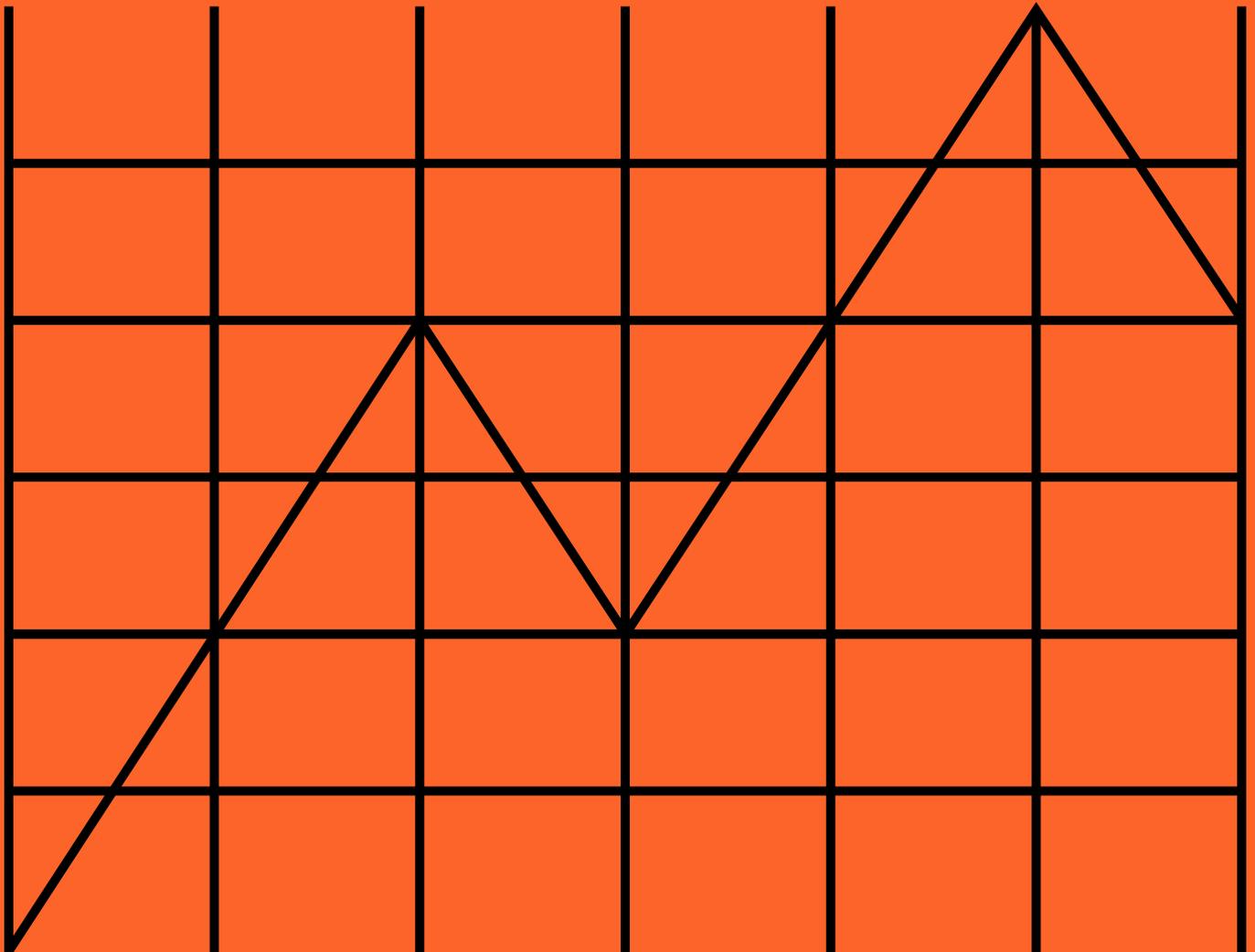


# Building Quality: How can Authorities engaged in direct delivery monitor design quality?



Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality and equality of everyday places by building the public sector's capacity for proactive planning.

10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.

# BUILDING QUALITY

## How can Authorities engaged in direct delivery monitor design quality?

This Practice Note is based on research carried out as part of a year-long placement in the Property Development team at Transport for London (TfL). It explores ways of monitoring design quality – from feasibility to completion – that public authorities can use to improve public housing delivery. The research took place between April 2019 and March 2020 and was focussed on London Boroughs, Wholly Owned Companies and Mayoral Development Corporations within London. Findings and recommendations may also be useful for Authorities beyond London, who are invited to help test, develop and improve the recommendations put forward in this Practice Note.

### CONTEXT

The new National Planning Policy Framework<sup>1</sup> and draft London Plan<sup>2</sup> place a greater emphasis on achieving design quality, and in London this has been informed by the Mayor's Good Growth by Design (GGbD) agenda.<sup>3</sup> GGbD sets out an integrated programme of work to enhance the design of buildings and neighbourhoods, drawing together existing design and placeshaping expertise and the skills of the Mayor's Design Advocates (MDAs) and wider built environment sector with teams within the Greater London Authority Group (GLA Group), the London boroughs and other public bodies (Authorities).<sup>4</sup>

Emerging planning policy seeks to consolidate the six pillars of GGbD into the regulatory framework: setting and applying standards, building capacity, supporting diversity, commissioning quality and advocating best practice.<sup>5</sup> Policy D4 of the Draft New London Plan specifically addresses delivering good design, emphasising the importance of rigorous analysis, scrutiny and quality control. Building on these policies, this Practice Note looks at ways that housing delivery teams can take a proactive approach to improving design quality through the definition and implementation of design quality

<sup>1</sup> [UK Government, National Planning Policy Framework, \(March, 2012\), paragraph 130.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Greater London Authority, New London Plan, Policy D2 \(H\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [GLA, Good Growth by Design](#)

<sup>4</sup> The GLA Group comprises the GLA, Transport for London, Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime, London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, London Legacy Development Corporation, Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation

<sup>5</sup> [GLA, Good Growth by Design](#)

management processes. Drawing on research carried out as part of a placement in TfL, the Practice Note makes a number of recommendations for how Authorities might monitor design quality across all stages of development projects.

## A PUBLIC HOUSING RENAISSANCE

The UK is in the midst of a housing crisis. After the council-led housing boom of the post-war period, responsibility for housing delivery was handed to housing associations and private sector developers in the 1980s. However, the expectation that the market would deliver supply to meet demand has not been met. As demand has grown, increasing land values have reduced affordability and this has had a direct impact on society. In 2019, a parliamentary report indicated that there had been a 77% increase in households living in temporary accommodation since 2010; of those households, 66% were placed by London Boroughs.<sup>6</sup> Homelessness has also risen across England, with estimates suggesting a 165% increase in rough sleeping since 2010.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, schemes brought forward by private sector developers have often failed to meet the requirements of Authorities for social, affordable, special needs and family housing. In response, the number of Authorities engaged in the delivery of housing has increased and this has been driven by three key factors:

1. A requirement to deliver homes to meet housing targets;
2. A requirement to reduce homelessness;
3. A requirement to generate revenue to fund public services.

Research as part of an RTPi report published in 2019 revealed that 69% of Authorities (a total of 98 Authorities) were now undertaking direct delivery housing programmes through varying mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> It also revealed an increased desire from Authorities to improve design quality across development projects, with this emerging as an additional key factor in the shift towards a direct delivery approach.

While an intention to improve design quality is a good start, it is not a silver bullet and must be supported by a robust implementation strategy. After a dearth of activity, many Authorities are now seeking to build in-house design capacity and expertise. This may be to support the in-house production

<sup>6</sup> [House of Commons Library, Households in temporary accommodation \(May, 2020\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Homeless Link, Rough sleeping - our analysis](#)

<sup>8</sup> [RTPi, Local Authority Direct Delivery of Housing, \(June, 2019\)](#)

of schemes and masterplans, the development of design-related planning policy or guidance, design quality and development management, design review or direct delivery programmes. With so many Authorities financially constrained and target driven, it can sometimes be a challenge to promote the benefits of good design, but it is clear that a design-led approach can lead to better quality buildings, spaces and places.

## APPROACH

The research for this Practice Note was undertaken in two stages. Firstly, a cross-section of Boroughs, Wholly Owned Companies and Development Corporations across London were surveyed to identify both where design quality monitoring processes are in place and how these processes are structured. Authorities hosting Public Practice Associates were selected for the survey to ease distribution of the survey to the relevant personnel. In total, 26 Authorities were contacted across London, however only 13 responses were received (giving a response rate of 50%).

Secondly, and prompted by the survey response rate, 1:1 interviews were conducted with a number of Authorities. Of these Authorities, one has a capital delivery team, one has a Wholly Owned Company, and one has no direct delivery function at all. An additional follow-up interview was conducted with the GLA who have been developing a Design Quality Management Protocol template as part of a working group comprising other teams and organisations within the GLA Group.

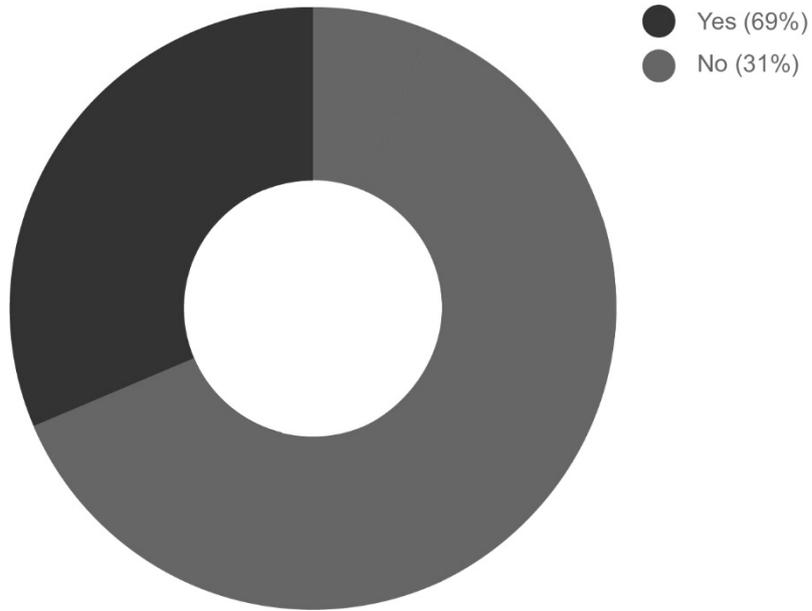
While the scope of the research has been limited to London, it should be acknowledged that a number of Authorities outside the capital are also actively engaged in the delivery of housing and, as such, are also defining and implementing design quality management processes. Further development of this Practice Note should seek to incorporate findings from this wider sample to build a clearer understanding of national practices.

## FINDINGS

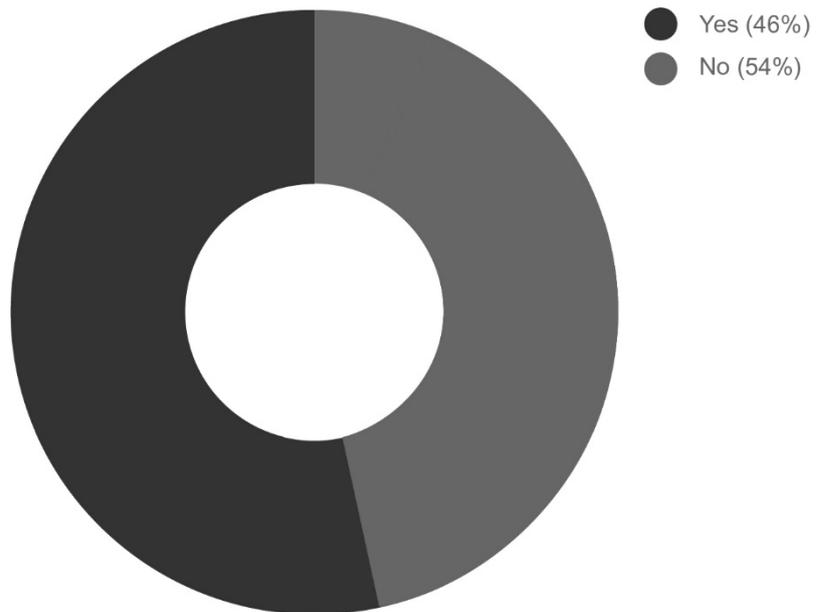
Previous research carried out into public sector housing delivery found that teams across London have different structures and that understanding their governance arrangements and where they sit within or alongside an Authority can be challenging.<sup>9</sup> The findings of that research should be considered when reading the findings and recommendations below:

1. **IN-HOUSE DESIGN CAPACITY DIFFERS WIDELY BETWEEN AUTHORITIES**
  - Authorities utilise a broad range of design expertise for monitoring and evaluating the progress of developments. While the majority of those surveyed have some in-house capacity, almost one third of Authorities who responded to the survey have no dedicated staff at all (approx. 31%).
  - 60% of Authorities with in-house design expertise also outsource design monitoring to consultants and/or agency staff. In most cases this seems to relate to the commissioning of Design Review Panel services, but there were also instances of Authorities outsourcing key parts of the planning process such as compliance monitoring and conditions discharging.
  - Of those Authorities with dedicated staff, the majority are employed on full-time, fixed-term contracts. While this seems to indicate a commitment across the sample to establish permanent teams, it also suggests an underlying uncertainty over the longevity of these teams.

<sup>9</sup> [Public Practice, Home Delivery. \(Sept. 2019\)](#)



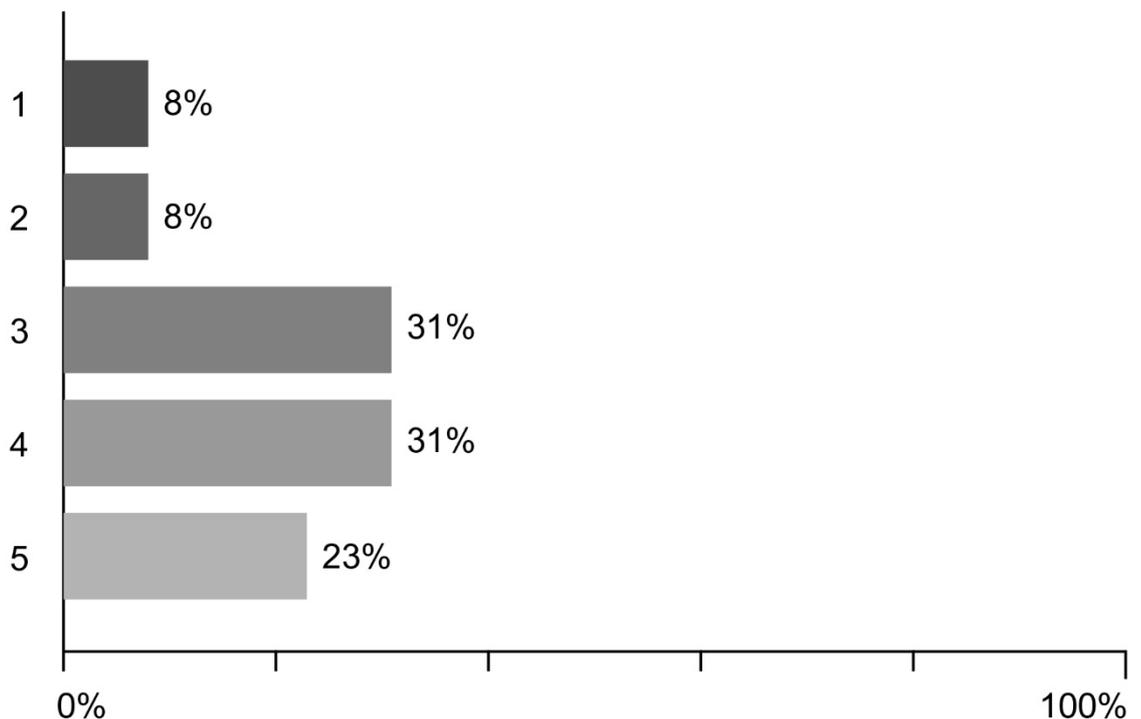
Survey results: Does your authority have dedicated in-house expertise to monitor and evaluate the progress of developments?



Survey results: Do you outsource/use consultants or agency staff to support design monitoring?

2. AUTHORITIES DO NOT HAVE A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF BEST PRACTICE.

- Overall, most Authorities seemed to be confident in their capacity to successfully monitor and evaluate design quality, with 23% regarding themselves as leading the way in best practice. Further research indicated that these particular Authorities all have in-house design expertise, utilise established Design Review Panel services and have either adopted or are due to publish design-related planning guidance.
- Of those Authorities with no in-house design expertise, 50% indicated a good to very good level of confidence in their design quality monitoring capacity, despite few formal processes existing aside from monthly progress reporting.
- 54% of Authorities include qualitative metrics as part of project reporting; design reviews (internal and external), leadership reviews, gateway reviews, design quality management processes and red/amber/green (RAG) ratings.



Survey results: To what extent do you believe your Authority successfully monitors and evaluates design quality (where 1 = struggles to meet requirements, and 5 = leading the way in best practice)?

3. AUTHORITIES ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO DELIVER BOTH QUANTITY AND QUALITY WITHIN RESTRICTIVE PARAMETERS

- For most Authorities, time and a lack of resource are considered to be the biggest barriers to monitoring design quality, with financial cost also a key factor. This is perhaps unsurprising given the conflicting budgetary and programmatic constraints facing Authorities at present.
- Despite these budgetary constraints, 46% of Authorities are recruiting for design-related roles, with both new and established teams seeking to grow. This suggests that many Authorities are incrementally building capacity to proactively engage with their housing delivery and wider growth targets.
- Most of the vacant roles were at a senior level, with experience in delivering design quality post-planning particularly desirable. Across several Authorities, the provision of a rigorous post-planning service was recognised as a challenge due to contractor procurement and the typically diminished role of design teams during the construction stage.
- Previous research found that significant variations across Authorities in the process between consent and completion can lead to lower quality developments and diminished confidence in the system.<sup>10</sup> This research explored how a post-permission service, equivalent to the pre-application stage, could help to improve the quality of development.

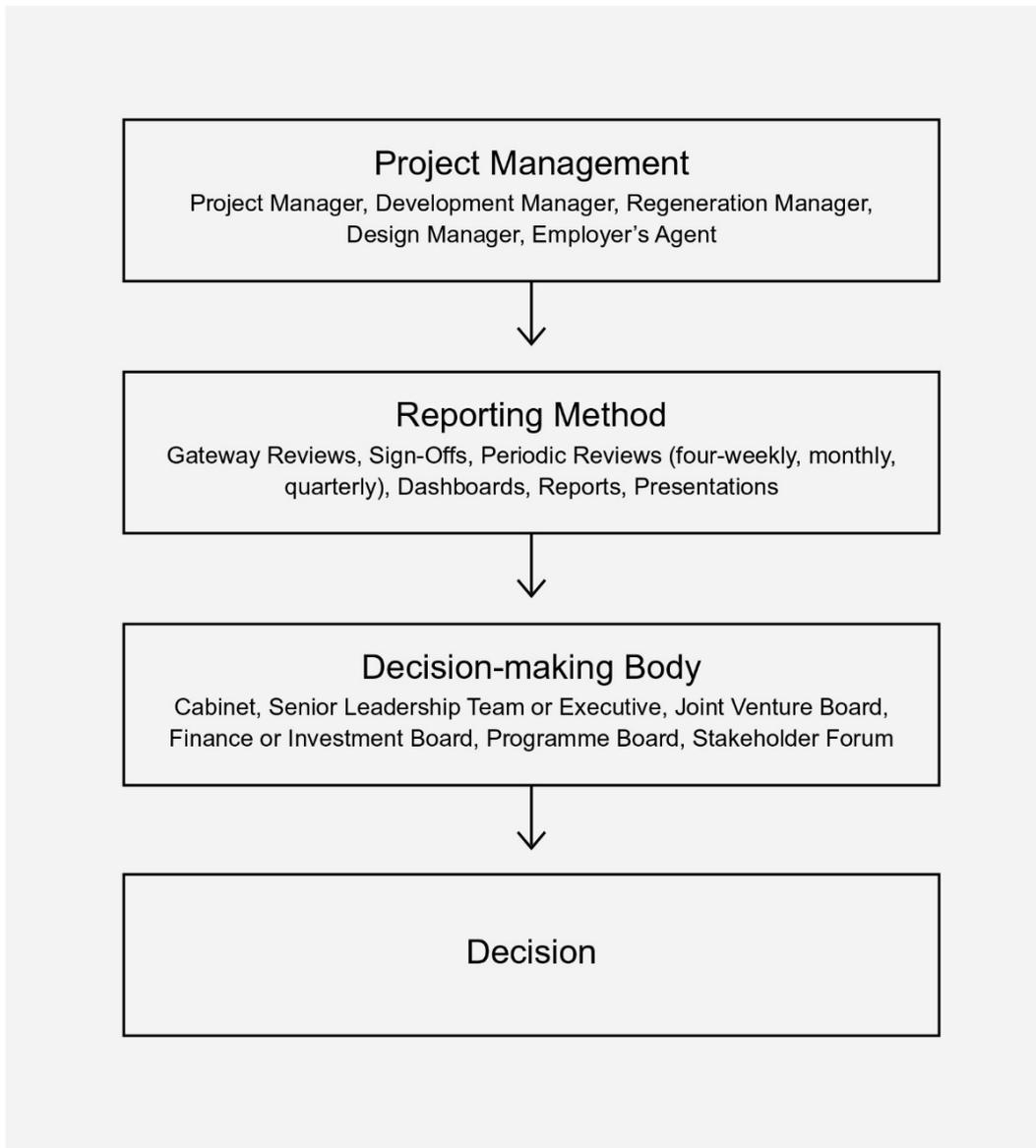
4. GOVERNANCE PROCESSES CAN BE STANDARDISED ACROSS AUTHORITIES TO DEVELOP A SHARED APPROACH TO DESIGN QUALITY MONITORING.

- As expected, Authorities have adopted a range of processes for reporting project progress and, while many of these incorporate the same or similar elements, each process is subtly different. The common structure of each process tends to involve a feedback loop between the day-to-day project management team and a decision-making body via a reporting method.
- A key challenge facing Authorities, in terms of reporting methods, is knowing how to record key design decisions and sign-offs throughout the different project stages, and where ultimately to store this information. Uncertainty over roles and responsibilities can lead to simple processes not being rigorously followed, for example ensuring that rolling design briefs are updated or that actions recorded in meeting minutes are resolved at the end of each project stage or gateway.

<sup>10</sup> Public Practice, Consent to Completion (July, 2019)

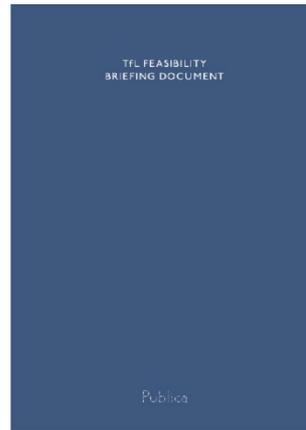
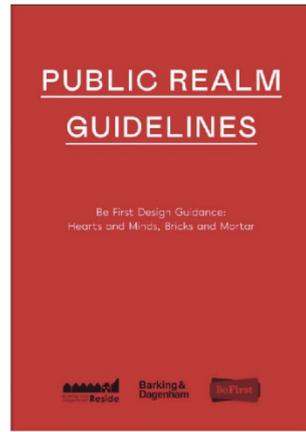
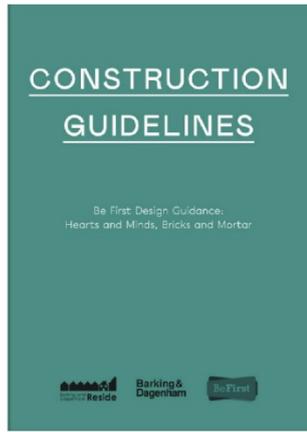
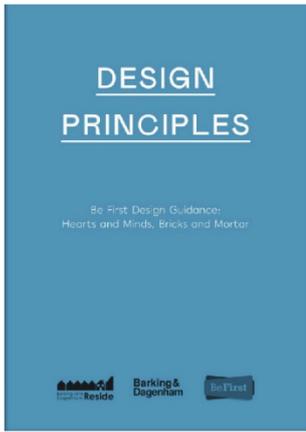
- Officers and Members in some Authorities can be particularly risk-averse in terms of implementing new governance processes and best practice. To obtain that critical buy-in, knowledge sharing between Authorities, where tangible and measurable outcomes are demonstrated, is often vital in reassuring Authorities that a process has precedent and is successful.
- As the foundation of governance processes, business plans that adopt a holistic approach to ‘value for money’ and rebalance spending between short-term capital costs and long-term whole life costs seem to enable a greater presumption in favour of design quality.

A summary of the common structure of processes for reporting project progress is presented below:



5. DESIGN GUIDANCE ALONE CANNOT EFFECTIVELY DRIVE CULTURE CHANGE WITHIN AUTHORITIES.
- 69% of Authorities claim to utilise standard terms of reference, policies, guidance and/or toolkits for monitoring and evaluating design quality in development projects, but only TfL and BeFirst (LB Barking & Dagenham) provided any further information. Both Authorities have developed a set of design principles supplemented by a range of best practice guidance documents focused on specific parts of the design and construction process, for example feasibility studies, community engagement, sustainability, heritage and conservation, public realm and landscape, BIM and employer's requirements.
  - During a 1:1 interview, the LLDC highlighted that it had also implemented design guidance in the form of a Design Quality Policy, which sets out a vision for achieving high-quality design across all of its development projects. The policy forms the basis of a delivery plan that identifies its key principles, processes and technical requirements.
  - In some cases, Authorities have developed supplementary resources and processes to ensure that design guidance is appropriately interpreted and responded to by a range of individuals, including design teams, developers, Officers and Members. While widely regarded as useful, these Authorities were also mindful not to allow particular resources, for example checklists, to become substitutes for the guidance itself.
  - As previous research findings have highlighted, there is a need to rationalise guidance, resources and processes across Authorities and to share knowledge and expertise.<sup>11</sup> Recommendations include the establishment of a Shared Resource Library for Authorities, including each direct delivery team's structure, resourcing and design guidance, and the appointment of an Information Champion to ensure the database is regularly updated.

<sup>11</sup> Public Practice, Home Delivery, (Sept, 2019)



Samples of Authority design and best practice guidance

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations build on some of the recommendations set out in the Public Practice research note PN007: Home Delivery and suggests practical ways for Authorities engaged in direct delivery to better monitor design quality.<sup>12</sup> This Practice Note recommends that Authorities develop and implement a shared approach to design quality monitoring which, over time, will lead to gradual culture change, improved standards and governance processes, and quality-focused procurement.

### 1. BUILD IN-HOUSE DESIGN CAPACITY

While guidance and resources are useful tools, there is a need for Authorities to continue building capacity for in-house design expertise, be it in the form of Design Managers or other design-focused roles. Where there are officers responsible for cost and programme, responsibility should also be taken for quality. Ensuring that there are design champions at each level of the organisation will facilitate a change of culture within Authorities, since this relies as much on up-skilling existing teams as it does on recruiting new staff. Unfortunately, the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to prompt a recruitment freeze in the public sector, making it all the more challenging for Authorities to build the capacity needed to meet their targets.

### 2. DEVELOP A DESIGN QUALITY MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL (DQMP)

PN007 recommends the formation of Housing Quality Working Groups that offer delivery teams an opportunity to discuss development projects in terms of design quality, design guidance they are seeking to produce and of challenges they are facing.<sup>13</sup> A valuable outcome from these working groups would be for Authorities to adopt a shared approach to design quality monitoring to ensure that, regardless of the level of in-house design capacity, there is a minimum set of requirements for project management and reporting.

In London, the GLA has already convened a working group, composed of six teams from across the wider GLA Group, focused on self-reviewing existing processes. The aim has been to enforce and enhance these processes by further embedding design quality management thinking into both strategic decision-making and day-to-day working. This has resulted in the production of a Design Quality Management Protocol (DQMP), a shared template for Authorities to record each stage of the process they use to promote, manage, safeguard and deliver design quality. Mapped to the RIBA Plan

<sup>12</sup> [Public Practice, Home Delivery, \(Sept, 2019\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Public Practice, Home Delivery, \(Sept, 2019\)](#)

of Work, the template aims to distil a complex process into a single resource and can be adapted to suit Authorities engaged in commissioning and/or direct delivery.

In future, as DQMPs are adapted, tested and embedded across more and more Authorities, it could be that new legislation requires every Authority to develop a protocol as part of either its Local Plan or other policies and strategies. If at this scale, regional government or new regional development agencies assumed responsibility for the setting of DQMP standards, it would help to ensure continuity of a shared approach to design quality monitoring between Authorities.

### 3. RECORD AND SHARE DESIGN DECISIONS

As planning embraces technology, there is an opportunity to further improve ways of working. In 2019, the Hackitt Review recommended that building information be digitised to facilitate a growing repository of digital records for every building in the UK.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of design quality monitoring, this could be utilised to accumulate and disseminate valuable information to different parties at different stages about how and why the design brief has evolved and what impact this has had on the scheme. At present, workstage reports can often only present the story of design development in terms of context and conclusion, with an absence of detail about key decisions taken along the way. In some cases, uncertainty over roles and responsibilities can also lead to poor administration, leaving this information either buried in miscellaneous documents or not recorded at all.

Published in 2020, the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission entitled 'Living with Beauty' set out a policy proposition for the introduction of digital building passports.<sup>15</sup> The report found that while building information is accumulated throughout the life of a project, it is invariably discarded once its specific purpose has been fulfilled. As a result, the golden thread of design intent can sometimes be lost, making it difficult to assess a scheme against the assumptions made at the design stage.

If Design Managers or other design champions assumed responsibility for (at least) part of the digital building passport, a key duty should be to ensure that meeting minutes, design review reports, gateway review reports and the responses to these records are captured within a form of rolling design brief. At planning stage, this might be a validation requirement; at

<sup>14</sup> [MHCLG, Building a Safer Future \(May, 2018\) pp.102-104](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Living with Beauty, \(Jan, 2020\) Page 120](#)

tender stage, this might be the basis of the employer's requirements; at completion, this might be part of the handover information.

## RESOURCES

The tool associated with this Practice Note – a Design Quality Management Protocol (DQMP) template – forms a downloadable resource developed to support Authorities either to establish new, or to improving existing, design quality monitoring processes.

This resource builds on an initial template produced by the GLA for teams and organisations within the GLA Group, adding additional layers of support for Authorities by setting out an exemplar timeline of key monitoring milestones (workshops, reviews, sign-offs) and recommendations for supplementary guidance or resources. Adaptable to suit Authorities engaged in both commissioning and/or direct delivery, the resources represent a starting point for the development of a shared 'best practice' approach to design quality monitoring across Authorities both within and beyond London.

Public Practice welcomes feedback on the findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note as well as on the resource to inform future research. Please contact us at [info@publicpractice.org.uk](mailto:info@publicpractice.org.uk).

## NEXT STEPS

This Practice Note has investigated the processes of design quality monitoring within Authorities engaged in direct delivery and has suggested a series of guidelines for how these Authorities establish, improve and standardise these to create a shared understanding of best practice. To take these findings further, there are a number of areas of research that would benefit from further development:

- Invite input from Authorities beyond London by undertaking a national survey of design quality monitoring processes and analysing the findings.
- Convene a series of regional or sub-regional working groups focussed on both self-review and development. As piloted by the GLA, this should explore both existing processes and new design quality management thinking that can be embedded into different parts of direct delivery.
- Address specific areas of the DQMP template in detail by developing and testing the recommended supplementary guidance and resources; this could form the basis of future Public Practice Associates' research. An area that requires particular attention is design quality monitoring post-planning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PUBLIC PRACTICE  
Urban Innovation Centre  
1 Sekforde Street  
London, EC1R 0BE, UK

[www.publicpractice.org.uk](http://www.publicpractice.org.uk)  
[info@publicpractice.org.uk](mailto:info@publicpractice.org.uk)

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With an ever-increasing number of Authorities responding to the housing crisis by engaging directly in housing delivery to meet their housing targets, a corresponding increase in emphasis on design quality in national, regional and local policy is raising the importance of rigorous analysis, scrutiny and quality control through the planning process.

This research looks at evaluation and monitoring processes across a number of Authorities and public delivery bodies to understand how housing delivery teams are taking a proactive approach to improving design quality through the definition and implementation of design quality management processes.

Drawing on research carried out as part of a year-long placement in the Property Development team at Transport for London (TfL), this Practice Note explores ways of establishing best practice processes to monitor design quality from feasibility to completion and is accompanied by a Design Quality Management Protocol template which acts as a starting point for the development of a shared 'best practice' approach.

#Design, #CapacityBuilding, #Council-ledHousing

Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at [www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources](http://www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources)