

Delivering Urban Quality

Time To Get Serious

The Case For A Design Quality Unit For England



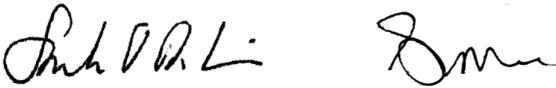
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A GREAT PLACE TO START

let's move forward together

In February, the organisations behind this pamphlet sent a letter to the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, congratulating the Government on its increasing commitment to deliver a better designed built environment and collectively welcoming the broad thrust of analysis and advice advanced by the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC).

We argued:

1. We have been systematically failing to deliver good quality urban design across England for decades, particularly in our new residential environments
2. Building on recent initiatives, there is now a once in a generation opportunity for the Government to show real leadership and ambition to help turn the tide
3. To drive the necessary culture change requires focus, capacity, leadership and resourcing
4. The Government should start by setting up a dedicated Design Quality Unit for England in order to confront the challenges head on and focus attention on the delivery of better design
5. We stand ready to work with Government and others to make this happen.

This pamphlet sets out how.

The BBBBC has given us a great place to start. Now it is time to get serious about delivering design quality.

WHY

do we need a design quality unit?

There is a direct and indisputable link between the quality of places and their place value, or how they enable users to sustain healthy, socially rich, economically productive lifestyles that minimise environmental impact. As the UK looks to strengthen its global position whilst levelling up at home and tackling the climate and ecological emergency, it will be ever more important that the quality of our urban environments enables us to compete for international talent and investment whilst enhancing the everyday well-being and quality of life for all.



The BBBBC's proposals come at a time when, care of the recently published Housing Design Audit for England, there is clear evidence that government guidance and policy on design and sustainability is not being effectively implemented. On the basis of the experience of the past two decades, it is difficult to see how the BBBBC's propositions will be delivered without a determined and very public effort by Government that also reaches out and harnesses the knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment of the sector.

The BBBBC report offers a valuable analysis and template for the Government and the country to re-focus our collective attention on the quality of the places in which we live. To carry this forward will require an organisation with the capacity,

focus and resourcing to help drive the culture change that is required, across Government (national and local), across industry and across the country at large, in city, town and country.

We conclude:

- Across the Germanic countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), the notion of Baukultur (building culture) is being driven at the highest levels in order to move the expectation of design quality into the lifeblood of these nations. This requires commitment, persistence and resourcing over the long term, in Germany fronted by the Federal Foundation of Baukultur.
- At home, Architecture + Design Scotland are at the forefront of a similar drive to change the culture of design in Scotland and use their staff of 27 to actively promote, support and monitor the delivery of design quality.

**England needs its own properly
resourced Design Quality Unit**

HOW

might a design quality unit operate?

In Proposition 45 of *Living with Beauty* the BBBBC recommend the establishment of a ‘time-limited’ body to monitor the implementation of the report. We welcome this recommendation, but in order to sufficiently help deliver the fundamental changes that the situation requires, we suggest it needs to go further.



The ambition should be for a Design Quality Unit for England that is longer term and authoritative, with the ability to reach across Government departments and its agencies, bring together and harness the energies of the wide range of professional, industry, campaigning and advocacy organisations and experts in this field, whilst influencing developers and local government and helping to give ordinary citizens and communities the confidence that design quality really matters.



A design quality unit should ‘monitor’, ‘challenge’, ‘inspire’ and ultimately help to ‘deliver’ real change.

Using a range of informal advocacy, persuasion and information tools, rather than new formal powers, such a unit could address four allied missions:

- **To monitor** – what is being delivered across the built environment in an ongoing and authoritative manner in order that Government policy can be appropriately shaped and implemented and challenges and opportunities understood across the diverse contexts (urban, suburban and rural) and local economies of England
- **To challenge** – through using evidence, advocacy and advisory means to engage with Government, its agencies (particularly Homes England and the Planning Inspectorate), local government, industry and professional and community stakeholders in order to help drive a culture change and establish design quality as a fundamental and ever-present pre-requisite for shaping the built environment
- **To inspire** – through gathering and publicising best practice, working across the country with regional centres of excellence (as advocated in BBBBC Proposition 39) to address skills and capacity concerns, and instigating a programme of focused championing within local government and beyond to demonstrate the art of the possible and to encourage local stakeholders to rise to the challenge.
- **To deliver** – responding to local need by instigating a programme of focused support and enabling within local government and other public and private partners aimed at reinforcing and enhancing local policy and guidance frameworks, briefing sites and projects, preparing local design codes, engaging local communities in design, and putting in place the local processes and parameters that would ultimately lead to better quality design.

LOOKING FORWARD, learning from the past

A Design Quality Unit should build on the lessons of former national initiatives focused on delivering design quality, whilst looking to do things better in the future.



The Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE) existed for just over a decade and the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC) for 75 years before that. Exhaustive research at UCL¹ has shown, that CABE was singularly successful in using informal tools to raise design quality up the agenda nationally and locally, but like the RFAC before it, was not universally loved. In both cases most criticism was reserved for their design review functions that were too often seen as paternalistic and divorced from the realities of the different regional contexts across England.

A design quality unit should be able to facilitate and support bottom up initiative as much as top down systemic change

We would recommend:

- **The creation of a new unit** which is sufficiently independent that it is able to give authoritative and trusted advice – to government, industry and the nation – whilst being confident that its funding will be sustained, even when it is critical.
- **That the unit remains small and agile at its core**, bringing in expertise as required from around the country to deliver its priorities by utilising a partnership and networked approach.
- **A hub and spokes model**, with key services delivered by regional centres of excellence but administered by a core that would enable Government oversight, effective administration and learning (between the spokes) and across the country, and the building of a collaborative network.
- **Omitting the direct provision of design review from the core of the Design Quality Unit** (although it might have a role in monitoring standards) in recognition of the viable market and the many successful local panels that now exist to deliver design review services. It is hoped that such providers, for example Design Network members, would form vital spokes in the model as recognised regional centres of excellence.

A design quality unit should work
through partnership and a networked
approach across the country

WHAT

would a design quality unit look like?

A number of models can be envisaged:

A UNIT WITHIN GOVERNMENT



The Government has already invested in some welcome design capacity within the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, led (under the Chief Planner) by the newly created Head of Built Environment and Head of Architecture. This small but vital team within Government could be expanded and further empowered to more forcefully pursue the design agenda. Working within Government, however, such a unit could not also be independent of it. Inevitably it would be tied by the constraints that government brings. Irrespective of what else is created, this team within the Ministry should continue its important work.

AN ARMS-LENGTH UNIT OF GOVERNMENT



Quangos of various forms continue to have an important role across government, and organisations such as the UK Statistics Authority and the Office for Budget Responsibility act to both monitor and audit key sectors and also hold Government to account. A key benefit of applying this approach to a new Design Quality Unit would be the potential closeness to Government and the authority that provides, although again at the risk that independence is compromised. The wider context, however, has been a reduction in quangos in recent years which have not always been good at building partnerships and sharing the financial burden beyond Government.

A PARTNERSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT



A partnership approach could provide a more dynamic and inclusive model. Government might work with stakeholders to pump prime a new unit, with financial liability reducing through time as other public and private sources of funding are developed. This is the model that organisations such as the Institute of Fiscal Studies work under, and a similar arrangement for the built environment can be envisaged; truly independent and cross-sectoral. Its influence would depend on its ability to convince Government and its network of partners of the rightness of its arguments. Its partnership ethos would need to extend across the country, with a mode of operation that engaged all regions and in a country-wide journey to better design.

A UNIT OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT



A cross-sector alliance completely outside of Government might also be established. The challenge with this model is in bringing such a diverse sector together and encouraging it to collaborate in a meaningful manner without the authority (and resources) of Government. In a much reduced way, the alliance behind *A Housing Design Audit for England* showed that this is possible, but in such a fragmented sector, the important role of Government in oiling the wheels of culture change should not be underestimated.

A SMALL but powerful national investment

Each of the models has potential benefits and drawbacks, and whichever was chosen, would not please everyone all the time. That, however, is the role of such a unit, to challenge and strive for improvement, and not simply to accept substandard outcomes because that is what we have become used to. Together we can deliver the ambition of this Parliament to put design quality at the heart of growth and banish the three quarters of 'mediocre or poor' developments that *A Housing Design Audit for England* recently revealed.

Resourcing

The models described will need resource to establish and deliver. Given that we are suggesting a new innovative partner-based solution, providing an example of a successful model is challenging. However, with a staff of around 25 at its core, Architecture + Design Scotland (£1.76 million per year), is perhaps a starting point. This sum represents just 2% of the market value of the average (by size and quality) housing scheme audited for *A Housing Design Audit for England*, or less than 0.02% of the increase in housing investment announced in the recent budget.

This is surely minimum investment if we really do care about design quality, and one that would quickly be recouped through the speedier passage of schemes through the planning

system, more efficient use of land and strongly enhanced place value. Other models of investment could include the endowment model and or private investment partnerships.

For many decades the country has lacked consistent and committed leadership on this issue. Its pursuit is both an urgent and widely shared ambition. We should leave behind a legacy of buildings and places that we can be proud of, and that support healthy prosperous citizens, not one that generations to come will need to fix at great expense because we failed to design them properly in the first place.

An initiative such as that described in this pamphlet, building on Proposition 45 of Living with Beauty, would offer a very tangible sign of ambition, commitment and leadership from this Government.

We commend this pamphlet to you and welcome the opportunity to convene and share our collective voice in this exciting, ambitious, proposition.



**It is time to get serious about
delivering design quality.**



Copies of this pamphlet can
be downloaded from

www.placealliance.org.uk