Public Design Evidence Review: A Brief Guide

July 2025

Foreword by Minister Georgia Gould OBE

When we design policies and services, we shape how people experience the state in their everyday lives. Done well, this work can build trust, unlock opportunity, and strengthen the fabric of our communities. But too often, the systems we ask people to navigate - and the systems we ask public servants to work within - are fragmented, outdated, and disconnected from the realities on the ground.

The Public Design Evidence Review arrives at a moment when we are asking fundamental questions about how government can work better for people. It brings together powerful insights from across the public sector, design community, and academia to explore how we can design policies and services that are not only more effective, but more human. Design is central to this transformation. It gives us the tools to listen deeply, test ideas quickly, and build with, not for, communities. It helps us move beyond assumptions and see the whole system through the eyes of the people who use it. And it enables us to work across boundaries, iterate quickly, and create services that are responsive, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

Before entering Parliament, I had the privilege of leading a local council. I saw firsthand how setting bold, shared goals - and co-designing solutions with residents - could transform outcomes. Through my work in my constituency, I've seen the most effective and enduring changes come when we work with, not for, our communities. These experiences have shown me that design is not a luxury, it's a necessity for a government that wants to be effective, trusted, and fair.

The newly formed Test, Learn and Grow team in the Cabinet Office has been set up to further expand the use of design methods like test and learn and place-based approaches to deliver better outcomes for citizens grounded in continuous learning, collaboration, and evidence. This work builds on the great legacy of design in UK government that started over a decade ago with the Government Digital Service formed in 2011 and Policy Lab in 2014. With test and learn, we are expanding the effort bringing design, digital and data experts, and frontline workers into policymaking. It's collaborative and focused on systems change including communities and public and private organisations working toward the same missions.

But we know there's more to do. We need to rewire the state to be more agile, more open, and more capable of adapting to people's needs. We need a government that is curious, open to learning and capable of adapting to people's needs. My hope is this review can spark new conversations and collaborations across the public sector. Together, we can design policies and services that are not only more effective, but more human - designed by the people they serve.

This review is not a blueprint. It's an invitation - to think differently, to work differently, and to build a government that truly belongs to everyone.

Georgia Gould MP OBE

Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office

Foreword by Susan Acland-Hood

Good policy is not just about good ideas. It's about understanding the people we're aiming to support and the systems we're trying to change. It's about testing what works and building services and policies that are fit for the real world. That's where design comes in.

This Public Design Evidence Review brings together a wide range of perspectives from academic experts and design leaders, frontline teams and senior officials. It traces the cutting edge of practice from New York to Helsinki, from local and central government to the NHS. It shows how design can help us solve problems more effectively, work across boundaries, and deliver outcomes that matter to citizens.

It also shows that design is not a silver bullet. It works best when supported by the right conditions: leadership that values experimentation, teams with the time and space to understand problems deeply, and accountability systems that allow for learning and adaptation.

As policy professionals, we are often working in complex, fast-moving environments. This review offers practical insights into how design can help us navigate that complexity by involving users, testing ideas early, and working collaboratively across disciplines. These are principles I've seen in action across education policy, for example in co-creating guidance for AI and education with tech companies, teachers, academics and civil society. It also challenges us to think about how we build the capability and create the conditions that allow this kind of work to thrive.

We also know that the early enthusiasm for missions must now be matched by the hard work of delivery: building strong, enduring relationships and making difficult choices. This review offers a timely and practical contribution to that task. It prompts conversations across the policy profession and beyond, especially at senior levels, about how we can make more of this kind of design possible. That means investing in skills, yes, but also in the systems, incentives and leadership that support good design. The evidence is here. The opportunity is ours.

Susan Acland-Hood

Permanent Secretary, Department for Education and Joint Head of the Policy Profession

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Introduction

How do we create better public policies and services that routinely achieve their intent? 'Public design' could be part of the answer. In the UK, high-profile 'proofs of concept' have included Policy Lab and the Government Digital Service's approach to service design. Scaling up public design, including early in policymaking, could have a real payoff. It could help us address the challenges that matter to people.

But what exactly do we mean by public design? What value does it bring? And how might the public sector have to change to realise design's potential? The 'Public Design Evidence Review' or PDER (originally the 'Public Design Review') was commissioned to explore such questions. It describes the leading edge of academic thinking and global expert practice, shares UK case studies, and offers reflections from an internal government perspective. Conceived in the Policy Profession Unit, prepared for publication in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and launched by the Cabinet Office at a venue provided by University of the Arts London, it represents a cross- and beyond-government effort.

This package aims to support a shared conversation about what public design becomes next. It is not a roadmap. It does bring the landscape into much sharper relief, and starts to point towards a coherent strategic framework for examining and implementing design in the public sector. This is vital groundwork for a further iterative process involving senior public servants working through decisions about what role public design should play in a modern, agile, mission-focused government.

PDER publications and role of the brief guide

The PDER package consists of this brief guide and seven substantive reports:

- '[Public Design for Transformational Change: Perspectives from International Design Thought Leaders](#)' (also referred to as the Design Thought Leader report): a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 Design Thought Leaders. It explores their perceptions of good public design, why it matters, its potential, and enablers and barriers to that potential being realised.

- The 'Case Study Bank': 13 examples drawn from across the UK public sector.

- Three literature reviews by a consortium of academics with expertise in both design and public policy:

    - 'Literature Review Paper 1 - Public Design' explores definitions, outcomes, capabilities, and conditions.

    - 'Literature Review Paper 2 - Public Value' considers frameworks for measuring outcomes; and

    - 'Literature Review Paper 3 - Public Design and Public Value' examines evidence linking the two.

- 'Public Design in the UK Government: A Review of the Landscape and its Future Development' (also referred to as the academics' Landscape Review): a commentary drawing on the documents above, a related Design Council report, and the academics' broader experience.

- 'Reflections from the Human-Centred Design Science team, Department for Work and Pensions' (also referred to as the DWP Reflections paper): a thought piece produced by the publication team as the last stage of the review, drawing on their wider experience with transformation initiatives.

This brief guide acts as an executive summary and primer to this package. It concludes with a navigation guide to help readers select a 'user journey' that will help them get the most value from these materials.

Key findings

The PDER offers a rich set of insights from sources including peer-reviewed evidence, practical case studies, personal reflections, and emergent hypotheses. This section takes a brief look at each paper through the lens of some of the key questions that matter to the case for public design.

What does good look like in terms of well-designed public policies and services?

Our 15 Design Thought Leaders described well-designed policies and services as those that:

- solve problems and deliver intended outcomes;

- work for the people who use them, and those who design and deliver them;

- are attractive, accessible, and align with people's needs;

- account for, and function effectively within, the context of communities, places, and wider public services;

- consider the natural and built environments of the present and future;

- work for government leaders and taxpayers; and

- can adapt, facilitate learning, and provide early warning signs of things going wrong.

What is 'public design' and how does it help deliver these outcomes?

In their Landscape Review our cross-disciplinary academic team set out a way of thinking about public design. This includes a list of practices (Table 1), a short working definition, and a set of key contributions to policymaking that they call 'intermediate benefits'.

Table 1: Public design practices

Practice	Example tools or methods
Understanding people's experiences of, and relations to, people and things in communities, systems and places	User journey or systems mapping based on interview or fieldwork data
Conceiving of and generating ideas	Workshops with citizens to generate ideas rooted in their lived experience
Visualising, materialising and giving more concrete form to ideas	Illustrations, maps and models
Integrating and synthesising perspectives, ideas and information	Problem statements
Enabling and facilitating co-creation and citizen involvement	Co-design workshops to explore problems and generate ideas
Enabling and facilitating multi-disciplinary and cross-organisational collaboration	Intensive 'sprint' workshops with experts, specialists and citizens to develop responses to a challenge
Practically exploring, iterating and experimenting	Prototyping and testing a mock-up service

The academic team's working definition offers a catalyst for discussion rather than a fixed or definitive view:

> "Public design is an iterative process of generating, legitimising, and achieving policy intent whilst de-risking operational delivery. It involves a range of practical, creative and collaborative approaches grounded in citizens' day-to-day experiences of - and relations to - people, objects, organisations, communities and places."

The academics propose that public design contributes value in the form of intermediate benefits including:

- Insight, particularly into people's experiences of and relationships to other people, communities and systems. This includes experiences of those delivering services

- Inspiration, and legitimacy, by engaging diverse voices and expertise in co-creation

- De-risked implementation, by surfacing assumptions and revealing the 'fit' between proposed solutions and existing real-world processes and infrastructures.

What are some examples of public design in the UK?

The Case Study Bank contains practical examples of design from multiple public bodies. This includes the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government describing how they adopted a user-centred approach to designing a digital service for managing local authority grants. This led to a culture shift in policymaking, encouraging more partnership and joined-up working. In another example, the Home Office worked to reduce 'spiking' offences and increase prosecutions, using visual journey and system maps to identify the best interventions. A historical example from the Department for Work and Pensions describes the programme to implement automatic enrolment into workplace pension schemes, showing how design practices can emerge without professional design input.

How can the public sector realise the benefits of design?

In addition to increasing design awareness and skills, the 15 Design Thought Leaders highlighted broader enabling conditions that are vital for design to achieve its full potential:

- Stable leadership that understands and values design, with senior jobs designed for longer tenure, and with transformation at their heart

- Investment in design standards and evidence, as well as research and development to explore new approaches

- Time and resources for deeply understanding problems and their system contexts

- Cross-disciplinary teams who partner with other organisations, users, and stakeholders in specific localities when appropriate

- Accountability mechanisms that enable people to seize time-sensitive design opportunities (including those arising from better monitoring of services), to experiment, and to share learning from failure as well as success

- A framework for cost-benefit analysis that accounts for whole-life or whole-system impacts and enables comprehensive appraisal of long-term, preventative strategies

- Flexible funding that allows for problem diagnosis, co-design, and iteration, as well as evaluation criteria that accommodate design practices

- An environment where people love to work, that engenders deep care for citizens and communities, and promotes human-centricity as a guiding principle

- Outcomes-focused approaches that cut across organisational and professional boundaries

- Place-based approaches that are sensitive to contextual factors, with appropriate involvement of multiple agencies at all levels of locality.

What helps turn promising ideas - like design - into lasting public sector change?

In the DWP Reflections paper, the Department's Human-Centred Design Science team draw on their experience of experimenting with design and other innovative approaches. From systems thinking to behavioural science, the team has tested and adapted many tools that augment human thinking and group decision-making - the cognitive science term is 'psychotechnologies'.

In their view, making the case for design should start with a rich understanding of the problem it addresses. One way of thinking about how policies go wrong and how public design might have helped is to consider cases of beleaguered policy programmes. The early days of the Child Support Agency, as described in King and Crewe's 'The Blunders of our Governments' (2013), is one such example, where test-and-learn approaches, stakeholder collaboration and a focus on user needs might well have helped.

Understanding how psychotechnologies work can help those introducing them to ensure that they do. The team hypothesise that public design improves decision-making by:

1. Expanding the range of data available, especially about people's experiences, system dynamics, and unintended consequences

2. Increasing the amount of data that people can consider simultaneously - through visualisation, prototyping, and collaborative sensemaking

3. Broadening the range of interpretive 'frames' available, enabling and flexing alternative interpretations of problems or situations.

Practical experience convinced the team that embedding and scaling psychotechnologies, such as design, is harder than it looks. Pitfalls they have observed include:

- Overclaiming: promising more than the evidence supports for a public sector context

- Tissue rejection: introducing innovation into environments unprepared to absorb it

- Pendulum swing: discarding existing practices wholesale in favour of new ones

- 'Cargo cult' adoption: mimicking surface features without substance.

To mitigate these risks for public design, the team share strategies that can help:

- Definitional clarity: a shared language to support alignment and rigour

- Ongoing learning: combining formal evaluation with reflective practice

- Attention to conditions: skills alone are not enough.

Commitment to enabling the right conditions will be vital for lasting change, from HR practices to funding models. Yet design must also adapt to public sector realities, including systems of scrutiny and accountability. The team suggests that design can help the public sector think better together, and act with greater empathy, precision, and impact, but doing it well takes considerable work. Design doesn't make things easy, it makes things possible.

What comes next?

These outputs cover the practical and the theoretical, the local and the global, the past, present and future, but there is much still to learn. In their reviews, the academic team call for further research to assess the contributions of design practices to innovation across the policy cycle, and to evaluate the maturity of public design in the UK. Research could also help answer wider questions about barriers to public design.

In the meantime, there is an opportunity to start that shared conversation about what it means to design public policies and services well, and how we can make that happen. This conversation need not exclude or assume a particular role for any professional group or function. Indeed, everyone has a role to play in building the public sector's capability and capacity, better meeting citizens' needs, and driving the outcomes that matter.

PDER outputs: a reader's guide and three suggested user journeys

- For readers with little to no background in public design, we recommend the Design Thought Leader report, followed by the Case Study Bank, then the academics' Landscape Review and the DWP Reflections paper. This provides expert insights into what public design is and why it matters as well as real-world examples, before consolidating with the academic overview and the perspective of a DWP team that has been heavily engaged in thinking about design.

- For readers with some experience of designing policies or services in the public sector, we recommend starting with the DWP Reflections paper, followed by the Design Thought Leader report, the Case Study Bank and the academics' Landscape Review. This user journey starts with a perspective of working inside government, then provides wider insights and examples, finishing with an academic consolidation.

- The Literature Reviews will interest those seeking a deeper academic dive into public design and public value. This includes readers looking for the technical detail of public design practices (particularly Papers 1 and 3), or those involved in analysing or appraising the value added by public design (especially Papers 2 and 3).