

# National place leadership: three steps to filling the gap in England

## A DISCUSSION PAPER

---

### Introduction

In his personal introduction to *The Farrell Review* Sir Terry argued: “We need [place] leadership from private and public sectors that is not subject to short-term political cycles and changes of government or driven by short-term profits and share values”. In making the argument he identifies a gap in place leadership at the national level that needs to be urgently addressed.

Building on the work of *The Farrell Review* and drawing from ongoing AHRC funded research at The Bartlett UCL<sup>1</sup>, this discussion paper presents a number of ideas for how the English design leadership gap can be filled in a collaborative, dynamic and fiscally neutral manner. These ideas are not meant to be a blueprint, but instead are designed to stimulate debate in the hope that following cross-sector discussion interested parties can come together around a common set of principles on which to then seek national political backing.

Addressing this issue is vital because it will also represent a first step to tackling many of the other recommendations made by *The Farrell Review*.

### High quality design adds value: a political consensus

Successive Governments have placed great value on the quality of the built environment, believing in the importance of high quality design to:

- Intrinsically enhance the appearance and perceived quality of places
- Make places more social and liveable and enhance quality of life
- Support the economic viability of development
- Deliver a range of sustainability benefits
- Make new development more acceptable to communities worried about the impact on their neighbourhoods.

This intuitive sense about the value of design was confirmed by a range of research projects commissioned and published by the Commission for

Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE) during the noughties which demonstrated that good design, particularly when focussed on ‘the place’ in a holistic sense, leads to a wide range of economic, social and environmental benefits, and does not necessarily cost more to deliver.

From the Quality in Town & Country initiative of the mid 1990s to the pursuit of Urban Renaissance, and from the Sustainable Communities agenda to Localism today, the drive for design and place quality has found a national political consensus. Today the National Planning Policy Framework reminds us: ‘*Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, is indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.*’

Yet with the demise of public funding to CABE as a casualty of the recent fiscal tightening, there is no organisation in England with the resources and capacity to take forward this vitally important agenda in a manner that offers proactive leadership to the sector. This stands in stark contrast to other parts of the UK and, if the situation continues, could gradually undermine the profound improvements to place quality that we have witnessed over the last 20 years, and about which we should be rightly proud.

### Learning from the past but looking to the future

It will not be right to try and reinvent the past. First, we need to take the opportunity to step back and learn the lessons from recent experiences so that we can build on the successes and avoid the mistakes. Second, the context within which the governance of design (or place) happens has moved on. Today, a ready market exists and is delivering many core design governance services, most notably design review, but also some aspects of enabling, certification (e.g. BfL 2012), education, and even the preparation of good practice guidance. In such a context it is no longer necessary to deliver all such services from a single national organisation.

However, in the name of society, the environment and the broad public interest we need a national voice for place design, a meeting point for people and ideas, a coordinating hand, and a truly independent critical friend to government, local government, the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Evaluating the governance of design in the built environment – the CABE experiment and beyond* is a two year research programme led by Prof. Matthew Carmona and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC): [www.bit.ly/EvaluateCABE](http://www.bit.ly/EvaluateCABE)

place professions and the development sector at large. This, and design governance efforts across the country, needs to be properly and sustainably resourced.

## 1 **A first important step: let's meet**

As *The Farrell Review* demonstrated, huge enthusiasm, initiative and energy exists within the sector to contribute to a national drive for place quality. It is important to capitalise on this in order to establish a united front that can influence politicians of all political stripes at the highest level. Design has slipped down the national political agenda in recent years as short-term pressing needs have had to be addressed. It is only by working together that we can raise its profile once again and demonstrate that the quality of place has profound short and long-term impacts that also deserve to be prioritised.

It is proposed to kick off discussions at a cross-sector 'Big Meet' hosted by UCL with the aim of bringing together organisations from across the sector. This should include the professional institutes, local and national organisations involved in the governance of design, key industry bodies, local government representatives, academia, and organisations representing civil society and the amenity sector. The intention is to be inclusive and constructive and to bring parties together with the explicit intention of agreeing a cross-sector stance on design leadership.

## 2 **Step two: form a Place Alliance**

Whilst the Big Meet will be a first important opportunity to bring key players together, if the sector is to take on the mantle of leadership itself, as advocated in *The Farrell Review*, then it will be important to establish a representative body that can meet regularly to discuss the design agenda, seek to influence government, endorse high level policy, coordinate thinking, networks and available resources, and ensure its own constituent organisations are doing their best to further a renewed focus on place quality.

It is therefore proposed to form a Place Alliance from amongst the representative bodies at the Big Meet. An early agenda will be provided by how to enable a sector-wide focus on taking forward key recommendations from *The Farrell Review*, such a body should require very few resources to operate. Its key asset will be found in the commitment and enthusiasm of its constituent organisations, and its key strength will be that it provides a unified voice for the sector on the importance of design.

If it can speak with a single voice, the highly fragmented built environment sector will be hard to ignore. The pursuit of place quality, whether relating to existing places or new one, seems to be in everyone's interest, it is surely an objective around which we can unite.

## 3 **A vital third step: seek to establish an independent Place Council for England**

Whilst the Place Alliance will provide an important new forum for cross-sector engagement on the subject of design quality, in order for it to remain an open, inclusive and representative body, it will be important that it does not become engaged in day to day place governance activities. Instead a high priority for the Place Alliance should be to campaign for the early establishment of a Place Council for England (PlaCE)<sup>2</sup>.

This idea builds on the recommendation contained in *The Farrell Review* that a Place Leadership Council should be established to drive a cross-Governmental focus on place, led jointly by Government and industry. In this respect *The Farrell Review* highlights that the key gap left by the demise of a publically funded CABE is one of leadership.

However, research (already referred to) at The Bartlett, UCL suggests that to retain its independence any future place leadership organisation should avoid becoming an arm of, or agency for, Government. Preferably, also, it should be free from a reliance on annualised Government funding rounds, the inevitable waxing and waning priorities of Ministers and the uncertainties of funding through purely market mechanisms. Instead, in public interest, what is required is a truly independent critical friend to government, local government, the professions and the development sector at large.

### **Some core principles to agree on**

Any changes to the national place governance infrastructure will require governmental support, which also necessitates that both the Place Alliance and PlaCE are established with a clear public interest purpose: '*to promote, support and protect the quality and experience of place in the built environment*'.

But whilst the Place Alliance would be primarily a means to meet and debate cross-sector concerns, PlaCE would be strongly action oriented. It should be:

- A recognised leader – working to fill the current leadership gap and provide a clear

---

<sup>2</sup> Such an organisation may be an entirely new body or could evolve out of one or more existing organisations in the sector.

'national voice' on design by acting as a new hub for knowledge and innovation, that is proactively engaged with all key parties active in shaping the built environment

- Independent – not of, for, or reliant on funding from Government or any narrow private or industry source
- Collaborative – coordinating and supporting rather than competing against the current diaspora of place organisations; aiming to monitor the field and encourage others to deliver services first before intervening itself
- Challenging – exposing and disrupting poor practice where it exists, and cajoling all development and industry interests, public and private, to take the place agenda seriously
- Fiscally neutral – not a drain on the public purse, but instead core funded through a ring-fenced dedicated fund.

### **PlaCE, some options for setting it up**

To meet these objectives PlaCE might be best established by the Privy Council under a Royal Charter. Organisations such as the BBC, The Bank of England, the British Council and our Universities are set up in this way, an approach that is seen as enshrining greater independence for public interest organisations. The process can also be relatively speedy (a matter of months), although subsequent powers and responsibilities would need to be established under an Act of Parliament that would take longer and could follow later.

It is proposed that members of the Place Alliance would appoint the governing council from its membership, but there should also be representation from relevant government departments, local government, and from neutral parties such as the media, academia, and civil society.

Drawing from UCL's research, a number of existing and new tools might be used to deliver the core purpose of PlaCE:

- Conducting research, advocacy and campaigning around key place-based issues.
- A national centre for excellence and a central point for information, on-going debate and for coordinating expert advice to Government and others.
- Supporting a programme of targeted local design enabling through grant-making to suitably qualified organisations to conduct this service (not to conduct enabling itself).
- On the basis of representations, the power to direct schemes to be design reviewed by competent organisations (although not to conduct design reviews itself).
- Becoming a statutory consultee for design projects of exceptional national significance,

either because of their prominence as projects or because of their role representing a particular set of design concerns. This could be undertaken on an 'open source' basis.

- The power to hold Public Design Inquiries to examine critical design concerns of national importance, in the process holding to account key government departments, industry sectors, local government, and the professions.
- An annual *State of Place* report, constituting a rolling audit of design and place quality in different regions and / or markets
- Commissioning, coordinating or endorsing nationally important competitions, policy, guidance, standards and awards.
- A duty on all tiers of Government to have regard to the formal reports and recommendations of the PlaCE.

### **And finally, the question of funding**

Whilst the Place Alliance could be funded through a small membership charge to its constituent organisations, to operate effectively PlaCE would need a small infrastructure of skilled professionals that would be bolstered with a large network of volunteers.

To fund such an organisation in a manner that retains independence, a surcharge (Place-fee) of 1% might be levied on top of all planning application fees. This could be collected annually from local authorities in England and on current income this would raise around £2-2.5 million (£6 on the average planning application).

Such an income stream would be predictable, free from Government budget pressures, easy to collect, and would rise and fall with inflation and the market (more development activity more income and vice-versa). It could deliver a reliable core income that might be bolstered by the ability to raise further funding from government or industry for specific project-based purposes, although only up to a maximum of 100% of core income. Such a cap would keep the organisation relatively small and nimble and focussed on its core purpose without distraction.

Professor Matthew Carmona  
June 2014