INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Design

Re-connecting policymaking and delivery

- Design engages with policy problems by centring the experience of public service users or citizens and challenging the separation between how policy is made and how it is delivered.

- By deploying a range of practical, collective and creative activities and skills, design works iteratively to help form, validate and realise policy ambitions whilst helping to make visible and mitigate the challenges of delivery in relation to people's everyday lives. Working in this way can help governments to deliver across a range of priorities.

- Design is now embedded in government, in digital services, public services and policy teams and its impact is evident in a growing number of examples, but work remains to marshal a credible and compelling evidence-base to deliver on its potential for policymaking.

Why design?

Former Permanent Secretary for the UK's Department for Education and Head of the Civil Service Policy Profession, **Jonathan Slater**, makes the case that design can helpfully shift the policymaking conversation from 'I wonder what the Minister wants?' to bringing ideas to the Minister rooted in insights from people's lived experience.

The use of design in policy could look like creating an evidence-based visualisation of a user's journey through a public service or prototyping an improvement to a service before implementing more widely, developing a digital interface for a service, engaging with service users to understand and map a policy problem or using designed objects to help make alternatives tangible and imagine new possibilities (Richardson et al., 2025).

By using a range of practical, collective and creative activities and skills, design works iteratively to help form, validate and realise policy ambitions whilst helping to anticipate, make visible and mitigate the challenges of delivery (Kimbell et al., 2025). By challenging the separation between policymaking and delivery, which continues to persist in government, design is perceived to have the potential to "reinvent the art and craft of policymaking for the twenty-first century" (Bason, 2014: 2).

Why now?

In a context of heightened urgency and uncertainty on matters from the climate emergency to the future of our global economy and a rapidly changing social context, governments also face system complexities which exacerbate the challenge of delivering on policy intent. As this *Innovations in Public Policy* series demonstrates, there is shared recognition of the opportunity to diversify the repertoire of policymakers, including with the use of design.

Design can deliver across a range of priorities for the current UK government.by offering new ways of doing things that are grounded in lived experiences and work better in people's lives, that look across systems rather than working in silos, and that have been de-risked by testing and learning during development (Kimbell et al., 2025).

Using design in policymaking and government also does valuable democratic work. By engaging with citizens and service users to define or map problems and develop solutions, design also offers a means of building legitimacy and repairing connections across our democratic systems (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020). Echoing Slater's argument, democratic theorist Michael Saward (2025) argues that design can not only work to embrace the insights of people locally but also shift how democratic governance is organised and works.

Delivering on government priorities through design

Design is being used to innovate policymaking and public administration (Design Council 2025) in what has been described as a 'present day design wave' (van Buuren et al., 2020). This is evidenced in the embedding of design approaches and skills across the UK government and internationally over recent decades. For example, the growing number of 'innovation' or 'policy labs', professional designers working in government and the institutionalisation of design, such as with the UK government's Government Digital Service, across the Policy Design Community, and within the NHS and other public services. '**Public design**' – an emerging term – also underpins the **'test and learn'** mission-based approach to tackling significant policy challenges now being driven by the UK Cabinet Office.

Illustrations of the use of design in government and policy now proliferate, across central and local government, and internationally. For example, to address concerns about the low take-up of initiatives to deliver on government priorities, the UK Government's Department for Education (DfE) worked with teachers to look at education from their perspective (Hope and Knight 2021). They found that teachers were faced with unrelenting 'waves' of change within a complex and congested policy landscape. Using this insight, the DfE decided to prioritise the area with highest return on investment, teacher recruitment and retention. By organising the system in a way that would make sense to a teacher at each stage of their career, the pilot reduce the number of people dropping out of the process allowing for 600 more trainees extra to successfully enter the teaching profession each year. The new service is also providing rich data to inform innovation in other areas.

Another example is an **award-winning projec**t by design consultancy Engine for HM Courts and Tribunals Service that involved a wide range of people involved in immigration and asylum appeals including people making appeals, lawyers, officials, judges and others to identify issues in the current service and map out and prototype a new service. Focusing on appellants' journeys with insight gained from co-design sessions allowed different parts of the justice system to collaborate more effectively.

At a local level, the University of the Arts London's Service Futures Lab has worked with Southwark Council to develop the Climate Studio supporting place-based climate action (Salinas 2022). The Studio worked with local community organisations and engaged over 100 young residents to envision better food systems. A series of 'what if' prompts inspired locally and from multi-cultural contexts were used to reframe and creatively develop alternative policy proposals. One of which, 'Gardening Duty' - inspired by jury duty – promoted making collective caring for green spaces mandatory. These proposals then informed the borough's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Internationally, the European Commission's EU Policy Lab working in the City of Malmö, Sweden used 'counterfactual world-making' to develop radical concepts for future governance (Hillgren et al., 2020). Teams of designers, researchers and policymakers were each given a short narrative depiction of a specific scenario and encouraged to imagine living in it, create a story of its wider world and then make a representation of it to pinpoint particular features. Working in this way allowed policymakers to 'consider, create and resist playful alternatives to business-as-usual' (Hillgren et al., 2022, p. 122).

Where next?

Work to conceptualise (Richardson et al., 2025), expand (Kimbell et al., 2022) and synthesise (Kimbell et al., 2025) how design can relate to and support policy and public services is developing apace. Building this momentum and credibility for public

design will enable its creative, engaged and practical contribution to policy to be further realised. In a context where government will be judged on how it delivers change and connects with the lives of ordinary people, design has a crucial role to play.

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