial series of design reviews on projects being commissioned across their network, we helped Network Rail better understand where and how design could improve their performance.
- Senior Network Rail officials including Chair Sir Peter Hendy wanted to see how a design-led approach to Network Rail's assets could help them deliver more effective projects and meet their objectives. Now, as Network Rail's strategic partner on design, we work on everything from communication and technical architectural advice, to running engagement events like ThinkStation, to future-proofing their vast estate.
- So far, we have supported the development of Network Rail's Design Principles, analysed existing processes and frameworks, and created new design mechanisms and support on development of design governance. A total of 38 design processes so far have been implemented, and design thinking has been embraced across the organisation.

In 2019 we delivered ThinkStation, 11 workshops with 350 stakeholders exploring Network Rail's nine recently adopted principles of good design – developed with our support – and have encouraged participants to consider how each principle can be applied to future small to medium railway stations. This is a fundamental part of Network Rail's commitment to be a more customer-focused, service-driven organisation that puts passengers first. ThinkStation feedback will inform recommendations for the brief of an international station design competition which will launch in 2020.

“In creating the next generation of railway stations, we want to put passengers and stakeholders at the heart. That is why we commissioned Design Council to deliver ThinkStation”

Anthony Dewar, Professional Head of Buildings and Architecture, Network Rail



93% of participants said they had thought differently about what's needed from future passenger hubs.



98% of participants said they had a chance to contribute their perspective.





## Built the design skills of built environment professionals

Design Council works to build capacity and support continuous learning within the built environment sector and its professionals. One of our key priorities is increasing skills and understanding around inclusive design, which we believe is the responsibility of everyone working in the built environment.

Our Inclusive Environments programme at Design Council aims to raise awareness of the importance of designing places that meet the needs of the diversity of people who want to use them. It has a number of components, including:

- An online hub of inclusive design best practice guidance for built environment professionals covering buildings and outdoor spaces, in all phases of development including planning, design and construction, through to management of those buildings and places.
- A free online Inclusive Environments training course, introducing inclusive design relevant to all built environment professionals. Over half of those registered for the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) – most of whom were qualified architects – had received no prior training on inclusive design, showing the need for this type of training.

In 2019, we also worked with Transport for London to deliver a series of inclusive design workshops for their staff.

All respondents strongly agreed they were 'enthusiastic' about inclusive design following the workshop, compared with only 56% beforehand.

Respondents' knowledge of inclusive environments increased by 60%.



All respondents said they would feel confident explaining inclusive design to a friend.



## Case study

### Community engagement and masterplanning in Jersey

In Jersey, we hosted six collaborative co-design workshops on behalf of the States of Jersey and the Jersey Development Company. These focused on the redevelopment of South West St Helier including the future hospital site. This was to establish a shared vision with residents after Design Council advised that the development masterplan was both undeliverable and had engaged poorly with stakeholders.

Our expert advice led to the recommendation and delivery of community and stakeholder engagement works, which allowed a shared vision and set of priorities and for maintaining key views to the seafront and Elizabeth Castle, promoting a wider mix of uses that would create broader value for the community.





## What have we learnt?

### There's a need for national coordination on design quality

To improve the standard of our built environment, we need a stronger, more coherent and predictable planning system. A single body, or group of affiliate members, with a mandate to foster high-quality built design in Britain would lead to greater coordination and sense of shared strategic direction; both across sectors and at all levels of planning. We believe there is a need for a Design Quality Unit for England to drive up the quality of urban development. Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious - published by the Place Alliance on behalf of a consortium including Design Council - makes a clear case for a Design Quality Unit and sets out options for making this happen.

### There's value in thinking about design earlier on in the process

Through our work, we can see how using design mindsets and skills adds value. However, we have learned that when design is only considered in the later stages of the development of a building or place, there is often a missed opportunity where that development could have been delivered in a way that added greater value for the end user. This understanding has influenced our decision to work more in the first diamond, where we can help clients to reframe the problem they are trying to solve and put the people that are going to use that place or service at the heart of the decisions they make. We also increasingly work with major national infrastructure providers, as their decisions shape the way that millions of people live their lives.

### The value of design in the built environment is not purely economic

We must not underestimate the importance of a shared vision of what we value – not just the bottom line, but how to take into account the social and environmental benefits of delivering a higher quality built environment. Having evidence of this wider value to make the case for prioritising design is key, as well as the lessons we learn from the homes, neighbourhoods and infrastructure we create. However, good evaluation isn't always prioritised in the built environment and there aren't always right tools: for example, our Healthy Placemaking research highlighted that practitioners didn't always have the necessary tools to measure and explain impact. In the coming year, this is something we will be doing more to advocate for as part of our ongoing efforts to demonstrate the full value of design.



Our *Making life better by design* series tells the story of Design Council's impact over the last 15 years. It shows how design has contributed to three major areas of the economy – business innovation, public services and places – as well as how Design Council has helped to clarify what design is and champion its use.

This chapter explores of our vast portfolio of work to prioritise design throughout the building process, from developing the skills of built environment professionals through to public engagement exercises.

To find out more visit:

**[designcouncil.org.uk/our-impact](https://designcouncil.org.uk/our-impact)**



**Design Council**  
**Eagle House**  
**167 City Road**  
**London EC1V 1AW**



**[info@designcouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@designcouncil.org.uk)**



**020 7420 5200**



**[designcouncil.org.uk](https://designcouncil.org.uk)**

---

Published July 2020  
Registered charity: Charity no. 272099