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Public Design for Transformational Change: International Perspectives from Design Thought Leaders

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[1] Public Design Evidence Review: Literature Review Paper 1 - Public Design. Available here: Public Design Evidence Review: Literature Review Paper 1 - Public Design (PDF) and here: Public Design Evidence Review: Literature Review Paper 1 - Public Design (HTML)

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Human-Centred Design Science team in the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) interviewed fifteen global pioneers in public design about the value of design in addressing public sector challenges. This report shares the findings from that research and forms a strand of the Public Design Evidence Review.

What ‘good design’ looks like in a public sector context

1. Well-designed policies and services solve problems and deliver intended outcomes. They are effective because they address root causes rather than symptoms and avoid moving problems elsewhere in the system.
2. Well-designed policies and services are attractive, accessible, and align with people’s needs. They make sense for the people that use them.

- Well-designed policies and services account for, and function effectively within, the context of communities, places and wider public services.

3. Well-designed policies and services account for the natural and built environments that people currently live within, support environmental goals, and deliver future environments that better meet people’s needs.

- Well-designed policies and services can evolve to meet the needs of future citizens and public officials. They are built to adapt, facilitate learning, and provide early warning signs of things going wrong.

4. Well-designed policies and services work for government leaders and taxpayers. They are preventative and reduce the need for future services.

Practices that lead to good public design

End-to-end collaboration across disciplines, professions and communities:

- Working well with people from different backgrounds and across specialisms
- Building relationships between people and government
- Involving citizens and service users so they feel invested in policy development.

"Designers work in teams…in order to do the creative, generative process of inventing stuff out of other stuff. It's very hard to sit alone in a room by yourself and do that" (Chelsea Mauldin).

Gathering deep insight into people, communities and systems, revealing how and why things currently work (or do not):

- Producing evidence about problems, including user experiences of policies and services, and the interaction of people with their environments
- Visualisation, which can help people zoom in to understand details and zoom out to understand the bigger picture
- Systems mapping, which manages complexity by breaking problems into parts. This also helps surface trade-offs and spot unintended consequences of ideas.

"It has to start from having a really great understanding of [people] and their context" (Julia Ross).

Creating and improving policies and services:

- Prototyping, iteration, and experimentation to develop and refine ideas
- Understanding root causes before finalising solutions and embedding feedback so ideas can be adapted in response to what works and what does not

- Removing barriers that may prevent or limit people's use of services.

"Going out and speaking to people, testing ideas, not jumping straight to solutions" (Cat Drew).

Personal and organisational capabilities and mindsets necessary for good public design

Skills relating to interpersonal and cognitive flexibility:

- Ability to relate to others from a range of different backgrounds
- Ability to listen and translate among different kinds of specialists to enable collaboration, user engagement, and co-design
- Ability to understand and communicate complexity, see multiple dimensions of a problem, and think in terms of systems
- Ability to think in non-linear, flexible ways, especially for generating and testing new ideas.

"You have to really be able to listen to people… be able to really work with people where they are… You have to be a very skilled translator" (Julia Ross).

Mindsets orientated towards problems and facilitating change:

- Looking at the world in ways that surface and clarify problems
- Disrupting 'traditional mindsets', asking questions and challenging norms
- Valuing learning that comes from working through problems.

"Wouldn't it be great if, when a problem comes up… the first thing the organisation says is, 'actually, have we understood the problem here?'... It's about how we look at things. It's about our mindset" (Julia Ross).

Organisational understanding of when to employ what types of design expertise, and leadership that creates conditions for success:

- A mix of people with general design awareness and those with specialist training, and the understanding to deploy each appropriately
- A wider operating environment that enables design approaches to be applied routinely and without encountering conflicting norms and practices.

"Ultimately, you can do great work on human-centred design. But for an organisation to implement it, it has to be human-centred itself" (Christian Bason).

Why public design matters and is valuable

Design can address increasingly complex problems in the public sector. It improves outcomes by helping people understand the many dimensions of problems to make better-informed decisions and use resources effectively.

1. Design can foster connection and rebuild trust, including between service providers and users.
2. Design can make the difference between the success and failure of public sector interventions. Thinking about people as parts of systems and testing ideas allows design to get to the root cause of problems faster.

"The way you design services radically impacts their success or failure, if you measure that by how effective they are for the people who use the services and operate them" (Julia Ross).

Enablers for good public design

Actions of senior leaders that contribute to the conditions needed for design:

- Staying in role long enough to manage complex and long-lasting change
- Seeing change and modernisation as key to their role
- Guiding organisations to focus on the problems they have been set up to solve
- Role modelling design for others
- Allocating resources to design approaches.

"I [can] care about design all day, all night. But if my executive directors and leadership above me don't, then it's game over" (Mari Nakano).

Organisational structures and incentives that support design:

- Commitment to learning by sharing successes and failures
- Collaborative ways of working
- Emphasis on preventing problems rather than addressing them after they have occurred
- Flexible funding arrangements, costing practices, and long-term investments
- Dedicated funding for research.

"We used to have innovation units, and they had no route to budget, power and decision making. And I think most design units are exactly the same… I don't see them positioned in the right place in the ecosystem" (Hilary Cottam).

Current state of public design

There has been progress in applying design approaches:

- Design is used more widely in government, particularly approaches that focus on user needs
- Design capability within government has grown, with more policy designers and service designers working inside government.

"We are seeing continuously really impressive work being done around the world… under the right conditions, we know how to do pretty massive internal systemic change in a human-centred way" (Christian Bason).

There are ongoing challenges with applying design approaches:

- Design approaches are not applied ambitiously enough
- Lip service is paid to design without fully understanding or committing to it
- When partially applied, design can create a false sense of action or hide underlying problems
- Convincing new senior leaders of the importance of design uses up designer's time and distracts them from their core work
- Designers without experience in government are not always prepared for the complexity of challenges in the public sector.

"My fear is that if we focus too much on making the experience of current services more pleasant, we fail to see the bigger issues that drive substantive improvements" (Marco Steinberg).

Changes needed in organisations for public design to achieve its potential

Investment in design capacity and capability:

- Diverse teams with cross-sector expertise to maximise public design capability, including bringing in expertise from the private sector
- Better standards and profile for design to maximise impact
- Investment in building the evidence base for design and increasing monitoring of services to further learning and to maximise performance, including the fast identification of problems and improvement opportunities

"It's important to bring people from the outside with deep experience. You need people with the lived experience of making things, not just the theory of making things. They will bring different references, mindsets, and ways of working to a team and will help challenge established ways of working" (Marco Steinberg).

Integration of design across the whole public sector:

- Costing and appraisal processes that support design approaches
- Place-based approaches to co-create and iterate solutions to cross-cutting needs, taking into account contextual factors and multiple authorities and agencies
- Outcome-focused approaches[2] to maximise collaboration across professional and organisational boundaries

[2] This would certainly include "missions" as used by the current administration. These interviews were conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 before this approach became a dominant narrative.

- Organisational design and transformation programmes that foreground the conditions for effective design.

"You can do great design projects and create great concepts… but for them to stay and flourish… you probably do have to embrace increasingly a redesign of how you organise… that is centred around ways in which people can collaborate meaningfully to solve problems" (Christian Bason).

Human-centricity as a core value and principle for the public sector:

- Make government a place where people love to work and that drives empathy and deep care for others
- Ensure more people from affected groups and communities are involved in government
- Enable and motivate public servants to see how what they do matters.

"[A] deep culture shift which I would love to see occur, where everyone really believed in government that their primary responsibility was to design things that were easy and satisfying and meaningful" (Chelsea Mauldin).

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Public Design Evidence Review sought to explore:

- the role of design in government (including creating a prototype definition of ‘public design’);
- the value that public design can generate; and
- design capability in the public sector, including the barriers and enablers to realising its value.

This report is one strand of evidence gathered by the Review in support of these ambitions. It presents findings from interviews with experts in the creation of effective public policies, services, infrastructure, and built environments. We sought to select individuals who not only put design at the heart of public services and create the conditions for it to flourish, but also showcase design’s potential to transform the public sector.

The research objectives were to:

- report the views of global experts who are advancing public design;
- explore the role of design in managing and addressing public sector challenges;
- uncover indicators of quality in public design (when public design is ‘done well’);
- expand on what is currently known about conditions that support design or limit it;
- generate diverse perspectives on the current and future potential of design.

1.2 Methodology

The Human-Centred Design Science team in the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were responsible for this strand of the Review. We interviewed fifteen global pioneers in the field of public design.

The research team included Dr Carla Groom, Head of the Human-Centred Design Science team, and colleagues Cate Fisher, Dr Kayleigh Edmundson, and Dr Russell Henshaw. The team has a strong background in social research, both within and outside government.

1.3 Fieldwork and sampling strategy

We selected participants with the help of wider review partners. We aimed to include a mix of participants with different professional backgrounds and experiences. The final sample included public design pioneers from across the UK, the US, Ireland, Denmark, and Finland. Participants have collective experience of applying design in central government, local government, health services, design consultancies, and other settings. A short summary of participants and their professional backgrounds[3] is listed in Table 1. Full biographies can be found in Appendix A.

[3] Current role captures participants' roles at the time of interview.

Table 1. Participants and their professional backgrounds

Name	Current or Past Role/Affiliation
Dr Christian Bason	Co-founder of Transition Collective, a public-purpose enterprise; previously CEO of the non-profit Danish Design Centre and Director of MindLab, the Danish Government's innovation team
Andrew Besford	Non-Executive Director and Chair of the Digital Committee at NHS Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Marianne Cassidy	Assistant Secretary General of Public Service Transformation, within Department of Public Expenditure & Reform, Government of Ireland
Dr Hilary Cottam OBE	Social entrepreneur, author and innovator, awarded an OBE for services to the welfare state. Honorary Professor at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) and trustee of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Kevin Cunnington	Previous Director General of the Government Digital Service, Global Head of Online for Vodafone Group and Business Transformation Group and Director General at the Department for Work and Pensions
Lou Downe	Founder and Director of The School of Good Services. Previously Director of Housing and Land Transformation at Homes England and Director of Design and Service Standards at Government Digital Service
Cat Drew	Chief Design Officer for UK Design Council, and co-founder of Policy Lab, HM Government
Matt Edgar	Director of Digital Urgent and Emergency Care, NHS England; previously Associate Director of Design and User Research, NHS Digital
Dr Catherine Howe	Chief Executive at Adur District and Worthing Borough Council, and Chair of national charity Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
Janet Hughes	Programme Director for the Future Farming and Countryside Programme (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs)

Chelsea Mauldin	Co-founder and Executive Director of the Public Policy Lab, an NYC-based non-profit organisation
Sadie Morgan OBE	Founding Director of dRMM, a Stirling Prize-winning architecture practice. Awarded an OBE for services to design advocacy in the built environment. Co-founder of the Quality of Life Foundation, an independent body aimed at raising wellbeing through improvement of the built environment
Mari Nakano	Design and systems strategist freelance consultant based in New York. Previously worked as Design Director for the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, and as Design and People Interaction Lead at the UNICEF Office of Innovation
Julia Ross	Managing Director of Julia Ross Consulting. Recently retired after more than 30 years in the NHS, most recently as a Chief Executive and Integrated Care System Leader
Marco Steinberg	Founder and CEO of Snowcone & Haystack, a strategic design practice focused on helping governments and leaders to innovate. Professor of Practice in Strategic and Industrial Design at Aalto University

We conducted individual online interviews with each of the participants during December 2023 and January 2024. We took a semi-structured approach to the interviews using a flexible topic guide containing three broad sections (see Appendix B).

Each interview lasted around an hour, and was recorded and transcribed for analytical purposes.

1.4 Analysis

We undertook thematic analysis to identify common patterns (or themes) in the interview data, focusing on areas of broad agreement across participants, as well as key quotes. We used a combination of Microsoft Excel and NVivo to support the analytical process.

We shared draft copies of the report with participants to sense-check findings and offer them an opportunity to contribute additional comments. The final report includes material from both the interviews and participant feedback on the draft report. Participants provided consent for the use of all quotes and views attributed to them. A more detailed account of our analysis can be found in Appendix C.

1.5 Caveats

The process of thematic analysis required us, as the research team, to apply our subjective judgement as to what constitutes a common theme in the data. Doing so was a challenging process, especially with a sample of participants deliberately selected to include diverse viewpoints and experiences and who therefore used different language and framings when discussing similar points. Additionally, reporting on these themes clearly and concisely inevitably required us to use language and ways of structuring the information that individual participants had not (explicitly) used themselves.

By following best practice in qualitative analysis – including extensive discussion and iteration of analytical frameworks within the research team – and through follow-up dialogue with participants, we hope to have been as faithful and accurate as possible in our use of the valuable insights they shared. However, it would be impossible to remove the role of the researcher in interpreting and creating a narrative out of those collective insights in this sort of qualitative study.

Participants spoke about design in multiple ways. For example, they referred to design variously as a profession, a form of practice, or as a way of approaching problems. Participants' views on design also differed from one another. Readers should note that we use the word design to reflect the many ways participants made use of it.

Readers should also note:

- The international nature of the sample means references to government and the public sector do not necessarily relate to the UK specifically.

- Throughout the report, when we refer in general terms to participants thinking or mentioning something we do not necessarily mean all participants. There was diversity in views and many of the themes were only mentioned by a subset of participants.
- Throughout the interviews, we prompted participants to talk about ‘good’ public design. The characteristics, practices and capabilities they described therefore represent a judgement about what good design involves and requires, rather than an account of standard design practice in the public sector or elsewhere.

1.6 Report structure

The report has five main sections:

- Section 2 contains participants’ views on what good public design means to them.
- Section 3 outlines the value that having well-designed policies and services generates.
- Section 4 explores the organisational conditions that support good public design.
- Section 5 sets out views on the current state of public design.
- Section 6 covers participants’ visions for the future of good public design, and contains suggestions for how we might collectively move public design forwards.

Throughout the report, selected verbatim quotes are used to illustrate and add depth to the themes.

2. What good public design means

We asked participants what ‘good public design’ means to them. We grouped their answers as follows:

- Section 2.1 presents the characteristics[4] of well-designed public policies and services.
- Section 2.2 describes the practices[5] that help to generate well-designed policies and services.
- Section 2.3 covers the capabilities and mindsets[6] associated with design practices.
- Section 2.4 considers the differences between good design in the public and private sector.

[4] We use ‘characteristics’ in its broadest sense to mean the key elements of well-designed policies and services as described by participants. We do not attempt to strictly distinguish components of well-designed policies and services from outcomes of well-designed policies and services.

[5] Participants spoke of a wide range of practices that, individually or in their combination, can help design better policies and services. The success of these practices (the extent to which they lead to desired outcomes) likely depends on the capability of individuals performing them (Section 2.3) and wider contextual factors (Section 4).

[6] We did not ask participants about the exact relationship between practices, capabilities and mindsets, but participants did talk generally about capabilities and mindsets as enablers of good design practice.

2.1 Characteristics of well-designed public policies and services

Participants identified a range of characteristics of well-designed policies and services.

Well-designed policies and services work to solve a problem and deliver intended outcomes

- Services are functional, effective and achieve their stated policy intent
- They address root causes of a problem rather than just tackling symptoms
- They avoid moving problems elsewhere in the system:

“When people don’t have a comprehensive view, and aren’t behaving in a comprehensive way, then they are unaware of the unintended consequences of their decisions… one thing which seems like it’s common sense, and it’s a good thing, actually has an unintended consequence somewhere else… in the overall picture, it’s actually working against what you’re trying to do” (Marco Steinberg).

Well-designed policies and services work for the people who are going to use them

- Services are clear, useful and accessible to all:

“Every single example of good design in government has come about through designing for accessibility first… If you designed for people who struggle the most, you basically make it easier for everyone to use that thing” (Lou Downe).

- Communications and buildings are attractive and memorable:

"I think good design is a process that really underpins the way in which we improve people's quality of life… that can be through buildings, it can be through the chairs we sit on. It can be through the way that we design a journey… I think it's the process of putting together complex issues… curating them in ways that are fit for purpose, useful, don’t cost the earth, but also joyful and delightful” (Sadie Morgan).

- Interactions and services provide a positive experience
- Systems and channels are joined up and “talk to each other on behalf of citizens” (Kevin Cunnington)
- They provide seamless user journeys across different policy areas, with life events as key focal points:

“People’s interactions with government don’t occur at single moments using single channels” (Chelsea Mauldin).

“[It’s] not the job of citizens to navigate and find their way between different organisational structures or entities” (Christian Bason).

- Services are human-centred. Where possible, they are built on relationships with individuals and prioritise people’s growth and learning (and thus go beyond mere transactions):

“We need to shift to a developmental philosophy, [where] the purpose of the economy, the purpose of government is to help people to grow” (Hilary Cottam).

Well-designed policies and services work for the people who design and deliver them

- Positive experiences result in high-quality, integrated and inclusive working environments
- Staff can access and easily use systems and services to achieve their outcomes
- Optimal working experiences create positive ripple effects:

“The service that you offer to patients [is] dependent on the experience of the staff” (Andrew Besford).

- Outcomes are operationally deliverable.

Well-designed policies and services work in the context of communities, places and wider public services

- Services are meaningful, fit for purpose, and based on a developed understanding of people's lives
- They are integrated, and work effectively within, wider public services
- They account for local factors and how these interact with people's experiences.

Well-designed policies and services account for the natural and built environment

- They use resources sustainably and focus on the "footprint of consumption" (Marco Steinberg)
- They encourage positive climate behaviours when relevant
- They strengthen connections between people, communities, and place.

Well-designed policies and services work for future citizens and public officials

- Systems contain parts that are changeable and adaptable
- Systems optimise for growth and change through the creation of positive learning and feedback loops. This presents opportunities for interventions, improvements and iterations:

"[Good design involves] designing something that the future can design" (Lou Downe).

- They provide early warning signs of things going wrong:

"If you look back at the things that have cost the state a lot of money, I don't think it necessarily was [due to] the lack of planning. If anything, it was that the planning was done over such a long and protracted period of time. So that when it came to the

delivery, it was over-complicated and out of date… it was thought of in a static environment as opposed to how it will interact with other things… capability [for] that kind of agile way of working, of learning, of iterating, that's where we need to bring ourselves to be a lot more comfortable" (Marianne Cassidy).

Well-designed policies and services work for government leaders and taxpayers

- They are preventative and reduce the need for more services in the future
- They make government more approachable and 'human'
- They offer long-term benefits and good value for money:

"We have this really weird… cultural idea that good design is decorative and must cost more, but good design is actually about understanding function [and so should] not cost more" (Hilary Cottam).

2.2 Public design practices

We use practices[7] as a general term to refer to all the things that people do in order to create well-designed policies and services, including:

- Activities
- Approaches
- Processes
- Methods

[7] Participants did not use this term themselves. However, our analysis suggests this is an effective way of grouping the range of practical undertakings mentioned by participants in response to the question: 'what makes good design?'

- Ways of working

Participants talked about the above as fundamental to the development of well-designed public policies and services.

We identified three main areas[8] of public design practice from the interviews:

- Section 2.2.1 describes practices that support end-to-end collaboration across disciplines, professions and communities.
- Section 2.2.2 covers deep insight into people, communities and systems to understand an issue.
- Section 2.2.3 focuses on creating and improving policies and services through ideation, iteration and testing.

2.2.1 End-to-end collaboration

This theme describes collaborative design practices and how these produce well-designed policies and services. In addition to the practices set out below, participants emphasised that good design is produced by teams, and rarely by individuals working in isolation:

“Designers work in teams… in order to do the creative, generative process of inventing stuff out of other stuff. It’s very hard to sit alone in a room by yourself and do that” (Chelsea Mauldin).

“You need different people to come up with different solutions” (Sadie Morgan).

[8] Although we think these groupings are useful to report what participants told us, in reality there is significant overlap between them. Collaboration, especially, was considered by many participants to be foundational to the whole design ethos and process. For simplicity, we present the tangible activities that make up design practices and the effects they bring about.

Participants spoke about the importance of collaborating with people from a variety of backgrounds. Within government, this could mean working with people who make policy, deliver services, or key government bodies. Outside government, this could mean people who directly use services, or citizens and broader communities that might be impacted by what governments do.

Design practices include people through co-design

Participants spoke about the importance of including people in the design process:

“[Designing in the public sector] has to be about designing with people, not designing for them” (Matt Edgar).

Participants stressed this goes beyond consultation because stakeholders and users are actively involved in the development of policies and services.

Design practices involve multi-disciplinary perspectives

Participants commented that working with a diverse range of people means handling multiple perspectives:

"Understand the problem from all the perspectives... it actually has to work for all the people with... [a] stake in delivering the thing" (Julia Ross).

Participants explained that managing different perspectives is important because policymaking is complex and multifaceted. Several participants felt this to be a strength of design because it allows people to explore, contrast and challenge ideas:

“You need some people with the deep vertical expertise, but you need everybody to have some degree of perspective and expertise… that would at least get them to ask the right questions to bring the experts in, in the right way. You’ve got to create that space… in which that is a normal way of operating and not seen as a threat, and it's exciting to have those people come and want to get involved in your work because they're going to bring a kind of different perspective for you and some different value than you’re able to bring” (Janet Hughes).

Design practices mean managing relationships

Some participants thought that it is important for designers to promote conditions of psychological safety, so that problems can be openly discussed. Other participants pointed out that strong relationship skills allowed designers to build trust with others:

“I always go back to the importance of relationship building. Whether you're a designer or not you need to be incredible at building relationships and maintaining trust. That's the biggest part of government” (Mari Nakano).

Design practices work by engaging people

Participants thought that collaborative design practices work because they allow policymakers to build relationships between people and government:

“[Design is a way of doing things that will] connect you to the public in new ways” (Hilary Cottam).

“If you have good relationships it results in better… designs and solutions” (Mari Nakano).

Participants noted that collaboration works by narrowing the distance between policymakers and service users. Reducing this gap means citizens and their needs are better represented in government. Engaging with users also results in well-designed, accessible, and attractive policies and services:

“People are going to be more aware of it. They’re going to want to use it. Take-up is going to be greater” (Cat Drew).

“People who are using it are seeing that their system is working better” (Andrew Besford).

Design practices work by empowering people

Participants felt that collaborative practices work because they involve people in decisions, allowing them to feel invested in the development of policies:

“To get people to take collective responsibility to make these things happen… they have to feel they are part of the solution” (Sadie Morgan).

"The process of having co-designed that with people will increase trust and people's agency to have a say in what they're doing” (Cat Drew).

Collaborative practices also help people value their work:

“It's more of an empowering process, not just for the people, the kind of the users are involved, but also for the workforce as well” (Cat Drew).

Participants also pointed out that collaboration works by bringing in perspectives that otherwise might not be included:

“In a room where there might be the executive director and a junior staff member, if that person's bringing in some bright moment or an insight… we've fostered them into the space” (Mari Nakano).

2.2.2 Deep insight into people, communities and systems

This theme describes design practices that generate deep insight and how these produce well-designed policies and services:

“It has to start from having a really great understanding of [people] and their context. In my experience, that's only ever been the thing I've managed to use to persuade people to do something they might not first have thought to do… to show how it's going to address the things that really matter to them” (Julia Ross).

Design practices define problems

Participants stressed that good design responds to context and targets problems:

“[A marker of good quality design is] absolutely that it addresses a carefully identified and understood problem, and that we understand the problem from [...] all the perspectives” (Julia Ross)

This means identifying the root cause of problems and helping others recognise them:

“Let's understand what is the problem that is driving this, not what's the symptom” (Julia Ross).

"Good design is actually about understanding function" (Hilary Cottam).

Participants referred to the use of discovery phases to examine problems by working through policy intent, constraints and project goals.

Design practices create evidence

Participants spoke about the importance of creating different kinds of evidence. Some described this is as necessary to justify taking a design-informed approach:

“You have to be able to do that and categorically prove your point that there is a better way of doing this based on the evidence, and that evidence might be user research, or it might be digital analytics, or it might be something else” (Kevin Cunnington).

Participants described case studies and storytelling as compelling forms of evidence that showcase how design works using contextual examples.

Design practices involve user research

Participants identified user research as a core design practice:

“Good design in the public sector is all about having the right… focus on who your users really are” (Matt Edgar).

“Start with the users and the rest will follow” (Andrew Besford).

Examples of user research that participants mentioned include identifying user needs or mapping user journeys. Participants also referenced other kinds of real-world observation, such as lived experience research and ethnography, as methods for understanding users and their relationships to their environments and communities.

Design practices visualise ideas

Participants pointed to the strength of design to visualise ideas and simplify complex issues. In some cases, participants described how well-designed visuals can be used to communicate ideas that are complicated to express in data or text:

“I can’t understand things unless they’re explained through graphs or images. And most policy is very text based, which is fine. But … it’s quite narrow, focused. [Visualisation is] contextualising” (Sadie Morgan).

“I've always been a really, really visual person, I've always loved graphic design... to be able to present data in different ways to engage people and to make things clear and visible” (Cat Drew).

In other cases, participants spoke about the power of visuals to allow people to experience ideas in tangible ways:

“We went and did some film ethnography… and then we played it back to a session with the minister and civil servants. And what was interesting about it is that most people in that department got the train to work every single day, so they commuted. They wouldn't even think about any of it because they just do that as a regular kind of experience… and we did research with someone who had a visual impairment, a mum with a kid and someone trying to cross from Sheffield to Manchester… we took films with them and there was one film which just completely jolted everyone's experience” (Cat Drew).

Design practices work with systems

Participants emphasised the importance of thinking about policies and services in terms of systems:

“We looked at stroke from cradle to grave… and so began realising that this was actually not a policy challenge. This is not a medical challenge. This is not a business challenge. This was fundamentally a design challenge. It was a challenge that fell at the intersection of all of those perspectives and dynamics, and so I think that was the first

time I really realised that there was a role for design in taking a much more systems approach to things like health care" (Marco Steinberg).

Participants referred to the process of mapping and visualising systems to understand complex problems and identify points of intervention:

"How do you create some representation or understanding in the minds of multiple people, who have different kinds of roles in complex policy-delivery systems, so that everybody can understand what that system is" (Chelsea Mauldin).

Participants felt this was important because of the many elements that affect the success of policies and services:

"You've got to be able to operate it so that it produces the policy outcomes that it was designed to, and that's not one dimensional. All the parts of the system have to work together to produce that" (Kevin Cunnington).

Design practices work by helping people see new dimensions of a problem

Participants spoke about how design practices help people see things in different ways:

"Designers… can be very useful in helping people who are inside of those systems perceive the system that they operate inside of" (Chelsea Mauldin).

Systems-level perspectives help people zoom out and see connections:

"What we did is printed out a massive systems map [with many interconnected elements] and put it on the floor. And we literally got civil servants to walk across different parts of the system to see how an intervention over in Department for Work and Pensions was going to have an impact on Department for Education. So, for example, DWP really wanted […] people not to retire early. So, obviously, a couple of extra years gives you a massive saving. But Department for Education colleagues really wanted grandparents to retire early because it meant that they could look after the kids, so that mums could basically return to work. So, you've got all these different kind of conflicts across the system" (Cat Drew).

Human-level perspectives help people zoom in to detail and see how others experience policies and services:

“I did a bit of work with Baroness Newlove… to set up a program around active communities and antisocial behaviour and her approach was, as you can imagine, to go and speak to people. And so, I was lucky enough to go with her around the country… and really through her eyes understand people's lived experience. So, that was a real moment for me realising that actually you could not design public policy unless you had a real understanding of the people which in Whitehall it was so difficult to get… and then, I suppose, I came to what I now know as design through that lens” (Cat Drew).

Design practices work by managing complexity

Participants described how deep insight leads to well-designed policies and services by helping to clarify and evidence problems:

“So, you've got all these different kind of conflicts across the system. [Design is] an approach to developing an understanding of what the problem is, what the root causes are, and bringing in the right people across the system” (Cat Drew).

Participants identified that design practices like visualisation and systems thinking help simplify and break down problems into manageable parts. Viewing problems holistically also helps manage complexity by identifying relationships between component parts and surfacing trade-offs or unintended consequences.

2.2.3 Creating and improving policies and services

This theme covers design practices for exploring and testing ideas and how these produce well-designed policies and services:

“Design is useful when you're trying to show that it's different from a traditional approach, and I think that's kind of quite important…to show what's different about it. So, going out and speaking to people, testing ideas, not jumping straight to solutions” (Cat Drew).

Design practices create ideas

Participants spoke about design practices that help people explore ideas and generate different options.

Participants referred to structured ideation techniques that allow people to develop and structure ideas through creative practices. Example activities that participants mentioned included mapping exercises and sketching sessions that allow people to set out possible ideas.

Participants also spoke about design sprints where teams collaborate to develop ideas in short, time-boxed periods. Other participants mentioned events like service jams where people come together over a series of days to develop ideas about how to address a specific challenge.

Design practices test what works through prototyping and iteration

Participants stressed the importance of testing to work through multiple iterations of an idea:

“You test them, you amend them, you test again, you amend, you test again… that's what I mean by that rapid cycle process” (Julia Ross).

Approaches like prototypes help designers to see how ideas work in a real-world context and how people interact with designs. One example of prototyping that participants mentioned was ‘living labs’:

“Living labs were very in vogue with a lot of the earlier Horizon Europe funding… they might have four or five funded programs and then they might have a living lab where the outputs of each of those programs were combined in place and examined… to have the capacity not only to implement the things… but also then you go in and observe what actually happens when we put all of these ideas in one place” (Catherine Howe).

Participants also emphasised the importance of strong feedback loops during initial implementation to enable continual learning and iteration of designs. They felt that this

need to continually reflect and refine in response to real world data is currently often lost by the time policies and services reach the piloting stage, and that that is a weakness in standard practice:

“Right through the scaling process for me, you want to continue to have that innovation approach where you're learning, where you're measuring and learning and testing and tweaking… until you’re at full roll out and embedding something that makes sense” (Julia Ross).

Design practices work through innovation

Participants spoke about how testing and experimenting allow people to solve problems differently and create new approaches:

“Today's big challenges are fundamentally creative challenges. They require discovery and leveraging knowledge in new ways. They involve creating things that don't exist yet” (Marco Steinberg).

Design practices can improve how people and organisations learn

“Helping them become more curious, more open-minded, more experimental, more learning” (Christian Bason).

Participants also connected innovation with the way design practices disrupt existing approaches and surface alternatives. For some participants this disruption has the potential to make fundamental change possible rather than only improving process efficiency and work ‘in the margins’:

“Not just making the current system a faster, slicker version of itself, but fundamentally creating a new, more inclusive and regenerative system… thinking what the service needs to do in the first place” (Cat Drew).

Design practices work by helping to identify problems early on

Participants talked about how design practices can make the difference between success and failure of policies and services. They ensure that root causes and contextual factors are well understood before solutions are finalised:

“One of the things I suppose I've become most zealous about, it's knowing that we really understand the problem and [are] really starting from the problem. But staying with the problem till we've got a really good sense of what the problem really is. What drives it? What the causal factors are, what the contextual factors are, and so on” (Julia Ross).

Testing and learning mean that solutions are appropriate and effective:

“We identified two particular groups who would likely need an inclusive service, and that was people with low digital access needs, but also people with low trust in government. And so having identified that group, we could test with people from that group every week in the very accelerated design process that led to delivering a COVID pass service that worked for everyone” (Matt Edgar).

Detailed testing also means people can learn quickly about what works and what doesn’t in practice, adapt their designs accordingly, and prevent failure at a larger scale or later on:

“We're having to think so much harder about what are the negative consequences, what are the backfiring things” (Matt Edgar).

Design practices work by saving time and resources

Participants described how design practices improve policies and services by saving time and resources:

“If you design things properly, and you do it early on… it'll save you money, it'll save you time” (Sadie Morgan).

Some participants connected this with the ability of design practices to streamline or reduce demand in services. This is because design can make services more accessible, efficient, and effective.

Participants also stressed that design practices can make work easier for public servants:

“Good design infrastructure… is allowing civil servants to be able to respond to the constant crisis that we're facing of needing new services, needing to change services and having very little time and money to do it” (Lou Downe).

Design practices work by removing barriers

Participants described how design practices improve policies and services by making change attractive. This can involve removing barriers that people face at work:

“It's about solving the problem or addressing the challenge or helping people progress in whatever situation they're in” (Christian Bason).

Design practices also remove barriers to services by making them intuitive and accessible:

“Every single example of good design in government has come about through designing for accessibility” (Lou Downe).

Participants pointed out that design practices reframe perceptions about change:

“Design is about making things and making things that people can experience that can change their perception of what is and is not possible” (Marco Steinberg).

2.3 Capabilities and mindsets for design

This section looks at the capabilities needed to practice public design well. It focuses on the:

- skills and knowledge;

- beliefs and assumptions in the form of ‘mindsets’;
- specialisms; and
- organisational conditions

…that equip people and organisations to practice design well.

2.3.1 Design skills and knowledge

Participants spoke of a mix of technical and personal skills that support design practices.

The ability to relate to others from a range of different backgrounds and professions

Participants felt that practices involving collaboration, user engagement and co-design (Section 2.2.1) were supported by the ability to relate to others from a range of different backgrounds and professions using skills like facilitation and deep listening. Sadie Morgan, for example, characterised design as a kind of ‘curation’ where the designer plays a role that enables others to come together and combine their different skills. The ‘designer as facilitator’ aids communication and collaboration by translating the ‘languages’ of different groups and types of people.

Julia Ross captured the many skills that effective designers (and especially design leaders) are simultaneously deploying in their work, commenting:

“You have to really be able to listen to people… be able to really work with people where they are… [from the most deprived families to boards and directors]. You have to be a very skilled translator. I suppose you have to be able to change yourself at any point to be able to work in one context or another in an effective, meaningful way” (Julia Ross).

Participants spoke at length about emotional intelligence, curiosity, playfulness, and empathy, which they described as important for building trust and discussing ideas openly.

The ability to understand and communicate complexity

Alongside the ability to relate, participants cited the ability to understand and communicate complexity as a core design skill. Relatedly, being able to see problems in 3D was considered to help people "literally see a process… and visualise that process in their mind and then articulate that outwards" (Mari Nakano).

The ability to think in terms of systems

The ability to think in terms of systems can play a similar role in the mapping of problems:

"Help people who are inside of systems perceive the system that they operate inside of, identify the points of intervention in those systems. And then actually design the products, tools, behaviours that can be deployed inside of that system to try to create behavioural change" (Chelsea Mauldin).

The ability to think in non-linear, flexible ways

Participants thought skills in breaking down problems are supported by the ability to think in non-linear, flexible ways. This enables practitioners to explore ideas:

"[Be] wildly divergent in their ability to explore and generate lots of different options and ideas… to do that really structured idea generation… and [I] see that as a professional specialism. And then to bring it to life in ways that people can really understand and engage with" (Matt Edgar).

A high degree of skill in digital and data

For some participants, design practices require a high degree of skill in digital and data: “what transformation are we doing that isn’t deeply entangled in digital and data?... that’s the water in which we swim” (Matt Edgar).

2.3.2 Design mindsets

Design mindsets are a way of approaching problems

In speaking about design as a way of approaching (looking at and thinking about) problems, participants alluded (implicitly and explicitly) to a ‘design mindset’. We use ‘mindset’ in this report to refer to the attitudes, beliefs and principles that inform a design approach.

“Wouldn’t it be great if, when a problem comes up… the first thing the organisation says is, actually, have we understood the problem here?... It’s about how we look at things. It’s about our mindset” (Julia Ross).

Christian Bason cited the work of Kamil Michlewski[9] who developed the idea of a ‘design attitude’ by studying successful design studios and agencies. ‘Design attitude’ refers to the shared values that define the working culture of design organisations. This echoes Christan Bason’s own view:

“[Design] is more about how you view the world, how you approach problem solving. It’s more an attitude or sensibility… what I call ‘designerly’… doesn’t necessarily mean that everybody’s a trained designer or that you have a diploma from a design school… And it doesn’t tell me you use a design process every time… but it’s how you view your work” (Christian Bason).

[9] Michlewski, K. (2016). Design attitude. Routledge.

The design mindset disrupts ‘traditional mindsets’

Some participants said that the design mindset disrupts ‘traditional mindsets’. This is because designers need to be curious, have the courage to ask questions, and challenge norms. This attitude is accompanied by the need to embrace the importance of change despite such change often being ‘painful’.

Change, design, and digital mindsets

Some participants talked about the overlaps between change, design, and digital mindsets:

“Real crossover between a digital mindset and a design mindset… I don’t want to say that everybody under 25 or under 30 is a designer but, in a way, I do think that” (Hilary Cottam).

Design is a way of learning

Other participants spoke about design in terms of a continuous learning mindset or an intuitive approach to learning:

“What is design? It’s just learning… design is having a hypothesis or having an urge to do something different, exploring the situation, trying something out. Learning from that, iterating, ultimately deciding ‘this is what we are going to do’” (Christian Bason).

Design helps personal learning and organisational growth

The orientation towards learning that design helps to cultivate may accelerate personal learning and organisational growth:

“[I] came into a digital space but very much with a human-centred design mindset going into it… I naturally transitioned… from ‘how do I design this bit of technology?’ to actually ‘what’s the whole operating context?’” (Catherine Howe).

“A lot of the public servants that work with us… they want to do the work, but they also want to understand the frameworks we are applying. And a lot of times, after they get into it and they start to really embody design, then they actually start to become more curious about the history and approaches of service design, of human-centred design, of design thinking because they believe this will deepen their own professional value and effectiveness” (Mari Nakano).

2.3.3 Design as a specialist capability

Some participants expressed the view that, whilst it’s possible for most people to develop some level of design awareness and capability, practicing design at a high level requires years of honing and mastering design skills:

“The analogy I make is it’s a great idea if everyone takes a CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and first aid workshop… but that does not mean that then everyone should then operate to remove your liver… there is a difference between having an awareness of a set of baseline skills that any member of the public can use, and being someone who has devoted their professional life to honing their skill set, doing a set of specific activities with specific kinds of tools” (Chelsea Mauldin).

A key capability for all is understanding the case for design and when to bring in specialist expertise

Participants suggested that a key capability for all is understanding the case for design and when to bring in specialist expertise. This is because when design is seen as a discrete capability, something done ‘over there’ by others, it risks missing opportunities for non-specialists to use design in their work.

“[A problem we have with capability is that] everybody thinks that they don’t need to worry about it, because the professionals have got it over there, and therefore [it] is not their job… the bigger, more difficult aspect of capability, to both define and bring about, is how you get everybody to have the kind of T-shaped idea that you need some people with the deep vertical expertise but you need everybody to have some degree of

perspective and expertise on this that would at least get them to ask the right questions to bring the experts in, in the right way" (Janet Hughes).

"Not every generalist can be a designer… Yes, you can upskill public servants… but there's a number of levels that capability has to be grown… first, you have to upskill generalist public servants to understand when there is a case for design and when to get expertise for design, then you have to grow or bring in design expertise" (Marianne Cassidy).

2.3.4 Organisational conditions for design capability

Design capabilities and mindsets alone are not enough to successfully embed design approaches

Several participants noted that design capabilities and mindsets alone are not enough to successfully embed design approaches. The wider operating environment also needs to support these approaches so they can be applied routinely. Participants pointed to the structural enablers and incentives that need to be in place for people to apply capability, mainstream design mindsets, and reduce the risk of embedding design approaches in isolated pockets or in continual conflict with wider organisational norms and practices.

Senior leadership and "organisational practice" are central to the successful widespread adoption of design approaches

As is reported in Section 4, participants spoke in detail about how senior leadership and "organisational practice" (that is, organisational capability and conditions) are central to the successful widespread adoption of design approaches:

"For most people, this is actually an intuitive way of working, which is blocked by the current culture. Release everybody's inner design talent by shifting the culture" (Hilary Cottam).

“Ultimately, you can do great work on human-centred design. But for an organisation to implement it, it has to be human-centred itself” (Christian Bason).

2.4 The distinction between good public design and good commercial design

We asked participants to talk about whether, and in what ways, good public design differs from commercial design. This is important for two reasons. First, it helps clarify what public design means. Second, it helps to clarify how design approaches developed in a commercial setting may need to be adapted for public design challenges.[10]

Many participants emphasised key differences between the public and private sectors arising from differences in the goals of design and the complexity or nature of the problems being addressed. This affects the kinds of design skills needed as a result.

The private sector tends to be better optimised for good design

The broad (although not universal) view amongst participants was that incentives to make money and increase user demand for their services and products means that the private sector tends to be better optimised for good design.

Largely, participants felt that the private sector has:

- The ability to do things in smaller chunks
- The ability to ‘fail’ with far lower risk when developing new solutions
- Different benchmarks for ethics and financial accountability
- Greater flex to invest in the long-term because it is not constrained by political cycles or ‘use it or lose it’ financial year-end pressures

[10] Recognising that many commercial organisations work with, through and for the public sector in order to achieve government goals.

- A more stable senior leadership
- More money to play with
- A greater incentive to fix mistakes and stay on top of learning due to the financial risks incurred by failure
- A “lightness of foot” (Sadie Morgan) less hindered by change and approval processes.

“Private sector designers can create… a gilded cage… if you can control the environment, you can create something perfect” (Catherine Howe).

“[Government gets] the worst, most difficult, more intractable, most complex problems which have zero chance of generating any revenue” (Chelsea Mauldin).

“It might not be as pretty [as elsewhere], but what we’re doing [in the public sector] is really hard. What we’re doing is often helping people who may be at the worst time in their lives” (Andrew Besford).

Public sector design involves greater complexity

Participants generally recognised that public sector design involves greater complexity. For example, in some cases the public sector aims to create less rather than more demand. Marco Steinberg's comment that “the best healthcare is no healthcare” highlights that sometimes the optimal outcome is to prevent a need arising in the first place. This points to the complexity of systems where the goal is to reduce demand for a service.

Participants said that much of the complexity in the public sector arises from:

- The types of problems and systems involved
- Solutions often lying outside clear boundaries or at the edges of organisations
- The number and diversity of stakeholders
- The lack of a single clear measure to optimise against, such as profit

- The fact that many public services must be inclusive and accessible to all citizens and so cannot be selectively optimised for specific groups.

“[Design is] much more challenging in a public sector context, when you’re trying to understand everybody’s needs and behaviours and the inherent contradictions that brings, than in a private sector context where you can choose your demographic and customer segment” (Marco Steinberg).

“One hundred percent of service to one hundred percent of users, one hundred percent of the time… we have an over-representation of people who are going to be struggling with all sorts of different things. That means that our services need to be even better. We have the capacity to be able to use that to make them better for everyone” (Lou Downe).

“[In reference to the ‘fail fast and fail often’ imperative] My mantra for the public sector has been the opposite. You need to succeed early and frequently to build credibility. You need to earn a seat at the table so that later you can afford to fail once in a while. You don’t have credits to fail early on” (Marco Steinberg).

Design in the public and private sectors sometimes face similar challenges

However, although participants did stress differing conditions in the public and private sector, they also identified instances where these sectors face similar challenges:

- User requirements for good services are generally the same in the public and private sectors
- Increasing or reducing demand pose similar financial constraints that are common in large-scale organisations
- ‘Big organisation problems’ like digital transformation and leadership support for design create similar long-term strategic challenges.

Like the public sector, there are high risks in some private sector industries. For example, the aviation industry has lengthy design phases that require tolerance for testing and failure before planes can be produced.

Both private and public sector bodies risk creating negative value if resources are not used effectively or bad designs create extra work for frontline colleagues.

3. The value of well-designed public policies and services

We asked participants about the value of public design and identified three key reasons why they believe design matters.

3.1 Design can address increasingly complex problems in the public sector.

By helping people understand multidimensional and multifaceted problems, make more informed decisions, and use resources more effectively, design can improve outcomes.

“Why would you have good design at the heart of the public sector? Because you need to improve outcomes for people who use our services, because you need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the resources, because resources are shrinking… but the needs are growing… good design ought to be at the heart of our cultural approach to how we do things, and that’s what I’d like to see happen” (Julia Ross).

Lou Downe gave the rapid rollout of the digital platform for the Ukraine settlement scheme as an example:

“That for me is what good design infrastructure is for the Civil Service… allowing civil servants to be able to respond to the constant crisis that we’re facing of needing new services, needing to change services and having very little time and money to do it” (Lou Downe).

Design can also help people respond to the most fundamental public challenges.

“I think we are in an extraordinary era of transition… what we can see if we take a longer historical view is that if you create social infrastructure, you create economic change. So, if you design infrastructure of care, if you design infrastructure for collaboration in local places, if you design the stuff that basically fosters human relationships, you actually get economic growth. You get companies forming, you get

new kinds of care and so on. So, I think we've got a kind of 21st century infrastructure challenge. And again, I would say that is a design challenge" (Hilary Cottam).

"There are bigger fish to fry… the profession of crafting great services that are joined up for people, that is hard enough. But we need to move on as well because we have big transitions in our society… You cannot think only of people and patients. You have to think about climate and other living things as well" (Christian Bason).

3.2 Design can make the difference between the success and failure of public sector interventions.

Thinking about people as parts of systems and testing ideas allows design to get to the root cause of problems faster.

"The way you design services radically impacts their success or failure, if you measure that by how effective they are for the people who use the services and operate them" (Julia Ross).

Participants stressed that good design is about understanding function, thereby focusing on what works for people. Janet Hughes gave the example of a voluntary scheme for farmers that had low uptake because it did not account for farmers' needs:

"What we did not optimise for was making sure that it was both affordable and going to give value for money, and it was actually going to work for farmers… [We asked] 'If you want this outcome to happen on a farm, what are the actions that a farmer would have to take?' [rather than] 'How do we actually design this in such a way that the farmer will (a) find it and understand it, and (b) find it any way attractive in their business context and be willing to do it" (Janet Hughes).

Redesigning the scheme in a way that took account of farmers' needs and experiences resulted in a successful service that worked for farmers:

"Now we've got thousands of farmers wanting to come to the scheme… for me design is understanding what is actually going to make this work in real life for the people that

need to interact with it… We inserted that question. The scheme succeeded" (Janet Hughes).

3.3 Design can foster connection and rebuild trust.

Participants emphasised that design can create connections between government and the public:

"We are in a moment where there is just lack of faith in many government institutions. And I do think that the human side of all these [design] disciplines is a way to, if done properly, rebuild connection, rebuild trust, open a different form of communication, get there on more of a human tenor" (Hilary Cottam).

Involving people in government can empower them and increase trust:

"Good design for me means trust. It means equity. It means having a government that's responsive to people's needs" (Marianne Cassidy).

Design can also create value for the people who work in government, by making their work feel purposeful. This contributes to improved recruitment, retention, engagement and wellbeing amongst public sector workers.

"There is public value in creating good public design in ways that are also meaningful and sensible to the people who are employed within the public sector… in creating flourishing, creative, effective… high-performing public organisations… workplaces have to be human as well, and that is also a public value" (Christian Bason).

4. Enablers and barriers to good public design

We asked participants about the organisational conditions that, in their experience, support or obstruct the widespread take-up of good design. Their responses covered a range of factors including:

- The awareness and priorities of senior leaders
- Organisational capabilities, cultures and ways of working
- Infrastructure, incentives and funding arrangements.

The report presents these factors in two sections:

- Section 4.1 discusses senior leadership characteristics and approaches.
- Section 4.2 sets out a broader set of enablers and barriers mentioned by participants.

4.1 Senior leaders who successfully unlock the full value of design

In many interviews participants highlighted the critical role of senior public sector leaders in supporting effective design and shaping the necessary conditions for its success:

“Ultimately there has to be [senior level] endorsement… protection, but also an investment and appreciation of the value of this work and demand for this kind of work” (Christian Bason).

“I care about design all day, all night. But if my executive directors and leadership above me don’t, then it’s game over” (Mari Nakano).

Participants noted common traits of senior public sector leaders who successfully unlock the full value of design within their organisations.

Senior leaders have stability and longevity in post

Senior leaders have stability and longevity in post. Participants said they mentioned this for two reasons:

1. Transforming systems like policies, services, or public organisations takes time. It requires deep knowledge, and strong, diverse stakeholder relationships. Frequent changes in leadership can obstruct the development of these assets and prevent leaders from successfully completing transformation initiatives.

“Nobody cares that all the senior people are rotating every six months. A head of adult social services might be in a position for 12 months, if they’re lucky. You can’t change [adult social] care in this country being a leader for 12 months!” (Hilary Cottam).

- Persuading new senior leaders of the importance of good design exhausts designers’ time, energy, and resilience. It also diverts them from their core activities. More often than not, leadership churn resets design awareness and support at the top of organisations.

Senior leaders view transforming and modernising the public sector as a core part of their role

Senior leaders view transforming and modernising the public sector as a core part of their role. In practice this involves being prepared to take risks by rejecting the status quo and experimenting with new ways of addressing evolving social challenges.

“I think the title of the role of Permanent Secretary is wrong because permanent implies continuity, not change. I think all the Permanent Secretaries should be renamed to something like chief change officer… because their job is to modernise. Without that you don’t get transformation, you just get… better sameness” (Kevin Cunnington).

Senior leaders have a foundational awareness of design approaches

Senior leaders have a foundational awareness of design approaches. This includes an understanding of how good design delivers value and a genuine commitment to resourcing and supporting design.

There remains a common misconception among senior management teams in the public sector that design is optional and only about how things look. Participants identified that leaders who drive decisions forward and who understand and prioritise design are essential.

“Someone with power and authority inside of a policy delivery stack saying ‘yes I want that, yes I authorised it, and yes I’m prepared to both pay for the work to be done, and I also am aware that the intention and the outcome of this project is to deliver change products that we will then implement’… What’s sad is that you can actually get quite far [into the design process] and, despite best efforts, discover that there is not the political will or resource capability to actually drive that implementation. And I feel that as a personal failure, every single time” (Chelsea Mauldin).

Some participants indicated that organisations with the greatest progress integrating design are those whose senior leaders can scrutinise and give informed directions about design activities.

“I think we’re at the point where you have to have zero tolerance for not having those skills in your leadership team” (Catherine Howe).

Senior leaders role model core design practices

They role model the core design practices needed to develop solutions that actually solve social problems, rather than solutions that just demonstrate the organisation is ‘doing something’. In particular, participants highlighted that these senior leaders:

- Champion a problem focus. This includes creating space for ‘not knowing’. For example, by critically evaluating colleagues’ approaches by asking questions such as: “Do we truly understand this problem? Is it a cause or a symptom?”.

Then, providing support to allow colleagues to adapt their thinking in response to new information and external developments. It also includes resisting stakeholder and media pressure to have all the answers or jump into solutions too quickly.

"One of the hardest skills [in design leadership] is to resist the urge to premature optimisation. So, we're under a lot of time pressure to decide, right? What are you going to do? What's the thing we're going to put in this paper? And then you're stuck with it" (Matt Edgar).

- Develop a deep understanding of the perspectives, experiences and contexts of the communities they serve. This includes support to co-design, test and iterate solutions with, not for, these groups. For some participants, this meant leaders who are unafraid to 'get out there' into communities, build trust and learn from user groups. Other participants also talked about leaders who test their own services where possible. Several participants acknowledged that local organisations like local government or those using place-based approaches may be particularly well-placed to do this.

"One of the most important things is lived experience… I do think that local government is a much more fertile, fruitful place at the moment… where that leadership is of the place and understands the place… The dynamics of place, even in the 21st century, are really powerful" (Hilary Cottam).

"[We're] doing lots of engagement with the senior leadership team and executive workshops so that they know they need to give the space for people to be able to shift their ideas and what they're proposing on the basis of having spoken and worked with people and communities… [Key messages include] … have you spoken to people? What are their experiences? Let's make sure things are inclusive and joined up" (Cat Drew).

"[Senior leaders care about] credibility, that I actually do understand the sector that I'm talking about and how things are going to land in that sector, and then everybody can see that what I'm trying to do is link what we're doing to that knowledge and that seems like a good idea to them" (Janet Hughes).

Senior leaders create a culture of psychological safety, playfulness and curiosity

In support of the practices described above, senior leaders create a culture of psychological safety, playfulness and curiosity. Teams can be open about the limitations of their knowledge and are empowered to experiment. This includes trying things that might fail or disrupt existing systems.

“The moment you start working with design, you start challenging assumptions about what’s really the problem… that can be challenging and even embarrassing to some leaders and decision-makers, and specialists for that matter, because you expose things that aren’t working. The human-centred approach means you also get confronted with emotional and subjective insights and judgements from users… [which] can be quite painful” (Christian Bason).

“[It’s a strength to say] ‘I don’t know all the answers to these problems, and we won’t get everything right first time’. A leader will get a group of professionals together, who have skills that they don’t. The leader will state the problem as they see it and as the public are telling them. And they will create the space for design and strategy work to take place. That work is a lot harder if you don’t have the leaders at the very top of the organisation creating that psychological safety” (Matt Edgar).

Senior leaders guide organisations to focus on core problems

Senior leaders guide organisations to focus on the problems that they have been set up to solve. This includes setting up structures and incentives that make design a central part of addressing those issues. Participants talked about organisations in which design is ‘the connective tissue’, or ‘in its DNA’. This contrasts with organisations where design is confined to certain areas or professional silos. Participants mentioned some practical actions to promote design in organisations:

- Developing a vision or mandate that clearly integrates design. This includes governance and accountability mechanisms that support the realisation of that vision.

Reflecting on the success of past programs, Christian Bason noted: “we had a very clear mandate from senior management… we had multiple ministries joining us, they wanted to… be able to do more complex work on cross cutting public sector issues”. This point was echoed by Lou Downe who pointed to the clear mandate that supported embedding of digital service standards across the UK Government. Other participants emphasised that such mandates needed to have ‘hooks’ into existing structures so that design was not a superficial ‘nice to have’. Janet Hughes added that while support from key stakeholders was essential, it needed to go beyond personal relationships:

“We've reached the stage where somebody like me can get license to operate, but that is personal to me because I personally built trust with the people that need to trust me. Where we need to get to is that it doesn't rely on somebody like me putting their own personal credibility on the line” (Janet Hughes).

- Investing in the development of design capability across the organisation. Isolating design within a single ‘niche’ team outside of major decision-making structures reduces its impact and increases vulnerability to ‘tissue rejection’ by other parts of the organisation.

“We used to have innovation units and they had no route to budget, power and decision making. And I think most design units are exactly the same… I don't see them positioned in the right place in the ecosystem” (Hilary Cottam).

“To be really effective, design has to cut right through… it’s a multidisciplinary approach to building your new world, your transformation, your continuous improvement… If you’re stuck out on the side then you inevitably end up just fiddling with the typefaces on things because that’s the way in. And that then becomes a self-reinforcing thing where you almost make yourself less relevant.” (Andrew Besford).

- Re-structuring organisations to support cross-cutting innovation and systems change.

“[You] can’t design in isolation. You have to think systemically. Where I am now is how do I [as Chief Executive] design an organisation that is a really effective steward of place and leader of system change… if we put all of our change levers in one basket, you risk having a change function rather than adaptive organisation... because I've got a high level of control over what happens within my organisation, it means I can be confident that I can create a coherent whole which means I think we can be effective at influencing the system” (Catherine Howe).

“A lot of the issues that we’re facing, they’re very much horizontal in nature. And the way that we [governments] organise is vertical. So, our focus for this phase of transformation is how do we change that to meet the challenges of today… turning the focus away from ourselves and how we’re organised to how we work together to deliver better public services” (Marianne Cassidy).

Senior leaders try to make long-term choices

Senior leaders try to make long-term choices in their funding decisions and prioritise prevention. This involves taking ‘multi-year, multi-parliament bets’ and understanding that preventative approaches take longer to demonstrate outcomes or ‘become profitable’.

Senior leaders are paid in line with their experience

Senior leaders are paid in line with their capability, experience and track record. Some participants felt that fair pay and employee benefits packages help the public sector to attract and retain top performers with the necessary levels of design awareness and expertise.

External incentives and constraints can limit the ability of senior leaders to support design

Finally, external incentives and constraints may limit the ability of senior leaders to create the conditions that support design within their organisations. Important external

factors include the needs and preferences of ministers at particular points in the political cycle or the standards and practices of cross-government bodies. Other constraints that participants mentioned included:

- professional practices and norms that are influenced by actors outside of the control of public sector senior leaders (for example, cross-sectoral professional bodies) and that run counter to design approaches;
- education pathways that favour more ‘traditional’ approaches; and
- the presence of multiple organisational cultures with large and complex departments.

Participants nonetheless thought that public sector senior leaders hold many of the levers for maximising the success of design within their organisations.

4.2 Systemic enablers and barriers

Participants mentioned a wider set of factors that could be considered organisational enablers and barriers to design. We grouped them into the following categories:

- Organisational capability[11], mindsets and ways of working.
- Time horizons and funding arrangements.

For comprehensiveness, the table also contains a summary of the barriers and enablers relating to senior leadership discussed in Section 4.1, and a summary of organisational

[11] This can be conceived of as a combination of capability (skills and knowledge) at the people level in addition to the structural enablers and incentives that need to be in place for people to apply this capability.

‘sensibilities’[12] that can influence how easy it is to embed good design practices in an organisation.

There is overlap between the mindsets and practices that participants considered to be an aspect of good design, and the wider conditions they thought were conducive to good design. For example, curiosity, and the prioritisation of feedback and learning. In our view this reflects the fact that good design is not separate to wider organisational culture, norms and ways of working, but is very much a product of it.

Lastly, some participants pointed out that not all the enablers and barriers they mentioned are unique to design, but some may be especially relevant in the context of design.

[12] We use ‘sensibilities’ as an overarching term for mindsets, orientations, attitudes, feelings and norms established within, and displayed by, organisations.

Table 2. Systemic enablers and barriers

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
Senior leadership	Senior leaders who: • Remain in post for the time required to deliver change. • Commit to organisational transformation and accept reasonable levels of risk essential for innovation. • Buy-in to the value and necessity of good design throughout policy development. • Role model good design practices including problem diagnosis, iteration and collaboration. • Create a mandate for design by including it in organisational strategies and plans.	Senior leaders who: • Churn frequently. • Are biased to the status quo and prefer small, discrete changes over wholesale transformation. • Avoid risks of 'doing things differently' even when different approaches help reduce the risk of failure. • Do not understand good design practices and are unconvinced of their value. • Believe design is an optional 'nice-to-have' but non-essential activity. • Believe design is only concerned with the how things look or end stage development of policies and services.

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
	• Guide organisations to address system-level problems. • Invest and promote wider use of design capabilities to maximise both the impact of design and increase designers' chances of progressing to senior leadership roles. • Take a long-term view and invest in preventing problems before they arise. • Receive a competitive pay and benefits package that allows top talent to be attracted and retained. • Advocate a mandate to work in iterative, human-centred ways.	• Limit investment in design capability to discrete pockets of the organisation. Limit the impact design is able to have and limit promotion opportunities, including to senior roles. • Take a short-term view or do not invest in prevention. • Receive relatively low pay, making it hard attract and keep top talent who understand design.
Organisational capability, mindsets and ways of working	• There is organisation-wide awareness of design and at least basic design skills across most teams, professions and grades.	• There is widespread lack of design awareness and skills.

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
	• Cross-discipline, cross-function and cross-profession working is the norm. Teams measure success in terms of collective progress towards organisational goals. • Time and resources are ring-fenced to ensure a deep understanding of problems and the social systems in which they are embedded. • A problem and system-focused approach means that collaboration is common and genuine system-wide change can be managed. • A shared sense of responsibility, extensive collaboration and a safe psychological environment to support creativity, innovation, and experimentation, even when there is a risk of failure.	• A lack of opportunity to use design approaches restricts aspirations and leads people to 'self-censor against the right thing'. • Design is sidelined or limited to niches putting professional designers at high risk of disillusionment and burn-out. • Strong professional and organisational divisions limit opportunities for cross-team collaboration. • Focus on measuring team outputs and activities rather than collective progress towards goals. • High-stress environments reduce people's ability to be creative and combine knowledge in new ways. • Assumptions about social problems and user needs often go untested. Solutions

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
	• A commitment to learning through the sharing of both successes and failures • Collaboration with organisational stakeholders and users is the norm. Where possible design decisions and resources are devolved to the local level. • Clear accountability mechanisms are balanced against the flexibility needed to take advantage of time-sensitive design opportunities. • Organisational structures and incentives such as governance or operating models are aligned with infrastructure. For example, IT and estates support good design practices.	are fast-tracked to demonstrate that 'action is being taken'. • System-wide change is limited by an 'organisation-centred' approach that focuses only on parts of problems that fall within an organisation's responsibility. • Pressure to minimise reputational risk can lead people to choose options that are considered 'safe' within the organisational culture and processes. • Centralised decision-making reduces proximity to, and understanding of, delivery contexts. • Incentives to brush 'failures' under the carpet minimise opportunities for learning. • Complex processes and governance procedures constrain time-sensitive opportunities and iteration at pace.

Factors	Enablers	Barriers

Time horizons and funding arrangements	• Long-term preventative approaches that may take decades to show results but deliver better value for money.
	• Use of whole life or whole system costing models, rather than those that focus on isolated interventions.
	• Flexible funding arrangements that allow for iteration, problem diagnosis, co-design and place-based approaches.
	• Ability to carry over year-end underspend as needed.
	• Dedicated funding for research and development into new and innovative approaches, not only for research on the effectiveness of policy interventions.
		• Short-termism limits investment in prevention, especially either side of an election when pressure is high to deliver outcomes at pace.
		• Costing models that focus on interventions rather than taking a broader, system-wide and life-course view.
		• Costs of keeping to the status quo are underestimated compared to costs of innovation.
		• Rigid funding constraints and low tolerance within the Treasury or other funding bodies for:
		  ○ Uncertainty in funding bids
		  ○ Perceived duplication
		  ○ Interventions that cannot easily be subject to randomised control trials

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
	• Recognising that Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) and similar methods are hard to apply at earlier stages of policy design. • Accepting a range of different forms of evidence.	(RCTs) or similar types of quantitative impact measurement. • Financial year end pressures to 'use funding or lose it' rather than being able to pace spend in response to developing project needs. • Lack of funding for research and development on the effectiveness of different approaches to policy and service design.
Summary of organisational sensibilities	• Open-minded and curious • Playful • Humble • Outward-looking • Collaborative • Prioritise outcomes not activities • Problem and system-level focus	• Lacking curiosity • Risk-averse • Assumption-laden • Insular • Narrow focus • Prioritise activities not outcomes

Factors	Enablers	Barriers
	• Rigorous • Psychologically safe	• Prioritise ‘better sameness’ not transformation • Blame culture • Fear of failure

5. Current state of public design

We asked participants about their views on the current state of public design:

- Section 5.1 describes recent progress.
- Section 5.2 reports areas of ongoing weakness.

It is important to note that the participants we interviewed were based in various countries. Their observations on the general state of public design may not necessarily, therefore, apply equally to public design within the UK.

5.1 Progress

Overall, participants felt that significant progress has been made in recent years on the implementation and integration of design approaches within the public sector.

They spoke of the great strides that have been made over the last two decades in embedding design in public organisations. For example, participants highlighted the increasing number of design labs, service designers, and policy designers working on the most challenging social issues:

“We are seeing continuously really impressive work being done around the world… under the right conditions, we know how to do pretty massive internal systemic change in a human-centred way… to craft and create truly joined-up, meaningful, human-centred, and also really good intuitive digital services” (Christian Bason).

Participants felt that design capability had grown substantially, especially in service design and in understanding user needs and perspectives. They also noted an increase in community engagement during the design process, although some participants thought that this was more evident and successful at the local government level.

“The big service organisations at the national level have massively, in the last 10 years, scaled up in design capability. [But] it’s not as participatory as it could be” (Matt Edgar).

5.2 Challenges, risks and areas of weakness

Although there have been positive signs of progress, participants identified various challenges and areas for further improvement.

Sometimes lip service is paid to design without genuine commitment to applying it

Participants felt that sometimes lip service is paid to design without genuine commitment to applying it in organisations, especially at the senior leadership level (see also Section 4.1).

Participants believed this issue was worsened by a lack of understanding about good design processes and practices. Design was often mistakenly connected only with digital services, superficial or visual parts of public initiatives. Some participants felt that siloed or partially applied design is a problem because it lacks impact, makes poor use of resources and adds to confusion about what design is and why it matters. As Marco Steinberg pointed out, misunderstanding design “creates a lot of noise in the system”.

Design approaches are not being applied ambitiously enough

Participants expressed a related frustration that design approaches are not being applied ambitiously enough. They felt that design practices had the potential to address 21st-century social challenges but were being held back by the barriers described in Section 4.

Specific areas of weakness mentioned by participants included:

- Design not being integrated as much as it could be at early stages of policymaking
- Design being restricted to specific units or labs means that design specialists cannot easily influence senior decision-making or how budgets and resources

are allocated. This limits, in turn, design's potential for broader, system-wide change

- Design mainly been applied to make processes better, faster, and more efficient
- Design being restricted to visual rather than functional parts of policies and services.

Additionally, participants noted there has been limited interest to invest in preventative approaches, even when rigorous problem diagnosis has identified the root causes of social problems.

"I'm generally feeling a little bit apocalyptic, which is that there are people who get the fact that the world has changed or is changing, and there are people who are still trying to mend the old stuff… I am not sure the balance is tipped in favour of the people who are trying to design something different" (Catherine Howe).

"I think we are in an extraordinary era of [societal and environmental] transition, which we're not actively designing" (Hilary Cottam).

As Marco Steinberg acknowledged, for design to be preventative it needs to be fully incorporated into government: "design [should be] part of the logic of how government behaves".

Partially applied design can be harmful when it creates a false sense of action

Participants also raised the concern that partially applied design can be harmful when it creates a false sense of action and makes underlying problems less visible.

"My fear is that if we focus too much on making the experience of current services more pleasant, we fail to see the bigger issues that drive substantive improvements. In doing so, design can be complicit in making flawed services more pleasant, further cementing the status quo" (Marco Steinberg).

Marco Steinberg pointed to the “fundamentally flawed logic of institutional [elderly] care” that has emerged from healthcare workforce supply challenges and a growing elderly population. In his view, efforts to re-design this care have “unwittingly made dying more efficient as opposed to improving the quality of life”. This example demonstrates the dangers of using design practices without considering how they work together, interact, or weaken other effects. Marco Steinberg also commented: “working on separate, well-intentioned interventions does not add up to greater change. On the contrary, my experience has been that a lot of good ideas usually add up to regression rather than progression on an issue”.

There is a lack of clear and consistent standards that cover the full range of public design

Participants also identified a lack of clear and consistent standards that cover the full range of public design activity as an ongoing issue. This includes patchy outcome monitoring of the outcomes from design activities. For example, one participant noted that there is no: “government design assessment criterion that is applied to service design on an ongoing basis” (Kevin Cunnington). One participant felt that careful and ongoing monitoring of public initiatives’ performance was a significant missed opportunity. Other participants thought that outcome monitoring can help hold the government accountable in the absence of other effective mechanisms. They also observed that where rigorous and central enforcement of design standards had been in place, the consistency and quality of design activity had increased.

“We talk about outcomes in government, we don’t measure the outcomes. We have no idea whether or not what we’re doing in the services that we’re providing have any impact on the outcomes that we are setting in our policies. Services are the way that we deliver policies. So, unless we’re monitoring our services, there’s no way of understanding whether or not those policies are effective at all” (Lou Downe).

Limited evaluation had further consequences by making it difficult to effectively and quickly re-evaluate design in light of wider change, limiting iteration and ongoing improvement work.

“We [just] do the design and then pass it over, done” (Kevin Cunnington).

“Right through the scaling process for me, you want to continue to have that innovation approach where you’re learning, where you’re measuring, and learning and testing and tweaking… You’ve got to keep redesigning… evaluation is a big challenge, particularly in services” (Julia Ross).

Participants cautioned that without sufficient quality control a push to increase design methods across public organisations may result in design being practiced by those without the necessary expertise or oversight to deliver it well. Some participants were concerned that this could add to confusion about design and undermine the credibility of the design profession in the future.

Academic design training and commercial design experience do not prepare designers for the complexity of public sector challenges.

Several participants noted that while public sector demand for design expertise is growing, supply isn’t keeping up. They also mentioned that current academic design training and commercial design experience doesn’t prepare designers for the complexity of public sector challenges.

“If you’ve been trained as a designer in the private sector, there is a different context you have to relate to [in the public sector]” (Christian Bason).

“In design school, you’re not taught how to navigate multi-stakeholder situations. You’re not really trained in the intersections of public administration… you’re also not really told or warned what it’s like to work in these kind of big bureaucratic situations… [On entering government] I was very quick to realise that we needed to find a [new] language to relate to each other” (Mari Nakano).

There are risks associated in applying commercial design to the public sector

Participants recognised significant associated risk in applying commercial design attitudes, methods and approaches without considering how they need to be adapted for the public sector context. For example, Hilary Cottam highlighted that focusing on efficiency can undermine initiatives that prioritise relationship-based interactions for long-term development:

“One of the difficulties that I have grappled with is that the framing of most design tools has come out of a private sector context… we’ve changed the language, but really we haven’t changed the intent and what therefore comes out of the use of those tools… I do think that there’s a fundamental philosophical difference between a public sector that is a kind of sales service… [and] a public sector that is actually there to provide people with the capabilities to flourish… one is a kind of efficiency narrative, of how do we design services that most efficiently reach people, pass them along this still very industrial process… The other is a developmental process… how do we stand alongside people so that all through life they can grow” (Hilary Cottam).

To prevent the misapplication of private sector principles to public design challenges, some participants stressed the importance of having experienced public servants or political scientists inside design teams or recruiting for individuals with a deep understanding of government into design roles. Participants also recognised the benefits of building bespoke, in-house public design capability in order to minimise this risk.

6. Changes needed in organisations for public design to achieve its potential

This section considers the future of public design:

- Section 6.1 covers priority areas for investment identified by participants.
- Section 6.2 expands on the types of practices and approaches that could enable more widespread integration of design across the public sector.
- Section 6.3 presents participants' views on the potential of design to promote a human-centric approach across the public sector.

6.1 Investment priorities for design

Given their view of the current state of public design (Section 5), we asked participants to reflect on what areas they would prioritise for investment to maximise the potential of design.

The themes we identified from participants' responses were:

- Maximising cross-sectoral public design capability
- Raising standards, profile and impact
- Investment in building an evidence base in design and increased service monitoring.

6.1.1 Maximise cross-sectoral public design capability

Build design awareness and capability across the public sector

Participants emphasised the importance of building widespread design awareness and capability at all levels across the public sector through practical experience, support, training and learning opportunities.

“I think you must build a design capability inside government, inside the public sector, and by having a strong design capability within, you are then also able to meaningfully commission external contributions when needed” (Christian Bason).

“Working in every single layer of the organisation when we do redesign... it's structure, it's capability, it's governance, it's systems, it's physical assets, it's obviously cultural” (Catherine Howe).

“Specialism at senior levels is so needed, but we just don’t have it” (Lou Downe).

Marianne Cassidy spoke about the creation of a central design unit within the Government of Ireland’s Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Inspired by service design principles, the unit has an ambition to improve policy and systems design. It will work with, and support, government departments to fund, procure and integrate design. As Marianne Cassidy described, it’s about “giving a commitment to design, building the capability for design, and then developing a culture”.

Harness capability within the broader ‘design ecosystem’

Participants discussed the importance of building and harnessing capability within the broader ‘design ecosystem’. This includes integrating design expertise from various sectors to create diverse teams, with more flexible commissioning practices, and as ‘critical friends’ on scrutiny panels.

“The value of having that kind of challenge from creative people [on independent design panels] … you can’t underestimate the value of it, but it needs to be done in a way that has credibility and is properly part of the process” (Sadie Morgan).

“I think can we go through a public sector organisation and identify people that have the potential to be creative if placed in a different environment… I also think it’s important to bring people from the outside with deep experience. You need people with the lived experience of making things, not just the theory of making things. They will bring different references, mindsets, and ways of working to a team and will help challenge established ways of working. You then need to work on creating the social, creative, and psychological conditions for a new way of work to happen, focused on making new things in the real world. In doing that you create new experiences and help build common belief that change is possible” (Marco Steinberg).

“The action plan around capability has been to engage with a very rich design ecosystem in Ireland. Small designers, people that have the skill and the expertise, universities that have done a lot of research in the design space. So, it’s about accessing that skill and expertise and looking at the applicability to public sector challenges” (Marianne Cassidy).

“I think there are certain classes of designers who thrive in large organisational contexts. I don’t think it’s necessarily that they’re ‘public sector designers’… just that there’s a particular kind of complexity of getting stuff done when you’re at the scale of offering a service that’s used by hundreds of thousands or millions of people. So, we need to go hire those people, but they might come from financial services, they could come from airlines, they could come from lots of different service sectors” (Matt Edgar).

Build stronger connections with the private sector

Participants also noted that stronger connections with the private sector can be cultivated to improve ways of working together and sharing ideas. Involving commercial design agencies early on can help the public sector develop skills to handle complex policy challenges. The public sector can learn more about design practices like branding and product design.

To achieve systems change, “you need to engage a load of people who are designing things out there in the real world… how could government see the 1.97 million

designers who are out there across the [UK] designing products, services, places, as a resource to help deliver policy?" (Cat Drew).

6.1.2 Raise standards, profile and impact

Professional standards for design

Some participants highlighted the value of 'professionalising' design. For example, by formally recognising design as a professional discipline in the public sector. Frameworks and standards could also be used to inform capability building, as well as to drive quality and consistency in design activity.[13]

"We need to professionalise design so that we have deep expertise and the craftmanship going into great design work… But the question is, how do you create an organisational culture and way of working and managing that is constantly open-minded, curious, challenging assumptions… looking for better and newer ways of doing things… constantly creatively experimenting and learning based on feedback from the outcomes being generated… extending from just a design project to being a modus of working as an organisation" (Christian Bason).

Design roles at the top of public organisations

Some participants suggested that dedicated roles for designers at the top of public organisations would help to increase the profile and impact of design and make sure that design expertise is present at the most senior of decision-making tables. Two participants used 'chief design officer' to describe this kind of role.

However, not all participants felt that strengthening the professional status of design or developing standardised frameworks and toolkits was the best way forwards. For

[13] Frameworks and standards do exist in the digital design space but not for other types of government designer.

example, Mari Nakano suggested focusing efforts on developing a more diverse public sector employee base. She felt that this workforce would be able to co-design more intuitively because of improved communication with diverse communities and a greater collective understanding of diverse users and solutions appropriate for them.

Sponsors, centralised bodies, and design panels

Other participants spoke of sponsors, centralised bodies, and design panels to champion and moderate design. They described how these might contribute to a community of practice to bring “all of the people who care about design together in one place” (Lou Downe). Participants identified cross-governmental definitions, and standards for services and regulatory reform, as enabling factors. Setting up contacts and commissions with a broad remit could also help deal with dynamic problems: “it gives you that freedom to move things around, to see a bigger picture, to operate more dynamically” (Marco Steinberg).

6.1.3 Investment in design research and service monitoring

Investing in building the evidence base for effective public design

A number of participants flagged the importance of investing in building the evidence base for effective public design. This could promote learning, the sharing of practices, and provide evidence for the value created by public design.

“When I go to treasuries around the world and ask, ‘what percentage of your budget is dedicated to research and developing more innovative ways of delivering what you’re doing?’, when pushed, the answer is close to zero. Basically, there is none and so I think this is an important question” (Marco Steinberg).

“Unless we’re monitoring our services, there’s no way of understanding whether or not those policies are effective at all… [I would] get some form of small MVP [minimal viable product] performance monitoring happening, because without that it’s almost impossible

for us to justify any cost savings that might then happen further down the line from design” (Lou Downe).

6.2 Integration of design across the whole public sector

Funding practices that accommodate design

Participants spoke of the need to support funders, including HM Treasury, to evolve costing and appraisal practices to better accommodate design approaches and to account for the realities of what it takes to solve complex social problems. This includes valuing learning generated through experimentation and iteration, a focus on prevention, and acknowledgement of value creation that goes beyond immediate cost saving (for example, moving to whole-life costing models).

“Full life costing would be absolutely dramatic… but really fundamental… We’ve got loads of departments but [have] nothing that responds to costs or data. It’s about cultural glue… there’s nothing I do that doesn’t save money” (Hilary Cottam).

“If you’re on a drive for efficiency, the urge to prematurely optimise is very strong… A more creative, expansive approach to the problem has a higher degree of uncertainty, but a bigger potential payoff at the end… [government needs to] change the cost-to-quality equation, particularly if you’re looking to solve those really big, intractable, longer-term problems” (Matt Edgar).

Devolving decisions and increasing place-based approaches

Place-based approaches support a well-rounded view of problems by making it easier to identify contributing factors and opportunities for intervention, which are often siloed at the organisational or national level. Locally connected teams, citizen participation and co-design pave the way for making positive community change.

“If you design infrastructure in collaboration with local places, if you design the stuff that basically fosters human relationships, you actually get economic growth… [For example] work is made, created and found locally” (Hilary Cottam).

“The only way we’re going to change [ways of working on the ground] is when local teams get together around communities of residents and citizens and think, how could we design this better for the community of Weston-Super-Mare, for example. A place-based [approach]” (Julia Ross).

“People in local government, some local service organisations, they’re doing some amazing stuff on a shoestring, these little pockets of activity… If we invest in design capability in local government and places, what an amazing diversity of different solutions we’ll see” (Matt Edgar).

Some participants flagged that central government would still play a key role in supporting local decision makers by creating infrastructure such as platforms, networks, communities of practice, and funding approaches:

“[I support a] resource shift and putting trust in multidisciplinary, perhaps multi-agency, activity that’s more situated in places and communities… national teams have a continued role to create platforms and enable [this work]” (Matt Edgar).

Outcome-focused approaches to maximise collaboration across professional and organisational boundaries

Participants advocated team-based approaches to support collaborative working, aided by ‘portfolio over project’ mindsets that focus on overarching goals rather than individual projects. For Marco Steinberg, this meant thinking about recruitment at a team level:

“This work is inherently collaborative and so I think we need to think beyond individuals and think about the teams that are going to do this work… rather than thinking about what are the specs for an individual I’m hiring, what are the specs for a team?” (Marco Steinberg).

Participants identified that team-based, collaborative approaches were also needed to balance bringing in people with different backgrounds and experiences while keeping the professionalism of design.

Participants also noted it was important to move away from “governments design for governments” to prevent the repeated mistake of making things “that respond to the culture and concerns and anxieties of their particular unit or ministry” (Chelsea Mauldin), rather than focusing on overall interests.

Putting resources into outcomes, missions and organisational design was seen as an additional means of achieving professional and organisational collaboration: “stop designing your systems and your user experience to reflect your organisation; instead, reflect the user need” (Catherine Howe).

Organisational structures, processes and working environments that foreground the conditions for design

For public design investments to work well and lead to real progress, a number of participants talked compellingly about the need for wholesale change in organisational structures, mindsets and ways of working. Without the kind of change that generates environments that enable public design practices (see also Section 4), and that lay the foundations for system change within and across organisations, these participants felt that the impact of public design and public designers would be thwarted over time, despite individuals’ efforts to champion them.

“It’s possible to do great human-centred public service design without having a bureaucracy that is… more open or more collaborative, but I think long term it’s hard to sustain it… it’s hard to get at scale without deeper changes in organisational structure and processes” (Christian Bason).

Organisational design means changing working environments to enable, normalise and reward design as a way of working:

“You can’t mainstream [design] capability without creating a context in which that capability is welcomed and recognised” (Catherine Howe).

“If this kind of work [is done] because of the exceptional characteristics of individuals that rally to make stuff happen, then I think we have probably failed because we haven’t

institutionalised a new way of working… As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [psychologist known for his work on flow theory] said “it is more effective to change the environment that people are working in, than to try to teach them and give them tools to innovate” (Marco Steinberg).

This includes organisational structures that support collaboration as a core design practice:

“You can do great design projects and create great concepts and you can maybe even have them implemented, but for them to stay and flourish and become the modus operandi of normalisation, you probably do have to embrace increasingly a redesign of how you organise that is centred around the public value you’re creating, and that is centred around ways in which people can collaborate meaningfully to solve problems” (Christian Bason).

High-quality working environments conducive to design mean public servants can access and easily use systems and services to achieve outcomes. Positive experiences that are associated with the successful delivery of outcomes give public servants more job satisfaction and a chance to connect with the people they serve. Investing in better working environments results in better policies and services:

“The service that you offer to patients [is] dependent on the experience of the staff” (Andrew Besford).

6.3 Human-centricity as a core value and principle for the public sector

We asked participants to consider what it would look like if the full potential of design was realised. Participants felt that design has the potential to change the way government works, particularly by promoting human-centricity as a core value and principle for public servants. This included:

- Making government a place where people love to work and that drives empathy and deep care for others: “I dream of a government where everyone working

inside comes in dying to work in government because they think it's an amazing place and a place that drives empathy, that cares about each other, but also shows deep care for transforming and supporting the community at large" (Mari Nakano).

- Bringing more people from communities into government. This not only improves diversity and representation but helps make design more intuitive because people are more likely to know how to engage their communities: "I come from the community and I know how my community works… I know how to have a conversation in a way that is going to be received really well by my community" (Mari Nakano).

- Enabling and motivating public servants to see how what they do matters. Part of this involves changing the way people think about, see and engage with their work by creating "a new set of mental models" (Chelsea Mauldin). This includes helping them think differently about what they do, and see how their work translates into action for the people that government serves. Public design can help public servants better understand problems, what solutions are likely to work, and translate between the goals of government and the needs of citizens.

  "[A] deep culture shift which I would love to see occur, where everyone really believed in government that their primary responsibility was to design things that were easy and satisfying and meaningful" (Chelsea Thi).

  "My dream would be that we shift the culture of the public sector to have design at the heart of it… not necessarily that everything is a design project, but everything should have design thinking applied to it" (Julia Ross).

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant biographies

Biographies were provided by participants. With the exception of a small number of updates requested whilst preparing the final draft of this report, roles and information reflect the status at the time of interview.

Dr Christian Bason

Christian is Co-founder of Transition Collective, a public-purpose enterprise that collaborates with leading organisations globally to enable the sustainable transitions the world so urgently needs. Christian is the former CEO of the Danish Design Center (DDC), a government-backed non-profit foundation (2014-2023). Previously, he was Director of MindLab, the Danish government's innovation lab (2007-2014), and Business Manager with Ramboll Management Consulting, a global advisory group (1998-2006).

Christian is a frequent keynote speaker to government, business and civic leaders at home and globally on topics such as innovation, design, missions, organisational redesign, leadership, foresight, and sustainable transitions. He has acted as a leader, facilitator and advisor in a wide range of contexts, always focusing on how to enable innovative and ambitious collaborations to address complex societal challenges across multiple sectors. In addition, Christian has extensive experience delivering executive training for leaders in business, government and the non-profit sector. Currently he works with, amongst others, CEDEP/INSEAD, Henley Business School, Parsons School of Design, Copenhagen Business School and the European School of Administration. He is the author of nine books on leadership, innovation and design, including 'Expand: Stretching the Future by Design' (2022) and 'Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society' and (in Danish) 'The Organization Was Set Free and the Leadership had to be Rediscovered' (2023). Christian is member of a range of boards and institutions, including the International Jury of the Bay Urban

Visioning Awards, the Board of the Centre for Leadership (CfL), the Advisory Committee of the Crown Princess Mary Center at the University of Copenhagen, and the Think Tank of the CBS Leadership Center. Previously, he was a member of the Board of the Royal Danish Academy, the World Economic Forum's Global Futures Council on Agile Governance and Chairman of the EU Commission’s expert group on public sector innovation. Christian is a Good Design Ambassador. In 2018 he was awarded the Creative Bureaucrat Prize by German daily Tagesspiegel and the Creative Bureaucracy Festival. Christian holds a Ph.D. in design, leadership and governance from Copenhagen Business School, an M.Sc. in political science from Aarhus University, and executive education from Wharton and Harvard Business School.

Andrew Besford

Andrew is a specialist in business change, with a particular focus on digital, data, and cyber security. He spent his early career delivering business transformation programmes in the private sector, particularly in the telecoms industry. Andrew was a senior civil servant for five years at the Department for Work and Pensions. He later served as deputy director at the Government Digital Service in the Cabinet Office.

Marianne Cassidy

Marianne is the Assistant Secretary General, heading up the Public Service Transformation Division in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in the Government of Ireland. The Department’s mission is to drive the delivery of better public services, living standards and infrastructure for the people of Ireland. Marianne has responsibility for leading and supporting Public Service Transformation including driving the implementation of the 10-year Strategy Civil Service Renewal 2030 and of ‘Better Public Services – a transformation strategy to deliver for the public and build trust’. She is also responsible for the Department’s Communications Unit and for the expenditure oversight of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Vote, the Department of Rural and Community Development, the central votes and the DPER Corporate Bodies Unit. She represents Ireland on the OECD

Public Governance Committee (PGC), is a member of the PGC Bureau and chairs the OECD Trust Survey Advisory Group. She is also a member of the EU DG Reform Expert Group.

Prior to joining DPENDR in March 2022, Marianne was the Head of Civil Reform for the Modernisation Programme of the Courts Service which aims at providing quicker and easier access to justice for all. Before heading up Civil Reform, Marianne was Eastern Regional Manager for four and a half years with responsibility for the operational, legal and financial governance of seven County Circuit and District combined Court offices. Marianne also made a noteworthy contribution in driving change as the Senior Responsible Owner for Courts Office Review Implementation (CORI) reform programme. Through innovation and partnership with experienced staff, CORI delivered the centralisation of jury summons, centralisation of service of foreign documents, the devising of a new customer charter and the roll out of a new management structure.

Before joining the Courts Service in 2016, Marianne held strategic and leadership positions in a range of public sector organisations including, as the first Head of Investigations for the Ombudsman for Children's Office and as the Public Transport Regulation Manager for the National Transport Authority. Marianne holds a Masters in Public Administration from Sciences Po Paris, a Masters in Social Policy from UCD and a Professional Certificate in Governance from the IPA. She is the proud mother of two sets of twins.

Dr Hilary Cottam OBE

Hilary is a social entrepreneur, thinker and policy advisor. Her work includes the creation of new approaches and services for ageing, family life and care. Her acclaimed book Radical Help (2018) was hailed as 'mind-shifting' by David Brooks in the New York Times. It has been translated internationally and is widely credited with shifting national narratives and practice around welfare systems. Her current research and practice centres on the future of work and on new care economies.

Hilary holds an Honorary Professorship at the Institute of Innovation and Public Purpose at University College London; she was named UK Designer of the Year in 2005 for pioneering the field of social design and has been named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum.

Kevin Cunnington

Kevin was Director General of the International Government Service and Digital Envoy for the UK from August 2019 until April 2021. Prior to that, he was the Director General of the Government Digital Service from August 2016 to July 2019.

Kevin has led a variety of large scale, and global, digital transformation programmes. He spent his early career in programming and IT consultancy. More recently he was the Global Head of Online for Vodafone Group and Business Transformation Group Director General at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Kevin holds a BSc in Computer Science from Liverpool University and an MSc in Artificial Intelligence from London University.

Lou Downe

Lou is the author of Good Services, the bestselling book on how to design services that work, and the founding director of the School of Good Services, an organisation that helps people to build the skills they need to design and scale great services.

Lou is the former Director of Design for the UK Government where they founded the discipline of service design, growing a 2,000 strong team of designers into one of the largest, and most influential design teams in the UK - winning a Designs of the Year award and a D&AD lifetime achievement award.

Cat Drew

Cat is the Chief Design Officer at the Design Council, where she champions Design for Planet, bringing together practitioners from across the design economy to develop new regenerative practice and create the conditions for designers to do their best work.

Cat has pioneered approaches to design in policymaking, having combined 10 years of experience of government with an MA in graphic design to co-found the UK Government's Policy Lab. She has also held leadership positions in Uscreates and FutureGov, where she led programmes to make public services more user-centred and systemic in how they address local challenges around homelessness. Cat is credited with introducing speculative design to the UK for the first time (on projects on ageing and rail) and leading a large-scale public participation programme to create the world's first Government Data Ethics Framework. Cat is an expert in Systemic Design and has been awarded The Design Week Hall of Fame Award for her work to develop this practice, with publications such as the Systemic Design Framework and System-Shifting Design. She speaks widely about the value of design and co-presented BBC Radio 4 The Fix. Cat is member of the RSA's Decolonising Design Commission, on the faculty of States of Change, and advisory boards for the Institute of Coding, the Well Lab at Work and the Design Age Institute. She is a member of The Point People and a co-founder of the Local Government Innovation Network.

Matt Edgar

At NHS England, Matt leads on digital in urgent and emergency care. Previously as associate director of design and user research at NHS Digital, he grew a professional group of designers, user researchers, content specialists, product managers and delivery managers, and enabled the shift to a product-led operating model.

Before joining the NHS full time in 2017, Matt developed the GDS Service Manager Programme, targeting senior leaders responsible for transforming digital services across government, and coached in the DWP Digital Academy (later GDS Academy). Matt spent 10 years in product strategy and customer experience roles at mobile operator Orange, where he managed products along the adoption curve that led to the world's first billion smartphones. He is based in Leeds, where he also serves as a non-executive board member for 54North Homes, a Yorkshire-based housing association.

Dr Catherine Howe

Catherine is the CEX of Adur and Worthing Councils, the current Chair of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, and a trustee of the Democratic Society.

Catherine's background reaches across private and not for profit sectors. Catherine is a technologist by trade and was CEO of a successful SME, Public-I Group Ltd, as well as working at Capita to help shape their digital transformation thinking. More recently, Catherine was Director of Design, Delivery and Change for Cancer Research UK. Before that, Catherine worked with new collaborative and digital technologies for over 15 years. Initially developing learning applications, including one of the first eLearning community sites, at the London Business School, she was founder director of Etribes.com – an online community consultancy which specialised in working with large third sector organisations. Catherine's research interests cover digital civic space, citizenship, digital transformation and systems thinking.

Janet Hughes[14]

Janet has been working in and around the public sector for 25 years, mainly in roles that are about making public policies and services work better for people and outcomes. This has included working in Parliament, City Hall London, the NHS, Department for Education and as an independent contractor working for a range of public sector and charitable organisations on digital service transformation and leadership.

For the last four years Janet has been leading the programme to radically reform farming policy, spending, and delivery in England. The Farming and Countryside Programme team have successfully established and embedded co-design and iterative development and delivery as the basis for the design and delivery of new policies and services for farmers.

[14] As of June 2025, Janet Hughes has taken up the role of Director General, Civil Service Reform and Efficiency in the Cabinet Office.

Chelsea Mauldin

Chelsea is a social scientist and designer with a focus on government innovation. She directs the Public Policy Lab, a nonprofit organisation based in New York City that designs better public policy with low-income and marginalised Americans. The Public Policy Lab partners with government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to develop more satisfying and effective policies and service delivery through ethnographic research, human-centred design, rapid prototyping, and formative evaluation.

Chelsea is an adjunct professor at Columbia University's School of International & Public Affairs and a frequent keynote speaker and panellist. Previously, she consulted to municipal and U.S. federal agencies, directed a community-development organisation, led government partnerships at a public-space advocacy nonprofit, and served as an editor for publishing, arts, and digital media organisations. She is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and the London School of Economics.

Sadie Morgan OBE

Sadie is a co-founding director of dRMM, a RIBA Stirling Prize-winning architecture studio.

Working as a design advocate, educator, and advisor for over two decades, her personal practice within the architectural industry occupies several roles. These include chairing the Cross Cutting Committee for Homes England, for which she is a board member; and acting as commissioner for the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC). Sadie has been instrumental in setting up the NIC’s Design Group, which places design at the heart of major infrastructure projects. She is also a member of the Net Zero Building’s council. She joined the NLA as a Senior Advisor with a particular focus on enhancing the organisation’s voice and influence at a political level, and is Chair of their New London Sounding Board. In 2018, she established the Quality of Life Foundation – an independent body prioritising wellbeing in the built environment. Sadie lectures

internationally and has held professorships at the University of Westminster, and Cambridge University.

Mari Nakano

Mari (she/they) is a designer, systems strategist, and educator who has been practicing what design can do for products, services, and teams in the social impact space for over 15 years. They are currently focused on building a practice centred around relationship and community-building, food justice, sustainability, and planetary repair, spending part of their time as an adjunct faculty and thesis advisor at the MFA Design for Social Innovation Program at the School of Visual Arts as well as a project coach for graduate students who are part of the Social E Lab under the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Mari served for five years as the Design Director at the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYCO), where they built strategies to help scale design thinking and strengthen community engagement and participatory research practices across the city. They led NYCO's Service Design Studio Team, which aims to build up the capacity of government colleagues who are focused on tackling issues around poverty and inequity to understand and apply service design methodologies to improve services, programs and processes through evidence-based, user-centred and creative approaches. Prior to this role, Mari served as the Design Lead for UNICEF's Office of Innovation and focused on building the first full team of designers to support data scientists, engineers, and country program officers to build innovative solutions for children and families around the globe.

Julia Ross

Julia spent over 30 years in NHS management, working at national, regional, and local levels, until her retirement in April 2022. For the last 10 years she was commissioning Chief Executive and System Leader, first in Surrey Heartlands and then in Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire.

Starting her working life as a teacher before moving into health, Julia's professional roles in the NHS encompassed: strategy design and delivery; organisation and

leadership development; and citizen engagement, co-production, and communications. An accredited Arbinger Institute Outward Mindset facilitator, Julia is particularly focused on how individuals, teams, and organisations can collaborate more effectively to optimise outcomes and experience for the people they serve.

Following retirement, Julia went on to have a successful career as a management consultant, working with the voluntary and public sectors. Today, Julia is Chair of OneCare, the GP Federation representing practices across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, a Trustee for the Patients' Association, and visiting professor at the University of the West of England.

Marco Steinberg

Marco is Founder and CEO of Snowcone & Haystack, a Helsinki based strategic design practice focused on helping governments innovate. He is currently also a Professor of Practice at Aalto University in Finland, where he is focused on advancing the craft of strategic design. He has worked with local and central governments across the world on issues of development, sustainability, and transformation.

From 2008-2013, Marco was Director of Strategic Design at Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, where he established the fund's strategic design capability. He launched a portfolio of public governance innovation initiatives including Helsinki Design Lab, a government innovation initiative, and Low2No, a low-to-zero carbon urban development transition strategy. From 1999-2009, Marco served as Associate Professor at the Harvard Design School where he led the Stroke Pathways Project, a system redesign approach to health delivery in the US. He is author of numerous publications on design and innovation. He holds degrees from Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard University. In 2020, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Delft Technical University (TU Delft).

Appendix B: Design Thought Leader interview topic guide

Introduction and scene setting [5 minutes]

Thank you for making time for this interview. We are [DSci introductions] and we are grateful and excited to be speaking to you today.

As you are aware, these interviews are part of a broader undertaking to explore the case for greater investment by the UK Government in design, and the infrastructure to support design capabilities.

[Consent statement, supported by written consent document sent in advance] Are you happy to proceed and for us to record this interview today?

Part 1: Lived experience of design [10 minutes]

[Objectives: Rapport building; elicit view of how the interviewee sees themselves and the language they use to describe and frame their work]

Question 1. You've made an impressive contribution to improving the way the public sector works. Can you tell me a bit about that journey? Where did it start? What were your proudest moments? How would you describe your approach to improving public policy and services and has that changed over time?

[This interview, along with the wider review, is couched in the language of design. Here, we are using design as a shorthand for: an approach, set of practices, professional expertise/capabilities. What we fundamentally mean is making and improving things. Public design simply situates the 'making and improving things' in the public sector, with the intention of delivering public value.]

Question 2. [If design is used by participant] How do you describe the work that you have done to people who are not familiar with the language of 'design'?

Question 3. [Reserve] What led you to take the (described) approach in your work?

Part 2: ‘Good’ public design [20 minutes]

[Objectives: Uncover examples of what design looks like when it is done well, and the practices and approaches that constitute ‘good’ public design; appreciation of various types of value that design brings to social policy challenges as well as to the public sector more widely; invite reflections on how far the public sector has come with integrating (good) design, and distinctions from commercial design]

Question 4. What does good quality design mean to you in a public sector context?

- Can you share some examples and what made them so good?
- Probe for aspects of process and practice, methods and outcomes, qualities (e.g. democratic, iterative, emergent, pluralistic, sustainable)
- How is good quality design different from normal policymaking?

Queston 5. Why does good public design matter?

- What is the value for citizens, for organisations, for governments?

Question 6. Does good design look different in public and private sector contexts? Why?

- Possibility of probing specific challenges introduced by the public sector context: problem types (wicked problems), complexity of trade-offs, role of democratic mandates, citizen perceptions, delegated decision making, policy intersections, multiplicity of users, immovable parameters

Question 7. What is your view on the current state of design in the UK public sector, and progress made thus far?

- What gains have been made? And where are there problems that still need to be overcome?

Question 8. If we fully realised the potential for design in the public sector, what would that look like?

- Probe for transformational potential in moving from ‘design for discrete problems’ to ‘design as integral to all aspects of an organisation’
- Probe for benefits at the organisational level (‘in what ways can design optimise organisational functioning?’), e.g. ways of working, cross-functional working, decision making, achieving a systems view of problems

Part 3: Enabling conditions for design [10 minutes]

[Objectives: Generate insight into the conditions that support, or hinder, the development of design capability and the successful embedding of design within organisations]

Question 9. Thinking about an individual public sector organisation, what things need to be in place for good design to happen?

May want to probe/explore:

- Capabilities (skills, methods, tools)
- Culture (knowledge, attitudes, norms, ways of working)
- Processes and practices (defining goals, measuring outcomes, project management)
- Leadership, planning, resource availability/prioritisation
- Structures (organisational, funding)
- Incentives
- Other personal and environmental factors

Question 10. What about the flip side, the barriers to great design? Does that add anything else to the list?

Question 11. Do you have any reflections on the ways in which good conditions for design have been created (or barriers overcome) in specific organisations you’ve worked with?

Part 4: Making a case for design [10 minutes]

[Objectives: Factors for consideration when building the investment case for design; inform investment criteria through discussion of key priority areas]

Queston 12. How have you championed design and got others on board with it?

Question 13. Have there been times you have faced resistance in making the case for design? Can you share with us what you did?

Queston 14. What would you say to help convince senior government decision makers and funders to care about design?

Queston 15. If we've got limited design capacity within the public sector, and limited money to spend on external design, where would you recommend that design is best focused to maximise public value? Why?

Queston 16. And what about investing in increasing that capacity – do you have thoughts on where the strongest case for investment might be?

Wrap-up [5 minutes]

Question 17. Is there anything we've missed? Any final thoughts you would like to share?

Many thanks for your time and hugely valuable contribution today. We will come back to you within seven days with the transcript of this interview and the key quotations which we will be recommending for inclusion in the Review. Any clarifications or edits you would like to make would then be requested in the following seven days.

If we have any further follow-up questions or points of clarification after we've reviewed your transcript, would you be happy for us to contact you with them?

Appendix C: Methodology: Further detail of analytical approach

Analytical Approach and Rationale

The analysis of interview data was carried out in two phases.

Phase 1:

We used the Framework Method[15] to support data-driven (inductive) analysis. This is a systematic approach to thematic analysis that uses a structured matrix-based output for mapping data. Material from transcripts was organised and summarised in an Excel spreadsheet, with participants assigned to individual rows (cases) and question areas of the interview forming the columns (codes). This allowed for multiple ways of comparing and contrasting data, both across and within individual cases.

This stage of coding generated the themes that formed the core sections of the report, as set out in Table C1.

[15] Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C.M., & Ormston, R. (Eds.). (2003). Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers. London: Sage. For more detail about these analytical approaches, please consult the Social Research Association's guidance at: Thematic analysis: Choosing a suitable approach.

Table C1: Parent and sub-codes captured in our matrix output, and how they read across to the themes discussed in the sections of this report.

Parent code	Sub-codes	Report sections with relevant themes
Lived experience of design[16]	• Description of experience/work/approach • Use of 'design' • Examples of design • Non-UK context	- - - -
Good public design	• Meaning of 'good' design • What skills are needed • Value of design • Public/private sector distinction • Current state of design • Future potential	2 2 3 2 5 6
Enabling conditions	• Enablers • Barriers • Leadership	4 4 4
Making the case for design	• Ask of senior leaders • Overcoming resistance • Investment • Requirements	6 6 6 6

[16] The interview questions relating to lived experience of design were intended to build rapport and generate a first insight into how participants described their work (see Appendix B). As such, this data was intended to inform and complement that which was gathered elsewhere and so was not reported in a discrete report section.

Phase 2:

We determined that a rich area of findings relating to ‘good’ public design (reported in Section 2) would benefit from further analysis. To assist this process, we used NVivo.[17]

Our first round of coding in NVivo captured all references to design practices and included exploratory codes such as 'case studies,' 'personal journeys,' and 'design mindset.' In subsequent rounds, we refined references to design practices into 'what' (descriptions of design practices) and 'why' (mechanisms by which design practices lead to outcomes) categories. We eventually grouped these under three parent codes: 'collaboration,' 'envisioning,' and 'grounded,' which we later re-labelled as 'end-to-end collaboration,' 'deep insight into people, communities, and systems,' and 'creating and improving policies and services’.

Theme Generation and Validation

We generated themes through iterative rounds of grouping, coding and team discussion. We grouped the initial codes into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. We tested these groupings against the data through re-coding and by cross-referencing with transcript excerpts. We validated the final themes through team consensus.

Team Calibration

To ensure consistency across the research team, regular meetings were held to discuss emerging groupings of findings, coding iterations, and to resolve discrepancies. Russell Henshaw led the NVivo coding process with oversight from Cate Fisher and Kayleigh Edmundson. We maintained a diary to document evolving coding decisions and facilitate transparency and consistency. This diary also served as a reference for refining the coding framework and ensuring alignment across the research team.

[17] NVivo is qualitative analysis software used to manage, code, and analyse unstructured data such as interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and field notes.

Ethical Considerations and Interpretive Risks

To ensure compliance with data protection legislation, data protection and confidentiality protocols were established for the collection, storage, processing and retention of participant data. These were communicated to participants as part of gaining their informed consent to take part in interviews.

Personal data was held in restricted folders on DWP servers, only accessible by members of the research team. In order to enable outbound sharing of draft findings with participants for their validation and review, and maintain confidentiality until explicit consent for the use of quotations/attributions was gained, participant names were replaced with numbers and these numbers were individually communicated to participants.

We paid close attention to interpretive risks, particularly in distinguishing between public and private design (Section 2.4). Feedback from participants indicated that our initial interpretations may have oversimplified this distinction. In response, we conducted multiple coding iterations to ensure nuanced representation. We sorted and referenced data in Excel summaries to substantiate analytical claims and mitigate bias.

Appendix D: Glossary

Agile: A project management approach that emphasises iterative development, collaboration, and flexibility.

Chief design officer: A senior executive role dedicated to integrating design into organisational decision-making.

Co-design: A participatory approach that involves including end-users in the creation of policies, services, or products.

Community of practice: A group of people sharing a common interest, problem or profession who come together regularly to learn, share knowledge, and improve skills.

Design labs: Teams or organisations that experiment with novel approaches to complex challenges.

Design principles: Principles often based on evidence or user needs to be considered when addressing a problem. Often first developed after the early stages of defining a problem prior to designing solutions.

Design thinking: A problem-solving approach that works through understanding user needs, generating creative solutions, and iterating through prototypes and feedback.

Design Thought Leader: An individual who plays a pioneering role in bringing design into public services, showcasing its transformative potential.

Digital mindset: An orientation towards understanding and leveraging digital technologies in the context of business processes and innovation.

Enabling conditions: Conditions necessary for public design approaches to thrive, such as evolving costing and appraisal approaches, devolving decision-making to local levels, adopting team-based approaches, and more.

Ethnography: A qualitative research approach that involves immersion in the daily lives of people to understand their perspectives and experiences in context.

Facilitation: The act of guiding others through a process, including workshops or entire projects, helping a group achieve its objectives collaboratively.

Failure demand: Additional work that organisations must do because services do not meet user needs. For example, where a letter sent to a customer does not provide clear information, leading to that customer contacting them for clarification and thereby creating more work for the organisation.

Human-centred design: A design approach that puts the needs, wants, and limitations of end users at the forefront of each decision in the design process.

Ideation: The process of generating, developing, and exploring ideas to solve problems or create innovative solutions.

Inductive analysis: A data-driven approach to thematic analysis where themes are identified from the data without preconceived categories.

Iteration: The process of refining and improving a design based on feedback and testing.

Lived experience research: Qualitative research into people’s firsthand experiences to inform policies and services, sometimes employing them as co-creators in the research process.

Mental models: Internal representations that people use to understand ideas and the world around them.

Minimal viable product (MVP): A product with the minimum features necessary to satisfy early adopters and provide feedback for future development.

Organisational capability: The skills, resources, and frameworks within an organisation that enable it to effectively implement design practices.

Organisational redesign: The process of restructuring an organisation to improve its efficiency, effectiveness, and alignment with strategic goals.

Outcome contribution framework: A method for understanding how different actions or interventions contribute to achieving specific results within a complex system.

Place-based approaches: Increasing focus on local decision-making to support holistic policies and services, systems-thinking, and co-design with communities.

Policy design: The process of creating policies that are informed by design principles and methods to address societal challenges effectively.

Prototyping: The process of creating early models or versions of a design to test and refine concepts, functionalities, and user interactions.

Public design[18]: Refers to all types of design practiced in, with, or for the public sector in response to policy problems or goals, including communication design, content design, interaction design, service design, strategic design, and policy design.

Public sector innovation: The development and implementation of new ideas, products, services, and processes within public sector organisations to improve outcomes and efficiency.

Public value: The value created by public organisations through their services and initiatives, focusing on the benefits to society as a whole.

Qualitative interviews: Research interviews that aim to gather in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences through open-ended questions and discussions.

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs): An experimental method used to measure the effectiveness of interventions by randomly assigning subjects to either the intervention or a control group, thereby isolating the impact of the intervention from other contextual influences on observed results.

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[18] See here for a full discussion of the components of public design: Public Design in the UK Government: A review of the Landscape and its Future Development (PDF) and here: Public Design in the UK Government: A review of the Landscape and its Future Development (HTML)

Root cause analysis: Identifying the fundamental underlying issues that cause problems, rather than just addressing the symptoms.

Service design principles: Guidelines and best practices for designing services that meet the needs of users effectively and efficiently.

Silos: Organisational structures where departments or teams operate in isolation from one another, often leading to inefficiencies.

Systemic barriers: Challenges and constraints that may arise repeatedly throughout organisations or systems due to factors upheld by structures, contexts or incentives.

Systemic enablers: Factors at the organisational or systemic level that support the adoption and effectiveness of design practices.

Thematic analysis: A method of analysing qualitative data by identifying and reporting patterns within the data.

T-shaped skills: A concept referring to individuals who have deep expertise in at least one area (the vertical bar of the 'T') and broad skills and knowledge across multiple areas (the horizontal bar of the 'T').

User engagement: The process of involving users in the design process aiming to understand user perspectives and experiences to co-design, test, and iterate solutions.

User experience: The experience of a person using a product, system, or service.

User journeys: The end-to-end experience of an individual as they interact with a service, system or product. Often represented using visual maps that may depict key touchpoints, needs, pain points and decisions.

Whole-life costing models: Costing models that consider the full lifecycle costs and benefits of a project or initiative, rather than just initial expenditure and outcomes.