

# Towards A Design Quality Unit For England

**Mission, Tools and Delivery**

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**Examples in boxes:**

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The Place Alliance advocates for place quality. It is focussed on the idea that through evidence and collaboration we can establish a culture whereby the quality of place becomes an everyday national and local priority. Place Alliance is open to all and brings together organisation and individuals who share the belief that the quality of our built environment has a profound influence on people's lives.

# TOWARDS A DESIGN QUALITY UNIT

The recently published [Planning White Paper](#) signals a significant new national commitment aimed at prioritising the design quality of new development. Reflecting the magnitude of this task and the low base from which, [too often](#), we are coming, a commitment is given to set up a new national body to support the transition to a more design-focussed planning system.

The white paper confirms that the transition that is required will be long-term, necessitating a dramatic up-skilling within local planning authorities, supported by appropriate national and local leadership on design. It is envisaged that a key role of the new body will be “to help local authorities make effective use of design guidance and codes, as well as performing a wider monitoring and challenge role for the sector in building better places”.

This pamphlet is intended to assist in the process of deciding what the i) mission, ii) tools of engagement and iii) modes of delivery of the new body might be. It is written in the spirit of encouraging and helping to shape a public debate, not of having all the answers. The steering group set up by Government to consider options for taking forward the initiative is very welcome. There is a huge body of expertise available to draw from to guide its deliberations, and it should hear from as diverse a body of opinion as possible – industry, professional, governmental and community – before coming to conclusions.

# MISSION

*To build a national culture in which the design and delivery of high quality development is routine, and where, as a consequence, place value is maximised*

The proposal for a new national body picks up on the idea for a Design Quality Unit (DQU) for England advocated in the pamphlet [Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious](#) which in turn built on Proposition 45 of the Building Better Beautiful Commission report [Living with Beauty](#). The pamphlet made the case for a body that acts across the country to help shift the national culture from one that is too often prepared to accept any development as long as it delivers new housing numbers, to one that prioritises and routinely expects the delivery of high quality development.

As the white paper argues, another way of understanding this is development that through its design achieves a net gain, rather than a harm. This is a challenge that is both measurable and achievable. It implies developments that are both beautiful and functional, and which, as a result, maximise 'place value' – enabling communities to live healthy, socially rich, economically productive lifestyles with minimal impact on the environment. This relates not only to the design of new residential areas (urban and rural), but also to how existing neighbourhoods, town and city centres, high streets and urban infrastructure is shaped and re-shaped over time, and how we, as a nation, can rise to the climate, ecological, housing and health emergencies that we face.

The challenge is to provide the long-term inclusive yet authoritative leadership on design of the built environment that such a culture change will require. The problems we face are well documented, success in addressing them will depend on approaches that: reach across Government and its agencies; bring together and harnesses the energies of the wide range of professional, industry, campaigning and advocacy organisations and experts in this field; influence developers and local government to consistently prioritise design; engage communities and help to give ordinary citizens the confidence that design quality, and their opinions on it, really matter.

This will not be an easy task. It will rely on the marshalling of the soft (non-regulatory) powers of design governance to encourage, persuade and cajole key players. Drawing on the experiences of the organisations backing this pamphlet, previous practices in England, and [best practices from elsewhere](#), it is possible to envisage four key tools of engagement and to recommend how a Design Quality Unit might organise delivery of its programmes.

### **The challenge – overcoming systemic design failures**

*A Housing Design Audit for England* is the latest in a long line of reports that demonstrate the systemic failures to deliver high quality urban design. It demonstrated that three quarters of new housing developments in England are mediocre or poor in their design quality; a fifth so poor that they should have been refused planning permission outright; and that less-affluent communities are hit hardest by poor design. Common failures include: a lack of character and sense of place; highways, bins and parking dominated environments; poor walkability and high car dependence; low street coherence and connectivity and poor access to local amenities and facilities; an absence of bio-diversity, street greenery and ambition on raising energy efficiency standards.

# **TOOLS**

**Support, Engage, Monitor, Inspire**

# 1. TO SUPPORT

**Enhancing design skills is the fundamental starting point for place quality requiring hands-on enabling of practice locally and dedicated, affordable, training**

A key feature of many countries – when compared with the UK – is a much smaller division between their architectural, planning and engineering professions. This leads to a greater integration of design thinking into planning and a heightened urbanistic sensibility within architecture and engineering. Even where design sensibilities are generally higher, mechanisms are found to supplement local capacity. In England the need is urgent and fundamental.

The White Paper rightly points to the major capacity and skills issues in English local planning authorities around design and we can also point to a similar dearth of those skills in many large housebuilders and in highways authorities. Retrofitting design thinking into planning in England will take many years, requiring the better integration of urban design skills into degree programmes and their prioritisation subsequently in practice. In the short-term a successful model that has been used extensively in the past and which is still used intermittently today is [‘enabling’](#). Enabling involves the temporary deployment of experienced external professional advisors within local authorities (and communities) for a short and focused period of work in order to boost local design skills and capacity when dealing with complex projects, such as the preparation of new local codes, the use and integration of new PlanTech or the preparation of neighbourhood plans.

Bolstering such efforts and supporting them both financially and logistically should be an early priority for a Design Quality Unit. This might work alongside a national design training programme to which local planning and highways authorities could bid for funds to meet their design training needs in a more hands-on and focussed manner than much traditional CDP. One key lesson from previously disastrous

national training initiatives e.g. the short lived [Academy for Sustainable Communities](#) was that for training to be effective, it has to reflect what the trainee and their organisation want to learn – not what a training funder wants them to learn; helping to drive a holistic understanding of form-based, social, functional and process concerns as they relate to the planning and design of the urban environment.

Stimulating demand rather than supply could help to overcome this. It would avoid undermining the programmes of existing specialist design training providers, whilst stimulating competition between suppliers and raising standards. The role of the Design Quality Unit would be to distribute funds, monitor supply, spread best practice, ensure equitable provision across the country, and work with industry (notably the housebuilders) to ensure that training extends beyond the public sector.

### Enabling local design capacity in France

The French Councils of Architecture, Planning and the Environment ([CAUE](#)) provide a wide range of professional enabling, negotiation and advice to stakeholders. CAUE exist in almost all French Departments for the promotion and development of architectural, urban and environmental quality. Besides developing guidance about architecture, urban design and heritage, they support clients (public, private and community) with free educational and technical advice on the different phases of a project and building work. The CAUEs are represented by a national Federation, through a network of CAUEs organised regionally and nationally. CAUE can also enter into partnerships with other organisations that help to deliver their objectives of raising awareness and building capacity within localities.

## 2. TO ENGAGE

### Local and national expertise should be harnessed through a networked approach

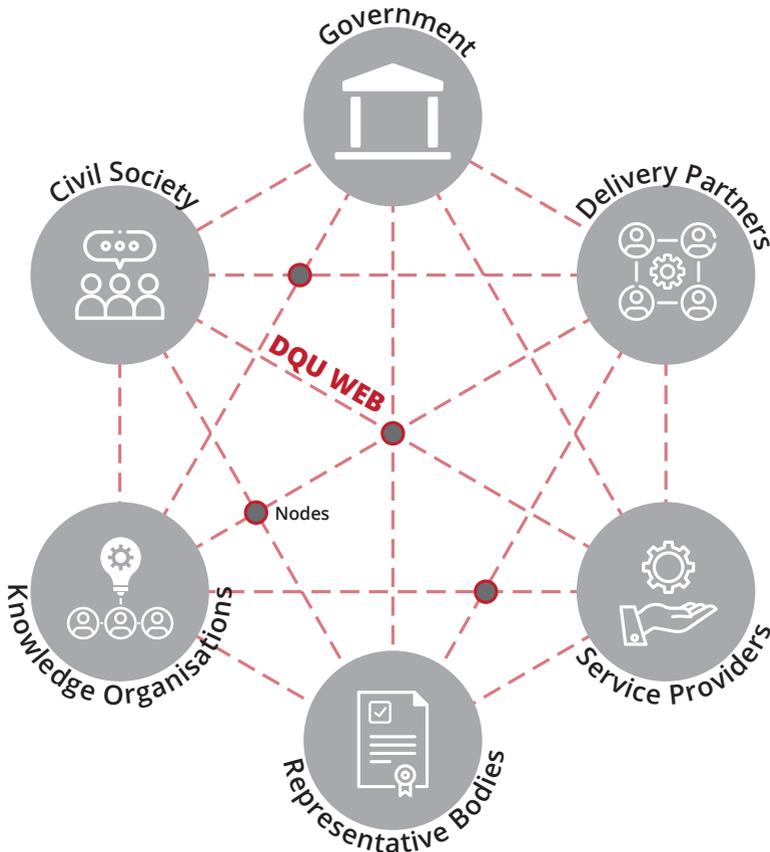
Whilst an influential national voice can shape the national conversation on, culture of, and priority given to design quality, ultimately delivery has to be local, reflecting a full understanding of local need and circumstances. Trying to do too much from the centre will undermine local initiative, but just as a rising tide will float all boats, stronger leadership from the centre will help to raise the profile of, and commitment to delivering, better design right across the country.

Experience from elsewhere suggests that a small and agile team nationally can have a huge impact, but only if they reach out to work with an inclusive network of local partners. The need is for collaborative rather than a top-down leadership and for a networked rather than hierarchical approach to how a new body should communicate, organise itself and ultimately deliver its mission.

In England, the network of interested parties is complex and includes:

- Government, its departments and agencies
- Delivery partners (public and private), who are on the frontline engaging in project development and delivery, notably developers, local authorities (including the new Chief Officers for Design and Place-making), and funders
- Service providers, who provide services to the delivery partners, including organisations such as those represented in the Design Network, the Design Council, local architecture and design centres, and a host of consultants

- Representative bodies, such as the professional institutes and industry associations representing critical bodies of expertise or Civic Voice and the CPRE with their networks of local civic societies and country groups
- Knowledge organisations, who contribute research or training in the sector, notably the universities, campaigning organisations and think tanks
- Civil society, namely the communities and citizens who ultimately live with development.



A Design Quality Unit should not attempt to direct or corral these diverse parties, but should positively engage them in developing and delivering its programmes of work. [\*Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious\*](#) envisaged a 'hub-and-spokes' model, but more valuable would be a 'web-based model', in which all parties within the web are connected and engaged in delivery in a manner that allows all to feel committed to, enthused by, and an integral part of the whole, with intelligence and learning flowing through the web in all directions not just from the top down. In such a model the Design Quality Unit would be the web itself activated through the use of the latest technologies, whilst the delivery of defined programmes of work might be delivered through the establishment of a series of time-limited nodes hosted by different organisations around the country.

Working in this way would allow the Unit to be aspatial and highly collaborative – distributed across the country (hosted by partners in the network) – avoiding the need for expensive offices, and allowing its work to exist at the delivery coalface with a clear understanding of local constraints and delivery models, rather than in the bubble of a head office. An early exercise would involve mapping the ecology of partners and their resources (e.g. existing panels of experts) around the country and understanding how they can best be engaged in such a mutually supportive network. Critical amongst these will be the envisaged Chief Officers for Design and Place-making in every local authority.

## Engaging a network in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, several mechanisms encourage a networked approach to the governance of design. The Dutch [College van Rijksadviseurs](#) (Government advisors on architecture and urbanism) initiated a system of spatial quality teams ([Q-teams](#)) across the country and these were set up by local or provincial authorities and national agencies to provide independent advice on spatial developments and urban development plans. Meanwhile [Architectuur Lokaal foundation](#), an independent centre of expertise and information on architecture and urbanism, is supported by four Ministries (heritage, town planning, environment and transport) to act as a link between national policies and local practices. They facilitate local stakeholders – public and private – to deliver national policies and act as a conduit of local experience to inform national decision-making. The foundation links to the country's extensive network of architecture centres (35 in total) and Bouwmeesters (city architects).

# 3. TO MONITOR

**An independent, national voice supporting programmes that are evidence-based and grounded in a willingness to challenge poor practice**

Over the decades, attitudes to design quality have waxed and waned in Government. Perhaps as a consequence, local government and developers don't always take policy statements – no matter how enlightened – very seriously. The need is to shift place quality permanently from the 'nice to have' category into the 'required' category, and to do this local stakeholders need to be convinced that it is in their interests to do so. Any new national body should therefore start with the evidence: what is being delivered, what do communities want, which approaches work and which do not, how can best practice be facilitated and disseminated, how do practices vary in local markets, and so on.

An ongoing and independent audit and reporting function should be a critical component of the new Design Quality Unit's remit. This might encompass a periodic (e.g. triennial) National Design Audit similar to the recent [Housing Design Audit for England](#), prepared in a manner that could feed directly into local digital planning frameworks and including an in-depth survey of community views. More regular deep-dive audits could supplement this work, focussed on investigating particular known challenges, types of locality, development types, procurement routes, and so forth, whilst a research programme could help to ensure that the work of the Design Quality Unit and the sector remains evidence-based and informed by the latest sector-wide intelligence.

In this way a Design Quality Unit could emulate, for the built environment, what the [Office for Budget Responsibility](#) does for the economy or the [Committee on Climate Change](#) for the larger environment. Such a model would allow the unit to become a trusted and independent voice whose programmes of work and ongoing advocacy for design quality are based on evidence and an ability to call out poor practice wherever it is found.

### Monitoring to focus minds in Germany

To inject a new commitment to its baukultur (literally building culture) in 2006, the German Federal government approved an Act establishing the [Federal Foundation for Baukultur](#) based in Potsdam. The Foundation is an independent organisation, funded by the state and working in partnership with it to promote baukultur, although not dictated by it. Whilst the Foundation promotes public discussion through events, networking and publications, its main focus is on the production of biennial reports on the state of German baukultur. It has the right to present these to the Federal Cabinet and Parliament and the Government is required to respond. As one of the few organisations with such a power, the Foundation is taken very seriously in Germany and is a key means to keep the national focus on design quality.

## 4. TO INSPIRE

**Programmes should be engaging, innovative, inspiring and collaborative, avoiding duplicating or undermining what others are already doing**

Whilst a Design Quality Unit would need to engage with formal regulatory processes, notably through its enabling activities, its only formal power should be the right to conduct national design audits and to receive a formal response from Government. Reliance on informal (non-regulatory) approaches and programmes will keep the new body open to innovative ideas, dependent on collaborations to maximise its impact, and fleet of foot enough to innovate as and when required.

Alongside monitoring, the planning white paper explicitly identifies a 'challenge' role for the new body. This can be addressed through the support and engage functions, but an important dimension of this work should be to inspire others about what is possible. This can involve direct advocacy of innovation and best practice through events, hands-on activities, and publication, for example building and curating an online national case study library of inspiring development projects at home and abroad, and producing practice guidance based on the experiences and collective wisdom of the network as gained through enabling, training and other tools.

The experience of COVID-19 has shown how powerful new technologies have become in helping us to stay in touch and up-to-date, and the library might form part of a larger national portal in which training, events, talks and guidance – curated with and delivered by local partners – are advertised, coordinated and made available nationally before inclusion in a digital library.

In England design review services (where used) provide a vital input of critical and constructive professional comment into design processes. There is now a successful market operating in these services, and whilst the Design Quality Unit should not offer design review itself, it could have an important role in encouraging and expanding this market, ensuring that the benefits of design review are maintained following any changes to the national planning system, and providing a means to share experiences, monitor standards and practices and encourage innovation in design review.

The White Paper argues the case for a stronger community voice in planning, and notably in the design of development. A Design Quality Unit could lead on this work, auditing existing public engagement methodologies and developing, trialling and rolling out new collaborative and engagement mechanisms nationally, building on the experience of existing centres of expertise around the county. Such engagement should use design to bring the community voice into the planning processes in an early and fundamental way whilst not undermining other tools such as design review. Potentially this might be focussed on the production of Coordinating codes as recommended in the White Paper, giving communities a tangible say in how development is shaped.

Developing a systematic approach to best practice engagement around the delivery of the new style local plans could be an early priority of a Design Quality Unit. In the medium-term it might reach out to schools and teachers, helping to educate the next generations about the importance of a well designed built environment and their place within and eventually as guardians of it.

## Inspiring early engagement in Scotland

[Architecture & Design Scotland](#) is the national advisor on design in Scotland. Realising that its greatest influence comes at the start of the development process, it has reshaped its tools of engagement to inject a strong design emphasis at that point. Its approach to design review, for example, has seen a shift away from a combative national design panel towards a more measured, iterative and collaborative process of nurturing and enabling well-designed buildings and places, and involving communities in the process. It has launched a Pre-Design service to ensure that placemaking is at the heart of local housing strategies by building the right conditions for better design outcomes, it has championed the use of charettes, and has worked with others to develop the 'Place Standard' assessment tool, which provides a simple framework to structure conversations about place and its physical elements, allowing users to consider all the elements of a place in a methodical way.

# **DELIVERY**

**Cross-cutting, Influential, Agile and  
Affordable**

# CROSS-CUTTING

The white paper envisaged no single model for the proposed body, although three possible options are listed: i) a new arms-length body reporting to Government, ii) a new centre of expertise within Homes England, or iii) reinforcing the existing network of architecture and design centres. These don't need to be mutually exclusive, and if – as already recommended – a web-based model is adopted, then the Design Quality Unit could incorporate elements from all three options:

- First, establishing the unit as a focussed and free-standing arms-length agency of Government (rather than a unit within a Ministry or existing NDPB), would have the principal advantage that the unit remains focussed on its core responsibility – design quality – and directly accountable for its work
- Second, linking the unit formally to Homes England through a secondary funding and management agreement would hard-wire a key delivery relationship in from the start
- Third, adopting a web-based model for delivery would build upon, reinforce and connect up the existing expertise around the country, ensuring that the capacity and potential of the network multiplies to become much more than the sum of the parts.

Such an arrangement would write the collaborative network into the DNA of the new organisation whilst ensuring the right balance is maintained between a long-term and independent outlook and any delivery objectives set by funding bodies. A Memorandum of Operations (similar to that between the OBR and the Treasury) could define the need to engage with and deliver through existing and local design governance infrastructure wherever possible.

The most logical sponsor department would be the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, but secondary sponsorship from the Department for Transport, Homes England and potentially from other government partners e.g. Department of Health, DEFRA, DCMS, and Active Travel England could reinforce a national drive for quality and build a committed cross-governmental arm to the work. Each would be represented on a Management Board that also includes representatives from each of the other five categories of stakeholders encompassed in the web, and notably industry, local government and civil society groups, and a suitably diverse membership from across the country.

## INFLUENTIAL

A wide range of informal tools of urban design governance can be used to persuade and advocate, including research, guidance, promotion of best practice, competitions, awards, sponsoring exemplar projects, exhibitions, experimentation e.g. temporary interventions, new tools for public engagement, and so on. With limited resources, a Design Quality Unit will have to prioritise what to back and what to leave, but much of its work will be associated with amplifying what others within its network are already doing in order that every initiative meet its potential and contributes to the national culture change.

The ultimate success of a Design Quality Unit should be judged on whether it was able to meet its mission to deliver long-term and permanent culture change in England, notably if and when the design of development was routinely prioritised in all development

decisions. A starting point on this journey might be injecting a stronger culture of design quality into the planning system through supporting the greater use of local design codes, but right from the start the ambition should be greater. The new body should work towards a fundamental change within and across all levels and arms of government, including in highways authorities, across industry, notably within the volume housebuilders, and across society at large, in order to raise demand for good design.

### Delivering culture change in Switzerland

The idea that how we shape the built environment also shapes the culture in which we live and work is not new, but the desire to systematically move it beyond woolly aspiration and into the lifeblood of the national (and international) debate is new. In early 2020, for example, the Swiss government adopted their first Federal [Baukultur Strategy](#), which clusters the Baukultur-related operations of the different federal offices together and defines binding goals for the state relating to how it will exploit its role as developer, owner, operator, regulator, sponsor and role model over the coming years. Such initiatives are about building a culture of great place-making and design in which sub-standard or mediocre is no longer good enough.

No less than a national educational process is required. Only the Government – via a Design Quality Unit – has the authority to bring this off.

# AGILE AND AFFORDABLE

To deliver through the four key tools of engagement will require a new body with enough capacity itself to harness the national expertise that already exists and to reinforce it in a concerted and directed manner leading to long-term culture change. A rolling five-year commitment to fund the work of the Design Quality Unit would give the new body the confidence to plan and to have an impact.

Given the size of the challenges and the need to make rapid progress, an initial minimum annual budget of £10million would be required, administered through a small and agile central team of around 30, with four fifths of the funding (£8million) allocated to spend by partners within its web. A spending profile might look like this:

- £2million, engage functions – core staffing, network building and associated costs
- £4million, support function – enabling across England
- £2.5million, support function – training provision across England
- £1million, inspire functions – online, off-line and community voice
- £0.5million, monitor functions – audit and research.

Whilst we live in uncertain times, one certainly is that if we fail to invest in a well designed built environment we will be greatly impoverished as a result. We can avoid that, but we need to make this small and critical national investment now!



Copies of this pamphlet can  
be downloaded from

[www.placealliance.org.uk](http://www.placealliance.org.uk)