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Design & Policy:
Current Debates and Future Directions for Research in the UK

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Report of the Design | Policy Research Network

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Design & Policy:
Current Debates and Future Directions for Research in the UK

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Ramia Mazé, Liz Richardson

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Executive Summary

Key messages

- We organised an 18-month Design|Policy research network, funded by the AHRC, with over 700 people involved. Its aims were to surface current debates and propose future directions for research at the intersection of design and policy-making in the UK.

- We found that there is a growing field in practice and research dedicated to discovering, developing and investigating the distinctive contribution of design to policy-making.

- The UK is a leader in the use of design in government and policy, and this leading position could be enhanced through a more effective, cross-disciplinary evidence base about the use of design expertise in policy-making.

- We propose a research agenda that deepens understanding of: (1) the extent of design in policy-making, (2) how design's distinctiveness can be applied through different types of design, (3) its impact, and (4) different relationships between design and policy, created through a range of types of research (including cross-disciplinary research integrating design and policy studies) and by mobilising UK central, city-regional and local government as collaborators and sites of co-produced research.

There is a growing range of practice and research connecting design and public policy-making including 'design for policy', as well as service design, interaction design, communication design, urban design and strategic design to deliver or inform policy. The UK is an early innovator and investor in building such capabilities including the Government Digital Service and Policy Lab, as well as the cross-government Policy Design Community, which convenes over 500 people in 75 UK public sector organisations.

We used the research network to develop a better understanding of the potential and distinctive nature of design in relation to policy and to propose a future research agenda for the UK. We did this by: (1) organising four workshops with 12 invited experts offering cross-disciplinary and practice-based perspectives, and involving 260 participants; (2) engaging with and contributing to academic research communities, and the Policy Design Community; and (3) hosting a LinkedIn group that, by September 2023, numbered over 700 people.

Discussions amongst academics and practitioners during the network events revealed a number of debates and dilemmas, specifically:

- Demand for clarifying how design is distinctive in its contribution to policy-making;

- Varied relationships between design and policy-making;

- Untapped potential of design in relation to policy-making;

- Challenges of using or implementing design approaches for policy-makers.

Even within the academic research landscape, there is a lack of clarity about the distinctiveness of design for policy-making. We found that:

- Despite the growing interest in research at the intersection of design and public policy (e.g., special issues of journals, Special Interest Groups in scholarly communities and conference tracks which bring together different perspectives, including cross-disciplinary research), academic research on design and policy-making is still at an early stage of development;

- The articulation 'design for policy', developed over the past decade, is problematic, while there is a longer history of 'policy design' in studies of public policy and public administration;

- Despite growing academic analysis of the use of design expertise, methods and techniques in policy-making, these do not capture its distinctiveness;

- The academic approaches for creating the evidence base needed to assess the impact of design on policy-making are limited. The current methods do not make sufficient use of the potential for transdisciplinary collaboration across design research, political science and policy-making, nor draw extensively enough on teams or sites of practice in government.

Given the lack of understanding of different relations between design and policy, we propose a heuristic comprising three distinct kinds of relations between design and policy:

- Design as a tool for policy-making;

- Design as a practice of improvising within policy-making;

- Design regenerating policy-making.

These three relations have implications for whose knowledge is valued in policy-making, as well as who does the designing and how design capabilities are established and maintained. It is important to recognise the spatial, temporal and power dynamics that shape the relationships between design and policy-making. Surfacing these makes the untapped potential of design for policy-making visible.

Recommendations for future research:

1. **Deepen understanding of the range of possible relations** between design and policy, clarifying the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of design in relation to policy-making including through design thinking, service design, co-design, social design, communication design, systems design, urban design and design futures.

2. **Mobilise the potential of existing and developing policy design teams and labs** across UK central and local government and devolved nations as collaborators and sites of co-produced research, along with engaging others in the policy ecosystem.

3. **Invest in cross-disciplinary research,** bringing design (including studies of design thinking, service design, co-design, urban design, social design, systems design, design futures) together with policy studies, political science, public administration and the broader social sciences as well as the humanities, to explore the ways in which design and policy can interact and generate new understandings and evidence (research), as well as result in outcomes for government (impact).

Dr Jen Ballie

**Head of Design Research, Victoria and Albert Museum, Dundee
Reader, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design,
University of Dundee**

Photo courtesy: Jen Ballie

As a design researcher working within the realms of local and national policy, I champion design, with both hope and caution, as a tool for unpacking complex problems, democratising conversations and drawing on the power of creativity in imagining new possibilities.

The projects I have worked on have been funded from various sources, including local authorities, economic development agencies and research councils. They have focused on addressing policy issues using design, for example by creating interactive 'Imaginariums' for community input on sustainable mobility or adopting storytelling techniques to assess citizen designers' programmes for Scotland's largest local authority.

More recently, within V&A Dundee, we commissioned independent design research: 'Design for Scotland', funded through Creative Scotland's national lottery fund. This emerging research has been steered by a working group of design professionals at different career stages and explores the potential benefits of a national design policy/strategy highlighting its significance in fostering innovation, economic growth and social well-being.

I am discovering that design operates at the crossroads of shaping, influencing and crafting policy, both for its own sector and community while also having the inherent capacity to transcend boundaries and contribute substantial value to diverse policy domains.

The challenge lies in striking a balance, recognising that design plays a pivotal role within the solution landscape but does not constitute the entire remedy. Addressing our complex twenty-first-century challenges necessitates innovative solutions that involve bolstering capabilities and resources, and fostering collaboration across a spectrum of disciplines including artists, designers, social scientists, economists, philosophers, business leaders, representatives from the third sector and dedicated civil servants.

Executive Summary

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Introduction

This report summarises discussions, perspectives and future directions for research at the intersection of design and policy in the UK. It is written at a time when the challenges facing policy-makers have high levels of complexity, uncertainty and urgency further amplified by popular contestation and perceptions of a democratic deficit, and when many working across government look at practices and approaches associated with design to help them navigate and address these.

The report shares results from an 18-month, collaborative, cross-disciplinary Design|Policy Research Network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2022–23. The authors of this report are academic researchers specialising in design and policy studies, employed in three leading UK universities. Over the course of its activities, the research network fostered dialogues among more than 700 people, including academic researchers, doctoral students, policy-makers and other officials in central government, local government officers, design consultancies, and those working in the wider cultural and policy ecosystem that includes business and civil society.

1.1 Approach

To develop our understanding of existing research at the intersection of design and policy, the network engaged with research and practice in the UK and internationally (see Appendix for details). The main activities were four participatory workshops (two held in London and two in Manchester) with 12 invited experts contributing cross-disciplinary and practice-based perspectives. These were open to anyone to attend (including hybrid participation) and involved a total of 260 participants (see Appendix). Each workshop included three invited 'provocations' from distinct positions – one from practice in design, policy and/or government; one from design research; and one from studies of policy, political science or public management – intended to encourage debate.

Alongside these events, we created a network through the Design|Policy LinkedIn group, which by September 2023 numbered over 700

members. In addition, during the network, the authors participated in and contributed to related events, including conferences of the Design Research Society (2022), Service Design in Government (2022), Political Studies Association (2023) and International Public Policy Association (2023). Members of the research network also contributed to dialogues and activities within the cross-government Policy Design Community led by the Policy Profession in the Civil Service of the UK government. Two of the authors joined its Delivery Board attending events and meetings, including contributing to the national Public Design Review launched in late 2023, as well as organising an academic peer review of learning materials developed by the Policy Design Community. As a whole, this approach opened up understanding and allowed network participants to engage and learn from people with different positions, roles and disciplinary expertise.

1.2 Findings

Across these dialogues and events, the research network demonstrated that there has been a rapid expansion of design approaches, practices, methods, teams and professionals with design skills within policy-making in government, both in the UK and internationally. The UK is a recognised leader in pioneering the take-up of design in government. The establishment in 2012 of the UK Government Digital Service (GDS) (Greenaway et al., 2018) strongly emphasised building capability for digital design and service design inside the Civil Service, now complemented by the cross-government Digital, Data and Technology Profession Capability, which specifies roles and skills required and used in government. A further prominent example, the UK Policy Lab, was founded in 2014 as a cross-government pilot (Siodmok, 2014) to develop design in policy-making. Subsequently, domain-specific policy labs were established in most large ministerial departments in the UK and a cross-government Policy Design Community of practice was developed to support staff. In January 2021, the Civil Service Policy Profession formally sponsored the Community and it has grown to include over 75 local and central government organisations

with around 500 individual members. In the UK, there is now a substantial 'apparatus' (an assemblage of discourses, practices, knowledges and institutions) of design in government and policy-making (Bailey, 2021).

The UK has the potential and responsibility to lead internationally, not only in an expansion of practice, but also to support and enable academic study of design in policy-making. Alongside these developments focused on design, there are related activities among research communities to carry out research translation, knowledge mobilisation and 'policy to research' activities, including the Universities Policy Engagement Network, UKRI's Local Policy Innovation Partnerships, the British Academy's Transforming Evidence project, as well as initiatives by smaller groups of universities such as Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement. In this context, there is an urgent and profound need to better understand, explain, contextualise and critically assess the possibilities, consequences and limitations of design in relation to policy-making and other forms of research and expertise.

Dr Jocelyn Bailey

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Having worked in politics and service design, I did an AHRC-funded Design Star consortium PhD looking at how the field of 'design for government' came to be constituted over roughly a ten-year period as a discourse and a practice. The thesis ended up being a critical deconstruction of the whole apparatus and its consequences. To precis my analysis: the field's biggest impact has been the reproduction of itself, the swelling of its rank and its institutionalisation. What I observed was designers and civil servants engaged in clever language games. I found little evidence of it making much difference to the quality or outcomes of governing.

I would speculate that the roots of this problem lie in two deep-rooted features of design itself. If nothing gets done it is partly because of the split between designing and making, which was baked into design from its birth. But unfortunately, you cannot design something well if you do not understand how to make it. And you cannot make something well that has been badly designed. Yet we valorise designers (imaginers of hypothetical schemes, performers of aesthetic capital) over the people who actually know how to make and repair things, and who are prepared to do that labour. Getting stuff done is also not mission critical for design – and by 'mission' I mean the ongoing project of colonising new domains. Over the past century design has expanded, virus-like, across territories, for all too obvious financial reasons. What counts in this endeavour is that people are seduced by the narrative. Resources are therefore marshalled towards the performance of persuasive "designerly" (as some design researchers put it) practices, rather than doing the hard work of changing the real world.

Photo courtesy: Dr Jocelyn Bailey

Introduction

1.3 Structure and scope

The structure of the report is as follows. First, we summarise discussions and insights generated by 12 expert speakers and participants at the four workshops we organised. Then we turn briefly to reviewing developments in academic research literatures. From this we note enduring challenges in articulating the distinctive contributions of design to policy-making. We then identify three different possible relations between design and policy-

making as a basis for a future research agenda: (1) **design as a tool for policy-making**; (2) **design as a practice of improvising within policy-making**; and (3) **design regenerating policy-making**. Surfacing these relations helps clarifying the distinctive contributions of design expertise and methods, makes the untapped potential of design for policy-making visible, and reveals implications for whose knowledge and skills are valued in policy-making and who does the designing.

We then conclude by making recommendations for future research in the UK to: (1) **deepen understanding of the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of design in policy-making**; (2) **mobilise the potential of existing and developing policy design teams and labs** across UK central, local and regional government as collaborators and sites of co-produced research, along with engaging others in the policy ecosystem; and (3) **invest in cross-disciplinary research**, bringing together design researchers as well as researchers in policy studies, political science, public administration, the broader social sciences and the humanities, to explore the ways in which design and policy can interact and generate new understandings and evidence (research), as well as result in outcomes for government (impact). We conclude with specific asks of a range of organisational actors in the research and innovation ecosystem including UK Research and Innovation, the Civil Service, universities with design and politics departments, and consultancies offering design services, to contribute to developing this research agenda.

The report is UK-focused, reflecting where the authors are based. However, the Network's hybrid events were open to and engaged

people with internet access from around the world, and several of the invited speakers work internationally. Further, members of the network's LinkedIn group include people from at least 28 countries (see Appendix) and the authors of research outputs referenced in this report come from several countries. Through this, the network has been cognisant of research and practice in other parts of the world, and we are aware of how design and policy are situated differently elsewhere. The network and our discussions, however, should be understood as rooted in the UK and its research, governmental institutions and public service infrastructures, limited to the English language, and at a particular moment in time (2022–23).

Interspersed with the main arguments presented here by the four authors are a set of additional **personal perspectives** invited from members of the network, which are grounded in design through doctoral study, research or practice. While by no means exhaustive, these short summaries help to illustrate the potential of research at the intersection of design and policy-making, and the different types of engagement with policy ecosystems.

In summary, this report serves several purposes. First, it **captures the themes** in discussions that took place in the network. Second, it **identifies gaps in current research** at the intersection of design and policy-making. Third, it **offers a set of propositions** for how to understand the relations between design and policy. Fourth, it **outlines directions for future research** and makes **recommendations** for those involved in the research, knowledge exchange and policy ecosystems in order to advance knowledge at the intersection between design and policy-making.

Dr Emma Blomkamp

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Convenor and Founder, CoDesignCo
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Over the last decade, I have worked as a researcher, consultant, educator, evaluator and coach at the interface of design, public policy and human services. My approach is shaped by my experience working with communities and organisations in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, as well as by my doctoral research on the role of government in enabling community wellbeing, and post-doctoral research on design-for-policy and public sector innovation.

These days, I mainly work independently with people in the public-purpose sectors to cultivate capabilities and conditions for participatory approaches to policy design and implementation. I am fortunate to be able to draw on academic, professional and lived expertise, and to work with people interested in sharing power and enabling creativity to achieve more equitable and just outcomes.

I have developed a couple of frameworks that combine specialist knowledge with practical insights on the challenges and opportunities of applying creative and participatory approaches to public policy and services. The Systemic Design Practice Wheel presents five domains — principles, place, people, process and practice — as key considerations to take into account when tackling complex problems and designing for social change. As well as offering a framework for project planning and reflection, which I cover in a short online course, I have used this framework to present a research case study of a design-led approach to policy-making.

More recently, I have been iterating a Co-Design Maturity Model to enable people to identify individual capabilities and organisational conditions needed in co-design for public and social innovation. These frameworks are published with a Creative Commons licence to enable re-use and adaptation and are available freely on my website (**emmablomkamp.com**).

Some of the questions I continue to grapple with in relation to design and policy are: How might we…

- reconcile fundamental differences between design and government, by recognising policy as craft?

- acknowledge positionality, power and privilege in design practice?

- become more inclusive by using generative and asynchronous methods?

- integrate co-design practice in democratic structures and processes?

Photo courtesy: Aaron Puls for Paper Giant

Introduction

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Themes identified through network events

Over 18 months the research network identified several broad themes in the invited provocations, responses to them and discussions within and across the four participatory workshops we organised in 2022–23. A summary of each workshop can be read separately (see the Appendix for a full list of events, links to online summaries and videos including details of the provocations contributed by speakers named below). Here, we focus on the core cross-cutting issues that were the main subject of our discussions and draw on contributions made by our invited speakers.

2.1 Demand for clarifying how design is distinctive in its contribution to policy-making

As **Marzia Mortati** (Politecnico di Milano) said, design and policy touch everyone's daily lives. However, she argued that how policy is made can feel intangible for those not directly involved in it. Design can help policy-making to become a more tangible process for citizens and others to experience and influence. Design uses methods and tools to make things concrete, multi-sensory and available for a wide variety of people and groups. Examples of materialising policy-making using innovative methods include sensory and ethnographic work such as that carried out by the UK's **Policy Lab**. For policy-makers, making visible how policies are experienced by citizens provides different insights to those gathered primarily through statistical data or by second-guessing how people live or behave. Design's strong emphasis on testing things out, iterating and adapting before full launch (e.g., via prototyping), is useful in that it provides policy-makers with more certainty about how

ideas might change or evolve when they hit the ground, and how they are impacting real human beings. **Andrew Knight** (UK Policy Design Community) argued that design adds to public value, by gathering evidence and testing policies early on, so that policy-makers can have more clarity about how policies can work well in terms of delivering their intended purpose and value to the public.

Some of the tools and practices of design are well-suited to enable anticipatory planning for the future. As scholars like Hatchuel (2001) and others have set out, one role for design is to try to overcome or transcend the limits of the present and the constraints on what has been deemed to be possible in order to create new possibilities. Speakers such as **Ann Light** (University of Sussex/Malmö University) described these ideas in action as a 're-worlding' through **collaborative future-making**.

Themes identified through network events

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We also explored instances where design has infused systems in a more comprehensive way, what Michael Saward (University of Warwick) called 'design for polity', that is, design of the wider systems of governance, policy and political decision-making. Creative and participatory design processes offer a mode of imagination, collective action and experimental doing. Bringing design to democracy is not a matter of choosing local or national, process or product. Democratic design can act as a bridge by, being both participative and representative, local and super-local, approximate and non-proximate. Examples of system change might include Audrey Tang, Taiwan's first ever Minister of Digital Affairs, mentioned by Mortati, who has brought about radical change in how government uses experimentation and co-creation.

These discussions at network events started to give shape to some of the characteristic features of design: creativity; innovation;

experimentation; experiential knowledge; materiality; a focus on people's experiences; anticipation. Michael Barzelay (London School of Economics) advocated for the benefits of conveying some of the essential features of design in order to aid policy-makers in understanding what methods and solutions could work and why – for example, through prior cases or precedents of design – thus helping to avoid the risk of failure.

However, in identifying these features, we also surfaced a core issue for design. Beyond the reduction of design to a neat definition, a list of characteristic features, or even cases of best practice, there remains a question of how design is distinctive and what value it can add. Is it merely an add-on or something more substantial? What is distinctive or unique about design compared to other disciplines or capabilities? For example, futures thinking is not the exclusive property of design. Is design just about the tools or is it more than that?

2.2 Varied relationships between design and policy-making

Catherine Durose (University of Liverpool) and the authors of this report suggested a propositional framework for better identifying the distinctive aspects of design in policy-making (further discussed below in Section 4). The framework outlines how the same core features of design can be applied in very distinct ways depending on the logic

and purpose within policy-making – for example, visualisation or human-centred design methods can be applied differently within instrumental, improvisation and/or agonistic approaches to policy. This framework, or heuristic, resonated with the experiences of other speakers. For example, Noel Hatch (London Borough of Newham)

Dr Cara Broadley

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Set against the context of democratic localism, my research examines the relationship between design and relational forms of governance, and the extent to which creative and participatory methods can advance a Scottish approach to policy design.

This has been informed by **Social Studios**, a research project funded by The Carnegie Trust, in which I developed participatory design methods to engage with communities across Scotland to investigate 'Participation Requests' – part of the **Community Empowerment Act** (2015) that aims to help people influence neighbourhood services and decisions. Here, hybrid digital and analogue approaches enabled participants to critically reflect upon their experiences of harnessing national policy as a conduit to address local issues; stimulated dialogue around policy challenges including promotion, access, inclusion, power-sharing, accountability, transparency and impact; and supported them to generate ideas and co-design prototype tools to support future 'Participation Requests' users.

The research has raised important questions around how participation is perceived and practiced by public service authorities, particularly in exposing perspectives of bottom-up policy innovation as rhetorical, tokenistic or perfunctory. It has also foregrounded opportunities to examine the capacity of design and designers to engage with national policy in multiple local settings – negotiating geographic scale, representing diverse demographics and connecting with communities meaningfully, while generating rigorous and actionable insights. This underlines a fundamental need to examine both the nature of policy design as a professional competency and how it permeates and diffuses around and across government.

Photo courtesy: Kallum Corke

Themes identified through network events

described how design advocates are often working in an instrumental institutional environment, using improvisational practices but with an ambition to move towards an embedded 'generative' or agonistic model.

The thorny question of how to assess the value of design expertise, or evaluate its contributions to process and outcomes, was raised a number of times, echoing long-standing debates, as reflected in the UK Design Council's recent **Design Value framework** (2022) that seeks to capture the economic, environmental and social impacts of design.

The neatness of any definition also troubled participants; we heard many distinct and sometimes conflicting conceptualisations of design, as also captured in design scholar Ezio Manzini's *Design, when everybody designs* (2015), a book on diffuse and expert design. In contrast to a version of design as a defined set of activities facilitated by trained designers, diffuse design is about design as an organic, emergent, everyday process enacted by lay people without formal training. For example, **Carl DiSalvo** (Georgia Institute of Technology) talked powerfully about doing this kind of participatory and bottom-up design, using sensing, data visualisation and other tools **to work with residents in a neighbourhood of Atlanta to advocate and lobby for housing justice**.

In a parallel debate to defining design, the nature of the policy-making process was also discussed in the network events. There have been useful attempts at 'essentialising' core elements, summarising and visualising policy-making. For example, the **'Government as a System' toolkit** from Policy Lab sets out different levels of government illustrating the various possible stages at which design could operate – from agenda setting to downstream implementation, legislation and regulation. But we wanted also to problematise these models by reflecting on some of the complex, messy realities of policy-making. Some of these messier notions have been theorised in different ways in public policy scholarship, as suggested by **Paul Cairney** (University of Stirling). The question of where policy is made was raised a number of times. Were we talking about 'policy-making' in the classic and narrower sense of formal institutions,

such as but not limited to central or local government or city-regional authorities? Or were we rather engaging with a wider idea of policy being made or shaped on the front-line of public services and in communities affected by given policies?

We also started to unpick or 'de-colonise' some of the problematic 'origin stories' of design as a discipline. For those outside of current scholarship in design, older and often outdated understandings and references remain influential. Other ways of thinking about design and policy were exemplified by speakers and the references they brought to the events. Drawing on post-colonial thinkers enables thinking through the knowledge relationships between design and policy in terms of 'transdisciplinarity' (Kimbell, et al., 2022), wherein it is possible to understand disciplines not as discrete, final and universal, but rather porous, dynamic and situated in particular contexts, cultures and times. This is aligned with the ideas of Homi Bhabha (1994), who proposed 'third space' or 'third culture' as places where differences, as well as hybridity, can emerge at the edges of disciplines, where cultures meet and new knowledge practices are formed. One of the speakers, **Joyce Yee** (University of Northumbria), reminded us that design works across varied political conditions. When some design professionals and academics based in the UK, Western Europe and North America talk about 'design for policy', they imply participation in a democratic process that may not exist in the same way in other countries, and may not even be desirable or invited.

2.3 Untapped potential of design in relation to policy-making

An overwhelming message across the events was that there is much more that design, as a discipline or field, and designers can offer to policy. However, participants shared that offers or invitations to use design approaches have sometimes had limited or partial take-up. A lack of sustained activity after experimental pilot work is not unique to design, but remains a missed opportunity for value creation in the eyes of advocates. In many ways, this is a good problem to have: design expertise is seen as a potential asset that is currently under-used. But it was puzzling and frustrating for those keen to do more. Our events reinforced a sense of urgency for current efforts to promote a design agenda for policy-making, adding to the work by a wide body of proponents such as the Design Council, the cross-government Policy Design Community, individual design teams in central and local government, universities and consultancies among others.

Participants in network events generated a number of hunches or hypotheses about why there is latent, untapped potential in design for policy, and what could be done to address this. For example, the design sector could improve how it communicates its unique but varied proposition, making it clearer, more succinct and compelling. We collectively reflected on how designers could apply design techniques to their own

promotion, and to enhance understanding of its value for policy-makers, such as using precedents or prototypes to demonstrate an idea in practice. The conclusion was that more work is needed to recognise and amplify the ways in which design helps improve policy.

Other hindering factors identified are cases in which design had been applied in too superficial a manner, or where process had been emphasised over content. For example, several participants recounted experiences where the expectations on what design could deliver had been overstated, but the way in which design was used had underdelivered, meaning that the full potential of a design approach was not realised. Others described the danger of design being too much of a novelty, diverting rather than bringing focus to important conversations that need to take place. Catherine Greig (make:good) offered lessons from her practice experiences, highlighting the delicate balance to be struck between design being playful and engaging while not losing sight of the information that needs to be conveyed to participants.

Regardless of the quality of the process, a key risk arises when design approaches are undertaken without being sufficiently linked to policy decisions. Another of Catherine Greig's lessons was that

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Dr Daniella Jenkins

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My doctoral research examined the gendered nature of pensions and how better long-term financial outcomes for women could be achieved through policy design. I conducted this research as part of a series of cross-disciplinary studentships funded and co-supervised by University of the Arts London and King's College London. As I took a critical feminist stance to a well-established policy area, I needed to look again at the processes of policy design and implementation. This was because I found that gendered assumptions, such as what type of activities constitute work or what a household is, deeply influenced how policy-makers thought about pensions. My work revealed gendered thinking influenced both how the issue of women's lower pension income has been understood and also how policy interventions have been designed. To counteract this and develop new policy ideas, I developed my own policy design process.

My aim was to evidence and identify the causes of unequal pensions in a way that took account of pre-existing structural biases. It was also important for my work to be responsive to the needs, constraints and lived experiences of women. Deconstructing and reconstructing a policy area in this way gave illuminating insights into how pensions policy design could incorporate techniques associated with design research, even in a limited way, such as reframing how issues are understood, adopting a human-centred focus and using future scenarios. Acceptance of such approaches can be challenging; however, my work shows that there are opportunities to apply new thinking to established policy issues. My analysis has been shared in dialogues with the Women's Budget Group and at two Labour Party conferences, suggesting that in-depth research like this can have an early impact.

Photo courtesy: Daniella Jenkins

Themes identified through network events

policy-makers need to be genuinely invested in, and have the ability to act on the findings from, participatory processes. To be credible, public engagement and co-design processes have to lead to action beyond the moment of participation. Without change resulting from insights generated through design, design might be perceived as masking poor participatory or decision-making processes.

2.4 Challenges of using or implementing design approaches for policy-makers

As implied, design practitioners and researchers need to be sensitive to the needs of policy-makers and policy contexts. For example, **Carla Groom** (Department of Work and Pensions) pointed to how design might be able to make further in-roads into policy-making. Based on positive experiences using design and behavioural insights in employment policies, she argued that design tools could be adapted for complex policy problems, and the attendant deep understanding that is required to do so. She pointed to the need to combine design with practices and processes that allow for audit, nuance and a carefully monitored delegation of decision-making. Space needs to be created in the framing of policy problems to allow design to do something more than tinker within a tight set of constraints.

Noel Hatch offered some practical ways that local government can use their levers to promote design in local policy-making, centring on devolving and building healthy, alternative forms of power. One opportunity is to devolve ownership and control of physical spaces and agenda setting for policy to citizens, with examples such as London Borough of Camden's **co-creation spaces** bringing together citizens, and its **Public Collaboration Lab** with Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, in which students work with communities and local government officers to address local policy issues. Devolution of power could also apply to workforce development, to create institutional environments where staff are given space to work in more generative ways, as in London Borough of Newham's **'Imagination Activists'**.

However, Paul Cairney cautioned that gaps between design and policy might be hard to bridge, for example where there are policy-analysis dilemmas that are hard to solve by design methods alone. Some policy processes may seem incoherent from a design perspective, but they make sense to the participants involved. Conversely, from a design perspective, Joyce Yee argued designers cannot make real change by operating at the margins, which is the space many are currently occupying. To enable change, designers need more than design tools, methods and principles. They should not assume that just by using design they are encouraging participation when systemic injustices do not allow for change. To achieve change, some designers have engaged and are involved in the political process, and in so doing they have become political actors, activists and lobbyists.

Design's ability to cut across and integrate between policy silos was seen both as a strength and a weakness. As Marzia Mortati succinctly put it: 'Design is seen

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as horizontal, so it could be everywhere. And because it is everywhere, it ends up being nowhere'. However, when design can be anchored and mobilised, it can offer what Andrew Knight referred to as a 'multidisciplinary nervous system' for civil servants and others, promoting ways of working that are collaborative and constructive across silos and professions.

We had a lively debate about the degree to which design should seek to challenge policy. Design activities may generate feedback that is uncomfortable for decision makers, and that may not endorse the policy direction being pursued. It is unclear under what conditions, whether, and to what extent policy-makers welcome such challenges. We also acknowledged the human and workforce development challenges of using design approaches. For example, the notion of **'unlearning'** is tough for those working in the public sector. As Noel Hatch said: 'I was unsettled by the word "unsettling".' Workforce development is a missing ingredient for more generative design practices to be scaled. Support for new practices can come through experience, for example through 'unlearning' and **putting yourself in other people's shoes**, as well as through experiments and embedding.

Embedding design in mainstream ways of working is crucial. Excellent examples where design has been implemented at a project or pilot level had not always been taken up beyond experimentation. Speakers talked about being in an experimental phase and trying to move towards design approaches that become 'business-as-usual' instead of an innovation that was not scaled up or out. They

argued for more radical approaches to bring about consistent, comprehensive changes in the ways that government institutions operate. Again, this is not a problem in policy that is peculiar to design; other changes to how things are typically done have had similar trajectories. System change is hard. Embedding is a challenge beyond the scale of specific projects, but legislation and policy such as the Welsh government's **Well-being of Future Generations Act** and the **Transition Towns Network** point the way.

These themes highlight some of the possibilities, consequences and dilemmas discussed in the four workshops the network organised. While not exhaustive, they bring into focus some of the issues at the intersection of design and public policy, drawing on a depth of knowledge and range of perspectives from practitioners in government and design consultancies, design researchers, and researchers in policy studies and public service management. To offer complementary insights into the relations between design and public policy, we also examined the research literatures investigating the intersection of design and public policy, to which this report now turns.

3

Understanding the research landscape of design and policy

As the workshops made clear, there has been a 'design turn' in government and policy-making which has developed and expanded across the UK, Europe and worldwide in the past two decades. There are now numerous examples of the use of approaches, methods and tools associated with design and sometimes involvement of professional designers too. The proliferation of 'innovation' or 'policy labs' in central and local government also signals the increasing institutionalisation of design in government.

The intersections and interactions between design and policy-making, however, as yet lack a strong conceptual, theoretical, epistemological, methodological and empirical grounding (Hermus et al., 2020; Malpass and Salinas, 2020; Whicher, 2020; Mortati et al., 2022). On the one hand, such activities highlight a growing emphasis on how policies are designed and delivered. The professional expertise of design can play a greater role at a time when policy-making is facing perhaps unprecedented challenges of complexity, uncertainty, urgency and legitimacy, including doubts as to whether the repertoire of policy-makers is fit for purpose. On the other hand, these developments can be seen as part of the consumerisation and bureaucratisation of the public sphere where citizens are addressed as 'users' of digital public services, whose lived experience and creativity are sought out to co-design public services, as public policies are developed through 'sprints' and 'prototyped' as part of a 'new spirit of policy-making' (Kimbell and Bailey, 2017).

Design in government and policy-making has become imbued with a 'magical quality' (Pollitt and Hupe, 2010), appealing to policy-makers and academics alike, yet remaining amorphous in ways that may seem to evade or inhibit critical examination. Civil servants continue to call for conclusive definitions and specific approaches. As Carey and Malbon note (2018, p. 169), such magical concepts are 'seductive but do not solve – and often render invisible – important policy challenges.' Design has been positioned as having multiple, competing and potentially conflicting purposes and values for policy-making. How do we make sense of this? How can we bring critical understanding to the relations between design and policy? What does design do for policy and policy-makers that makes it distinctive? How can we look beyond the 'magic'?

3.1 A growing research field

There are growing research dialogues at the intersection of design, public policy and higher education. Indicators of these intersections between design and public policy include events such as the

Service Design in Government conferences held in the UK annually since 2014. UK Policy Lab set student design briefs with the Royal Society of Arts (RSA, 2017) resulting in new collaborations with design higher education.

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I have been researching the conditions required to embed design and creative practice in policy settings to support policy professionals to act as advocates and commissioners for design, and to strengthen the internal capacity for design research that is not focused on service or digital design. The words 'disrupt' and 'radical' make people feel uncomfortable, so let's say it is about helping people to think differently. There is potential for design being used in relation to policy for creating the space to challenge assumptions and slow down the reactive attitude of jumping to solutions, in particular using different types of evidence to explore current contexts in order to inform a direction of travel.

As a professional designer-in-policy, I have been positioned in two teams in two government departments. One role focused on evaluation (Rural Broadband, Department of Culture, Media and Sport) and one on design (Farming and Countryside, DEFRA). In each role, my work has been twofold: delivering good design research and being a relentless champion for design in an often resistant environment. I employ three main approaches that generate visibility and interest in design methods:

- Co-design coaching: holding space to support policy-makers, service designers and interaction designers to develop, deliver and reflect on participatory encounters;

- Design research practice: employing novel methods for research, analysis and storytelling, including engaging a range of creative practitioners (game designers, illustrators, filmmakers, web developers) as part of evidence gathering and data storytelling;

- Pop up studios: designing regular workshops and seminars for policy colleagues (at every level) to learn about and try different activities and approaches that could be applied in their work.

If employed for their creative skills, designers are not necessarily trained or equipped for the contexts required for policy development related to communication, hierarchies and prioritisation in policy-making. Designers in the digital space can be somewhat siloed to development of a specific product and not exposed to the wider political and policy contexts. Designers working in the policy development phase have additional work to do to engage with policy owners who are not familiar with working in co-design or user-centred design approaches. To be able to perform at their best and make a positive impact, designers rely on the reputation and visibility of high-profile case study examples and senior advocates for research and design in the policy development phase.

Photo courtesy: Marion Lean

Understanding the research landscape of design and policy

Similarly, the EU Policy Lab (part of the European Union's Joint Research Centre) set student design briefs for six European design schools asking for ideas about the future of government in 2030 (Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2019). Recognition of prominent individuals such as designer Dr Andrea Cooper, previously head of UK Policy Lab, being awarded an OBE for Public Service in 2021, highlights the growing visibility of these activities.

In academia, new developments include special interest groups (SIGs) in scholarly communities such as the Design Research Society's SIG Design for Policy and Governance and International Research Society for Public Management's SIG Design Approaches to Renewing Public Management and Governance, as well as tracks at public policy and design conferences (see Appendix for examples). As part of the network, the authors drew out and

summarised concepts, scholars and movements in contemporary design research relevant to policy and politics, mapping a number of emerging themes that cut across the fields of design and policy studies (Kimbell et al., 2022).

Across the landscape of academic research, questions raised in the previous section have been approached in various ways. Early approaches have examined the relation between design and policy in terms centred on either one or, conversely, the other discipline. Other approaches, in attempting to become more granular and nuanced in terms of in-between relations, have generated descriptions of characteristic features or cases of particular design practices within policy-making. Other researchers, including the authors, seek to avoid universalising as well as over-specifying the relations between design and policy-making, and attempt to articulate more cross- or transdisciplinary typologies of relations.

3.2 Design and (versus for) policy

Dialogues in the network revealed that 'design for policy' is currently popular in practice and research – policy is in the midst of a 'present-day design wave' (van Buuren et al., 2020) or 'design turn' (Mazé, forthcoming). Design is hard to define and often identified in relation to what is applied to, as in product design or service design. Whilst, on one level, this distinguishes between different forms of design, since the distinctiveness is expressed as the object (product, service, policy, and so on), it does not address what is distinctive

about design in and of itself. The more recent term 'design for policy' (Bason, 2014) is a particular application of design, and we can now evidence a wide range of research and practice that would fit under that label. What such research efforts often produce are repeated iterations of key principles, features and definitional elements of design that may be relevant to policy. Clearly, understandings of design must share principles and approaches, such as human-centredness, creativity, anticipation, visualisation,

prototyping and problem-solving. In this way, such lists do begin to answer the question of what design brings to policy-making.

However, attempts to define design for policy by listing features are unsatisfying for several reasons. Such attempts to clarify what design is when applied to policy often fail to differentiate it from other efforts to meet the challenges of policy-making. Falling back on generic characteristics of design overstates its uniqueness – for instance, design is not the only route to creativity or experimentation, nor is it the only means of accessing and integrating lived experience into policy. Further, an emphasis on problem-solving may not reflect how policy-makers see their role. Beyond generic characteristics, there are some features regularly cited in definitional efforts that may be thought of as more unique to design, such as visualisation or materialisation. Again, however, these practices can be manifested and applied to policy in many different ways.

As this brief discussion suggests, 'design for policy' may be used either as a homogenising label (it is all one thing), or in a reductive way (design as a set of tools to be picked up and put down), or as a mere description (often of what happened in a given instance or project), or simply as a PR buzzword. We found that the current state of debate is analytically weak and limits understanding of the contribution of design to policy. In this report, therefore, we aim to advance understanding by summarising current debates and outlining a future research agenda. To do this, we summarise discussions across the network, identify important gaps in the literature and then propose a set of analytical propositions which differentiate between the distinct potential relationships that design can have with policy, establishing an original articulation for the value of design to policy.

3.3 Deeper entanglements

In policy studies, articulations of policy design have become more commonplace during recent decades (Peters, 2018), when the term 'design' was notably adopted over alternatives such as policy formulation, creation, innovation and development. In studies of policy design, there is a growing 'design-orientation' (e.g., Howlett and Murkherjee, 2018). A recent special issue of the journal *Policy and Politics* (van Buuren et al., 2020), later republished as a book, noted a history of efforts to establish studies of public administration as a 'design science'. This framing of design emphasises

systematic, evidence-based planning rooted in Herbert Simon's (1996) articulation of design as concerned with how things could be and with planning around best courses of action. In public administration and political science education (and hence practice), this has been the predominant understanding of design.

Design studies, in contrast, have tended to frame design as a service profession, rather than a particular or distinctive form of knowledge. This is understandable, particularly given that design has become academised within higher

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Having come from a background of trying to involve people with lived experience (of substance use/recovery) in the development of national policy in Scotland, I had first-hand experience of the difficulties in translating the views and opinions of many people into something coherent and deliverable to policy-makers. I guess this is a common experience with complex issues, yet what is in many ways more intriguing was noticing an inability for policy-makers to really listen to what was being said. To hear.

In previous project work with the Royal Society of Arts, I realised that design was an effective overarching tool to try solving these communication problems. Design for policy is the culmination of my interest in this issue. Starting to research design for policy through a PhD studentship funded by Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy is a wonderful opportunity, for it affords additional layers of even more complexity. Given Northern Ireland's divided community and dysfunctional executive, innovation is not just a buzzword, but often a necessity. When, as is often the case in Northern Ireland, no policy-maker is able to do their work, it becomes intriguing to consider what happens in the gap.

Rather than utilising design as a tool predominately to help the workings of government, I am more interested (given the Northern Ireland context) in how design can help to aid communities to form their wishes and organise their coherence in a way that then influences whoever happens to have power. Indeed, in the forming of this, design (and design for policy) may point a way forward to possible alternatives to traditional governmental practice.

Photo courtesy: Brian Morgan

education and research quite recently compared to other disciplines (Hellström, Reimer and Mazé, 2023). Considering the intertwinement of its history with that of trade guilds and industrialisation, design has traditionally been perceived as vocational- or skills-based rather than knowledge-based. It can too easily be understood and treated as 'in service' to other people and other knowledges, especially that of well-established disciplines such as political

science. A service mentality can indeed be traced in the by-now common term design *for* policy that is used to frame the emerging space at the intersection of policy, public administration and design. The phrase has become widespread since its appearance as the title of a book edited by Christian Bason (2014, p. 2), which identified the potential to 'reinvent' the art and craft of policy-making for the twenty-first century through the adoption of design approaches.

Partly motivated by a need to more critically assess the assumptions that accompany 'design for policy', it is worth exploring the conjunction of 'design *and* policy' to open up a more nuanced examination of the range of relations between the two fields. Yet, there remains a need to more deeply and rigorously interrogate the meanings, purposes and consequences at stake in the varied relations between design and policy. To do that requires being more precise about what is meant by 'design'.

3.4 Difficulties of defining design

There are today multiple definitions and forms of design developing simultaneously within government and public policy. Many use the same term – 'design' – but often mean very different things. There are some commonalities, such as foregrounding creativity, materiality, user experience, navigating uncertainty and enabling collaboration.

Many attempts to define design centre on the 'object' of design. These many and heterogeneous 'objects' are evident in the nomenclature of subfields, where they are appended to the word design – for example, product design, architectural design, communication design, user experience design, service design, urban design or systems design. In these terms, design is defined only through the object to which it is applied.

Other scholars highlight the subfield of service design as particularly useful for the distributed and networked governance of public service. In such terms, design accompanies public policy in a shift from 'goods' to 'services' which follows the dominant logic and the consequent need to consider how governmental and service-provision agencies perceive and potentially co-create with 'consumers' of services (Ansell and Torfing, 2021). Others look to design subfields such as collaborative and participatory design in the context of 'collaborative governance'. Applied to deliberation processes among diverse actors within and outside government, design is understood as applied to formal and informal settings for dialogue and consultation (forums), decision making (arenas) and resolution of residual disputes (courts) (Bryson, Crosby and Seo, 2020). Still others look at subfields of design such as organisational design as a way to posit the design of whole governmental institutions (e.g., parliamentary procedures, policy labs, citizen assemblies, and so on) as, arguably, designed in themselves (Saward, 2021).

Such approaches to defining design have benefits in terms of specificity, since they provide a deeper focus on particular theories and practices. However, it is questionable whether and how such definitions can be relevant when generalised or scaled beyond the specific subfields of both design and public policy.

Some definitional approaches attempt to do just that – to 'join up' or integrate subfield-based definitions into more general models.

One such model is the policy design cycle, in which policy-making is conceived of as a linear, sequential and finite series of steps, spanning from high-level, expert-based 'decision-making' that happens upstream in the policy process through to 'implementation' of policy that happens downstream at the front-lines of service delivery to citizens and the public. The cycle has been variously characterised in terms of more specific phases or steps (e.g., in Howlett and Ramesh, 2003; and Parsons, 2005, both common references in 'design for policy' literatures). In her contribution to the book edited by Bason, Sabine Junginger (2014) articulates an argument for 'policy-making as designing' by outlining multiple specific roles for design within the policy-design cycle. Several scholars reference this model in order to map design directly onto policy design, for example differentiating while connecting 'designing for policy' from 'designing for service' – the

former being upstream and associated with the subfields of strategic design or design thinking, the latter being downstream and associated with service design (Salinas 2022). Returning us to efforts in defining design in terms of its objects, Helena Polati Trippe (2021) identifies three 'objects' in the policy cycle – a policy, policy instruments and a public service – that can be designed with recourse to specific design subfields. Such conceptualisations are useful attempts to 'join up' subfields within a heterogeneous design field as well as to bridge across design and policy fields.

However, as acknowledged by the above-mentioned scholars, such definitional approaches are limited by well-known critiques of the policy design process, including how the latter oversimplifies, essentialises and reduces the complex, multidimensional, distributed and incomplete nature of actual policy-making.

3.5 Understanding the evidence base

Would it be better, then, to try deriving a definition from the bottom-up, from actual cases? Some studies have tried to do just this. Given that practice has arguably outpaced scholarship at the intersection of the design and policy fields, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a large and ever-increasing number of case studies about specific projects where design practices have been deployed in UK central or local government, often in 'policy lab' teams including recent doctoral research (e.g., Kimbell, 2015; Bailey and Lloyd, 2016; Blomkamp,

2018; Bailey, 2020; Buchanan, 2020; Vaz, 2020). Such accounts are useful particularly in terms of relatability and communicability of design-in-action for policy-makers. Case-based work also allows attention to the detailed 'look and feel' and process of design, as well as evidence-based understanding through ethnographic study.

While such contributions have served to delineate an emerging area of professional practice, they have limitations too. For instance, in terms of academic rigour, it

is always problematic to draw a general theory on the basis of different, discrete and contingent project cases. Further, by focusing on design practices used in public policy settings, this work tends to neglect the specific institutional contexts of government and public administration. Finally, such case studies typically focus on 'what worked' within specific practical cases. Challenges, alternatives and direct compare-contrast analyses are often beyond the scope of practical cases, with the result that such cases may lack criticality in themselves and especially across cases and in relation to wider contexts.

Some definitions are emerging at a 'meta' level which are not centred on a field (or subfield) and attempting to bridge across, nor centred on a generic model or discrete case and attempting to generalise from the top-down or bottom-up. These 'meta' approaches can be motivated by an impulse to essentialise or, vice versa by a more critical examination aimed at distinguishing the characteristics of design.

Several notable studies have produced helpful sets of categories, typologies or taxonomies. Margot Hermus et al. (2020) produced an extensive literature review of articles on design published in public administration journals between 1989–2016, analysing them in terms of three categories (adopted from Brown, 2008) and an additional two categories (inspired by Sanders and Stappers, 2008), ultimately proposing six design approaches ranging from traditional, scientific and 'informational' approaches to more 'inspirational', innovative and user-driven ones. In order to thematically introduce articles published in their special issue of *Policy and Politics* journal, Arwin van Buuren et al. (2020) elaborated three ideal type approaches to 'design science' in public

administration: design as optimisation, exploration and co-creation. More recently, Geert Brinkman et al. (2023) analysed 14 public sector projects in the Netherlands and Denmark, in which they were able to distinguish 'design thinking' from 'conventional design' approaches and to produce a set of strategic factors that enable and support them. These three studies, produced by a relatively small group of collaborating scholars, primarily foreground established understandings of 'design science' and focus on public administration, thus including only some theoretical lenses and sources relevant to the field. These are however helpful as attempts to characterise the fields in terms of cross-cutting frameworks that draw together different sources and methods, ranging from large-scale literature reviews, key design practitioners and analysis of cases.

In our own research in this area, the authors have sought to develop a set of propositions which allow inclusion of a wider breadth and diversity of approaches evident across the network, while, at the same time, maintaining a theoretical rigour in terms of distinguishing features. While general or essentialising frameworks are tempting, we align with Lewis et al. (2020) in recognising policy-making as a more reflexive, uncertain and even ambiguous process in comparison to the models depicted in policy handbooks. Such a 'meta' level framework should advance scholarship through its systematicity and criticality, but also resonate with practitioners working in highly complex, contingent and potentially incomparable situations. It is this set of propositions that can enable us to recognise a range of types of design practice in relation to public policy-making and underpin a more systematic examination of their potential and limitations.

Understanding the research landscape of design and policy

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Exploration drives us to improve our living conditions, to cross borders, to expand our knowledge and to advance our civilisation. Exploration is a constant challenge and serves as a fitting metaphor for the evolving relationship between design and policy. An increasing number of scholars and practitioners are embarking on exploring how to adapt design methodologies and principles (human-centred, iterative, experimental) to the realm of policies, often viewed as intangible and distant. As a design researcher, I ventured into the uncharted territory of public policies to amplify the impact of my work and enhance life conditions. Projects funded by the European Commission, such as **NetZeroCities**, provided this opportunity. In this expansive initiative led by Climate Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC), we guided over 100 cities towards climate neutrality, leveraging the consortium's diverse expertise. Amidst these complexities, articulating design's significance in sustainable transitions, especially in policy innovation, is a crucial facet.

As part of the team at Politecnico di Milano, our ongoing work underscores that design, with its creative problem-solving and human-centred approach, empowers municipalities to experiment with citizen-centric policies, offering safe avenues to anticipate future scenarios and understand the consequences of their actions. My experience shows the potential for design to enrich policy by rendering tangible its outcomes and engagement methods. These manifestations mitigate the risk of policy failure, encouraging experimentation, collaboration and public involvement. Moreover, I increasingly recognise that addressing pressing global challenges like sustainability transitions and climate action requires comprehensive, systems-thinking approaches. The nexus of design and policy unveils also the vital roles of social innovation and citizen engagement alongside technological innovations. These shifts are essential to tackle deeply entrenched societal issues, transcending technology to address systemic injustices and inequalities. Interdisciplinary collaboration is also key. Policy research benefits from the creativity of design thinking, while design thrives with the solid foundations and frameworks of policy research. This intersection underscores the need for synergy; this is where design and policy together hold transformative potential. However, this is an evolving realm necessitating further research and evidence to demonstrate that effective design for policy is not just words on paper – it is about real-world impact, with design as a potent catalyst.

Photo courtesy: Politecnico di Milano

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Towards a new research agenda for design and policy-making

4.1 Understanding relations between design and policy-making

Discussions in network events, and our engagement with research in design and policy studies, highlighted the varied, situated and evolving relationships between design and policy-making. As the previous sections demonstrated, there are different ways of understanding design and, further, different approaches to characterising and evaluating the possible contributions that design expertise might make to policy-making, under what conditions and with what consequences. To address the need of clarifying the possible relations between design and policy in research and practice, we developed a set of propositions distinguishing three relationships between design and policy-making, which provide an agenda for further research and aid reflection on practice.

These different relationships are elaborated upon in Table 1 and discussed below. We see these relationships between design and policy-making as co-existing in the work of public administrations. Rather than seeing one as preferable to others, we suggest they do different things and lead to different results.

Relationship between design and policy-making	Purpose of design	Scope and nature of policy-making	Terms on which design and policy interact
Design as a tool for policy-making	To support achieving specified goals of policy-making	A technocratic endeavour where policy operates within a single world-view	Design to generate solutions to agreed policy problems
Design as a practice of improvising within policy-making	To enable policy-making to be more open in the face of unfolding events and experiences	A responsive process where policy negotiates among plural world-views	Design to open up policy-making to lived experience
Design regenerating policy-making	To facilitate the re-envisioning of policy-making	A generative space where policy emerges from the decentring of different world-views	Design disrupting or unsettling assumptions about policy-making

Table 1. Three relationships between design and policy-making

Design as a tool for policy-making

The purpose of design within this relationship is to support the achievement of specified goals of policy-making and support effective delivery. Within this relationship, policy-making is understood as premised on a specific or elite form of technical experience, and as operating within a single or given world-view. Design and policy here are interacting in terms such that design is employed to help generate and deliver solutions to existing policy problems.

Design as a practice of improvising within policy-making

The purpose of design within this relationship is to enable policy-making to be more improvisational and experimental in the face of complexity and uncertainty. Here, policy-making is understood as a responsive process where policy necessarily needs to negotiate between different world-views. Thus, design and policy here are interacting in terms such that design is used to amend and expand upon existing policy-making, based on engagement with lived experience and diverse positions and expertise, closing the gaps between policy and delivery.

Design regenerating policy-making

The purpose of design within this relationship is to challenge or unsettle assumptions built into policy-making and enable regeneration. Here, policy-making is understood as a generative or even agonistic space where policy emerges from the decentring of different, potential world-views. Thus, design and policy here are interacting in terms such that design is used to re-envision the basis for policy-making, challenging the ways we currently think about a policy issue and the delivery of policy.

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4.2 Implications of different relationships between design and policy

Having proposed three distinct relations between design and policy, we now turn to examine the kinds of knowledge and roles that are implicated in them, as shown in Table 2. Each of these possible relationships poses questions about whose knowledge or expertise is foregrounded, and who is involved in the expanded work of designing in and for policy-making. While some studies of design and policy have emphasised the expertise of professional designers, there is also potential to look more broadly at design capabilities spread across teams and organisations, which may not consider themselves as 'designers'.

Relationship between design and policy-making	Whose/what knowledge	Who are the designers?	Examples	Relationship to design research literatures
Design as a tool for policy-making	Narrow recognition of different forms of knowledge useful to the policy process	Policy-makers and professional designers	Design toolkits	First and second-generation design methods, service design
Design as a practice of improvising within policy-making	Inclusion of specific and explicit kinds of knowledge/co-construction of knowledge	Policy-makers and designers, plus users/those with lived experience of a given policy issues	Living labs	Participatory design, service design
Design regenerating policy-making	Hidden, unknown, occluded knowledges	Inclusive/wide recognition of different knowledges and perspectives	Creative futuring	Anticipatory/speculative design, service ecosystem design, transition design

Table 2. Implications of the different relationships between design and policy

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For design as a tool for policy-making

Understanding the policy process as a technocratic endeavour within a given world-view, with design seen as a supportive tool for achieving existing policy goals, implies a narrow recognition of the kind of expertise or knowledge that may be valuable, and which is perceived to be held by policy-makers and professional designers. Such relationship may be manifested in practice through design tools or toolkits, which are premised on an established problem and clear solution, and which set out a series of universally applicable, clear and linear steps or formulas of how to do design. This relationship is informed by and aligned to what may be termed first and second-generation design literatures. This approach is clearly the most prevalent form of 'design for policy', but risks playing into the idea of design as a set of tools to be picked up and put down, with limited scope within the policy process.

For design as a practice of improvisation within policy-making

The sense of policy-making as an improvisational process which has to respond to and negotiate between different world-views and where design is used to help navigate an unfolding policy landscape,

suggests a recognition of specific and explicit forms of knowledge, and the value of including those with lived experience of a given policy issue within the policy process. Such relationships are often negotiated within spaces such as living labs, and may be aligned to literatures on participatory design. This use of design within policy is expanding, but its value may depend on how a given policy issue is framed, and its openness to re-framing.

For design regenerating policy-making

The sense of policy-making as a process which necessarily has to be open to challenge and the re-framing of existing thinking in order to meet unprecedented challenges, implies a recognition of the need to engage with hidden and marginalised perspectives and forms of knowledge, including those previously or regularly excluded from policy-making. Design here has a critically disruptive or generative purpose. This may be aligned with literatures on anticipatory or speculative design and may be manifested, for example, through the use of creative practices for transformational futuring. This use of design within policy is the most nascent, perhaps because of the implicit political challenges it poses, which may put off incumbent policy-makers charged with making policy work as it is.

4.3 Discussion

In response to deliberations at network events and our review of research literatures, we developed the set of analytical propositions laid out above. Our aim was to bring greater clarity to discussions of the distinctive value of design with respect to policy and to better understand the relationships between the two. In concluding, it is valuable to reflect upon what may shape the use and value of these different relationships between design and policy.

First, it is important to highlight the temporal and spatial dynamics of the relationships between design and policy. We can imagine that these relationships may be in evidence at the same time within policy-making, but also deployed at different points in the policy process, or at different levels and environments of policy-making.

Second, we note that these different relationships between design and policy are also mediated by power. For example, the differing prominence of these relationships is reflective of the nature of current policy-making. The widest ranging use of design as a tool reflects where the power to shape and challenge policy-making lies. But we have also seen growing use of design as improvisation, often related to demands for greater legitimacy, justice and effectiveness within policy-making. The level of challenge currently faced by policy-making – from heightened urgency to radical uncertainty – perhaps suggests the need and indeed demand for greater future use of design as a means of enabling the regeneration and renewal of policy-making.

Third, our differentiation of design-policy relationships also allows us to bring greater clarity to how different design elements or practices may be mobilised. So 'visualisation' or 'user-centred' design may look quite different dependent on whether design is understood as a tool, practice of improvisation or means of generating new relationships, ideas and ways of understanding policy. Our delineation of these different relationships between design and policy may also be understood as a set of heuristics to allow policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to critically reflect upon their own positioning. All of them may enable 'de-risking' policy-making, allowing for use of different kinds of data and evidence, and different methods. For example the design practice of 'prototyping' might be found in all three relations. In the first relation, when design is used as a tool for policy-making, iterative prototyping can help fine-tune policy development and the effective delivery of a new service to achieve policy objectives, connecting policy with delivery. If design is understood as practice of improvisation, prototyping can help ongoing learning and adjustment to a changing environment and integrate different data sources and perspectives. In the third relation, in which design regenerates policy-making, exploratory prototyping can help surface different understandings of a policy domain and negotiate alignment between competing worldviews.

Dr Lara Salinas

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My practice-based research focuses on embedding design-led approaches in local and central government in the context of complex challenges such as climate justice, bringing a stronger people- and place-centred approach to policy-making and public service provision.

Since 2019, I have been collaborating with the London Borough of Southwark to support their efforts to achieve net zero in the London borough. In 2022, we initiated a year-long collaboration funded by UKRI's Design Exchange Partnerships and Higher Impact Education Funding.

During the first six months, we created a Climate Emergency Visual Action Plan including a visualisation that agglomerates Southwark's climate resilience and adaptation documents providing a holistic overview of the council's strategic priorities, objectives and actions; the actors involved in policy-making and delivery; and how particular policy problems have been framed. This visual analysis led us to identify the opportunity to collaborate with the Public Health team and use design-led approaches to support their efforts of helping residents access sustainable and healthy food. During the second half of the project, we delivered 200 hours of activities in four local venues, engaging 100 children and young adults to co-design alternative food systems through the design of provocative future services. The borough's sustainable food strategy was built on insights gained from these engagements, later achieving national recognition for their leadership in securing good food for residents.

This work foregrounds residents' lived experience, demonstrating the potential for design to bring situated perspectives into policy-making.

Photo courtesy: Lara Salinas

Towards a new research agenda for design and policy-making

It is beyond the scope of this network report to map such variations in practice, but we see this as a starting point for future research and practice development. Our intention is that these analytical propositions enable a more critical understanding of the different intents and implications at play within the 'design turn' in policy and open up new agendas within design research and political science, and indeed in policy-making and practice.

5

Recommendations

The dialogues that took place in the research network, including those with the Civil Service Policy Design Community, demonstrated that there is need for research to better interrogate the possibilities, consequences and limitations of design in relation to policy-making. This need is spread across universities, central and local government, consultancies and others in the policy ecosystem, including policy-makers and those involved in delivery and implementation of policy. This section makes recommendations to enhance and accelerate research oriented towards practice, alongside theory-building, at the intersection of design and policy-making. Recognising the varied sites, agendas and actors involved in research in the UK, we offer high-level recommendations and specific actions to be undertaken.

5.1 High-level recommendations

1. **Deepen understanding of the range of possible relations** between design and policy, clarifying the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of design in relation to policy-making and delivery including through design thinking, service design, communication design, co-design, social design, systems design, urban design and design futures.

2. **Mobilise the potential of existing and developing policy design teams and labs** across UK central and local government and the devolved nations as collaborators and sites of co-produced research, along with engaging others in the policy ecosystem.

3. **Invest in cross-disciplinary research**, bringing together design (including design thinking, service design, co-design, urban design, social design, systems design, design futures) with policy studies, political science, public administration and the broader social sciences as well as the humanities, to explore the ways in which design and policy can interact and generate new understandings and evidence (research), as well as result in outcomes for government (impact).

5.2 Actions for specific bodies

Recommendations

1. UKRI and other research funders should

    a. Fund a follow-on network project (to capitalise on the existing AHRC Design|Policy Network infrastructure) in collaboration with the Policy Design Community to provide a forum for researchers and practitioners to share knowledge.

    b. Invest in a new national scheme that develops and delivers cross-disciplinary research clarifying the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of design in relation to policy-making, co-produced with the Civil Service and local government, using mechanisms such as Network+, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and embedded doctoral studentships.

    c. Create additional opportunities to enable design researchers and policy scholars to work together on policy design activities in existing and future cross-council calls, fellowships, secondments and mobility schemes so as to allow for cross-fertilisation of approaches, methods and data clarifying the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of the use of design in policy development.

    d. Build into the 2028 Research Excellence Framework, ResearchFish and other aspects of UK research infrastructure, opportunities for reporting on involvement in policy design that recognises the varied unfolding processes and practices of policy development.

2. Civil Service and local government

    a. Those working across government using design approaches and expertise including the Policy Profession, Policy Design Community, Government Digital Service, Digital, Data and Technology Profession, and Central Digital and Data Office should

        i. Establish and fund a five-year research capability for Policy Design with Areas of Research Interest, a cross-disciplinary College of Experts and resources to commission research clarifying the extent, types, distinctiveness and impact of design in relation to policy-making, and build the evidence base for policy design to inform and support practice development using a range of research approaches, methods and types of evaluation.

        ii. Routinely include academics from design and the political sciences in Policy Design capability development, evaluation, governance and training.

    b. Policy labs, policy teams and delivery teams in central and local government and devolved administrations should host academics on secondments and doctoral students from design and policy scholarship and build them into project delivery, evaluation, learning, governance and development.

Natasha Trotman

Equalities designer and researcher

I am an international, award-winning equalities designer and researcher whose practice explores extending the frontiers of knowledge across mental difference, non-typical bodyminds, ways of being and marginalised experiences. I work with neurodiverse, pan-impairment, pan-disability and varied ability communities. Drawing on my educational backgrounds in information experience design, special educational needs and therapeutic arts, I have exhibited widely, creating multi-modal offerings, interactions and workshops with Somerset House and The Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as working as a research associate on a project (Design and The Mind) between The Royal College of Arts Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design (HHCD) and the Wellcome Trust. I work across sectors often in transdisciplinary teams, ensuring that inclusion, equalities and access are brought into focus and illuminating how deeply ingrained non-disabled mindsets can be and to promote post-normative equity.

In addition to producing academic publications, I contribute to change-making work toward a post-normative, fairer, fully accessible and more equitable world. This includes working with local governments, including being appointed as a member of the Co-Production Strategic Implementation Panel for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham as well as sitting on their Inclusive Design Review Panel (IDRP). IDRP strongly believes that:

1. Inclusive design is about making places for everyone, including disabled people, as how places are designed can affect people's ability to move, see, hear and communicate effectively.

2. Inclusive design is everyone's responsibility.

3. Good design is inclusive (intersectional) design.

This can take the form of co-producing key aspects of the process, ensuring accessible routes into the content, meetings and more.

Accessible and accelerated routes into inclusive design are a unique and key aspect of IDRP, with each member who each has lived experience of disability and/or neurodivergence (irrespective of academic background) receiving inclusive design training from specialist architects and built environment professionals (in alignment with negotiable and non-negotiable access riders for each panel member) to aid the providing of feedback and input during the IDRP and wider processes. The IDRP can invite developers and architects to present proposals to a mixed panel of IDRP members and local government decision-makers before applying for planning permission.

Recommendations

c. Those working to develop cross-government capabilities such as Government Campus should include training in design including supporting or enabling policy development, delivery and iterative learning, informed by academic research.

3. **Design departments in universities should**

   a. Host policy-makers as visiting fellows from different parts of government and academics from policy studies to contribute to student projects, doctoral research and research projects.

   b. Invest in the doctoral pipeline investigating the intersection of design and public policy, including across institutions and geographies, through cross-disciplinary doctoral supervision, seed funds, capacity building, exchanges and dialogue.

4. **Politics departments in universities should**

   a. Host designers from different design specialisms and design researchers as visiting fellows to contribute to student projects, doctoral research and research projects.

   b. Invest in the doctoral pipeline investigating the intersection of design and public policy, including across institutions and geographies, through cross-disciplinary doctoral supervision, seed funds, capacity building, exchanges and dialogue.

5. **Consultancies using design to deliver policy and public services should**

   a. Engage with academics and doctoral students from design and the political sciences to inform project scoping and delivery, capability development, evaluation and training.

   b. Create opportunities for staff to carry out doctoral research at the intersection of design and policy-making.

Dr Federico Vaz

Senior Lecturer, University of West London
Affiliate Researcher, MIT Governance Lab
Design + Futures Fellow, UN Development Programme

During my doctoral research, I investigated the introduction of design for public policy innovation in Europe. Subsequently, I moved towards more resource-constrained, non-Western contexts such as West Africa and Latin America.

Through this, I became increasingly aware of the contextual factors affecting policy design and how these shape the practice. Chiefly, these consist in the assumptions around the socio-technical and cultural arrangements in which design (as a set of practices, tools, methods and mindsets) is introduced. Despite being an inherently human activity, design has been codified in the West (e.g., as design thinking) under specific premises that do not always apply to other contexts. Hence, some of the assumptions underpinning the operationalisation of these approaches are not always applicable, impacting their effectiveness.

Yet, those 'making policy' in these contexts are also doing design. Design, understood as the future-oriented practice of creating the artificial, has the potential to re-signify the world we live in both creatively and materially. In (public) policy, it has the potential to improve the processes through which the State, at its different levels, regulates life within its territory and interacts with citizens and other stakeholders, emphasising co-creative exploration of policy options and the lived experience of those who will be affected by them, ultimately improving their welfare.

Today, one of the main challenges of design for policy is to avoid the trivialisation of the consultative approach while understanding that the practice of design should be intrinsically tied to the contextual norms, needs and constraints of the setting where it is implemented.

Photo courtesy: Luke Richards

Recommendations

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Acknowledgements

Author Biographies

Author biographies

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Photo courtesy: the author

Lucy Kimbell is Professor of Contemporary Design Practices at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London.

Photo courtesy: the author

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Photo courtesy: Leena Ylä-Lyly

Liz Richardson is Professor of Public Administration in the Department of Politics, University of Manchester.

Photo courtesy: the author

Author Biographies

Appendix

Network information

Design|Policy Research Network

May 2022 – October 2023

Project team:

Principal Investigator: Professor Lucy Kimbell, Professor of Contemporary Design Practices, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London (UAL)

Co-Investigator: Professor Liz Richardson, Professor of Public Administration, Department of Politics, University of Manchester

Administrator: Gabriele Grigorjevaite, UAL

Steering Group:

Dr Jocelyn Bailey, Social Design Institute, UAL

Professor Catherine Durose, Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool

Dr Daniella Jenkins, Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Bristol

Professor Ramia Mazé, School of Design, London College of Communication, UAL

Dr Niall Sreenan, Policy Institute, Kings College London

Dr Anna Whicher, PDR, Cardiff Metropolitan University

Advisory Board:

Dr Camilla Buchanan, Co-head, Policy Lab, Department for Education, UK

Dr Carla Groom, Deputy Director for Human-Centred Design Science, Department of Work and Pensions, UK

Dr Paola Pierri, then Head of Design and Research, Democratic Society, Germany, later Deputy Head, Institute of Design Research, University of the Arts Bern, Switzerland

Professor Michael Saward, Professor of Politics and International Studies, Warwick University, UK

Appendix

Events organised by the network

Workshop 1: Tensions and resistances in the field of design in policy

University of the Arts London
15 June 2022

Invited provocations:

- Dr Carla Groom (Department of Work and Pensions)

- Professor Paul Cairney (University of Stirling)

- Professor Ann Light (University of Sussex/Malmö University)

Summary by Jocelyn Bailey available at: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2022/07/14/tensions-and-resistances-in-the-field-of-design-in-policy/

Workshop 2: Untapped potential from design research for public policy

University of Manchester
3 October 2022

Invited provocations:

- Professor Carl DiSalvo (Georgia Institute of Technology)

- Andrew Knight (Head of the UK Policy Design Community, UK Civil Service)

- Professor Catherine Durose (Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at the University of Liverpool)

Summary by Ramia Mazé available at: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/17/untapped-potential-from-design-research-for-public-policy/

Workshop 3: Democracy, design and public policy

University of the Arts London
17 February 2023

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Invited provocations:

- Catherine Greig (make:good)

- Professor Michael Saward (University of Warwick)

- Professor Joyce Yee (University of Northumbria)

Summary by Anna Whicher and Lucy Kimbell available at: **https://publicpolicydesign. blog.gov.uk/2023/07/13/democracy-design-and-public-policy/**

Workshop 4: Future directions for research

University of Manchester
6 September 2023

Speaker:

- Professor Catherine Durose (University of Liverpool)

Invited provocations:

- Associate Professor Marzia Mortati (Politecnico di Milano)

- Professor Michael Barzelay (London School of Economics)

- Noel Hatch (London Borough of Newham)

Summary by Liz Richardson available at: **https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov. uk/2023/10/05/future-directions-for-design-and-public-policy/**

Number of participants at network events

	Format	Booked	In-person attendees	Online attendees	Total attendees
Workshop 1	Hybrid	81	13	41	54
Workshop 2	Hybrid	208	23	28	51
Workshop 3	Online	215	N/A	90	90
Workshop 4	Hybrid	113	25	40	65
					260

Conference contributions by the authors during the network

Design Research Society Conference (Bilbao, 27 June – 1 July 2022)

- Conference track convened by the authors themed 'Uncertainty and Incompleteness in the Design of Public Policy and Administration'.

- Paper by the authors: Kimbell, L., Durose, C., Mazé, R. and Richardson, L. (2022) 'Design for Public Policy: Embracing uncertainty and hybridity in mapping future research' in Proceedings of the Design Research Society Conference, Bilbao, 27 June – 1 July. Available at (open access): https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2022.303

Service Design in Government (Edinburgh, 28–30 September 2022)

- Lucy Kimbell and Andrew Knight 'In Conversation' event: 'Public policy design: making design core business for government'.

Political Studies Association, 73rd annual conference (Liverpool, 3–5 April 2023)

- Paper by the authors: Durose, C., Kimbell, L., Mazé, R. and Richardson, L. (2023) 'Design for Policy: Navigating politics and the political'.

International Public Policy Association, 6th international conference on public policy (Toronto, 27–29 June 2023)

- Paper by the authors: Durose, C., Kimbell, L., Mazé, R. and Richardson, L. (2023) 'What does "design for policy" contribute to policy-making? Three logics'.

Contributions by the authors to the cross-government Policy Design Community

Peer review by the authors and other members of the network for the Civil Service's first Policy2Delivery training course. See: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/03/launching-governments-first-ever-multidisciplinary-course/

Policy Design Community Delivery Board (2022–23)

Lucy Kimbell and Liz Richardson are members of the board, meeting quarterly. See: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/join/

Public Design Review announced in September 2023.

Lucy Kimbell, Catherine Durose and Liz Richardson are acting as advisors to this cross-government initiative to develop a research-based definition and framework demonstrating how public design leads to public value. See: https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/22/introducing-public-design/

LinkedIn group details

AHRC Design|Policy Research Network

https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12656362/

Appendix

Members of AHRC Design and Policy Research Network LinkedIn group at 21 September 2023

Appendix

Locations		Locations		Sectors	
UK	441	Poland	3	Design	144
Australia	37	Mexico	1	Policy and practice	42
New Zealand	4	Brazil	3	Research	56
Italy	16	Portugal	5	Higher education	112
Netherlands	13	Finland	10	IT	21
Spain	12	Denmark	11	PR and comms	4
France	6	India	14	Environmental services	6
Germany	15	Iran	3	Government administration	119
USA	23	Pakistan	2		
Canada	13	South Korea	2	Management consulting	42
Sweden	11	Hungary	1	Non-profit organisation	18
China	2	Japan	2		
Turkey	1	Not specified	49	HR	3
Greece	2			Not specified	140
Ireland	4				
Austria	1	Total	707	Total	707

Design and Policy: Current Debates and
Future Directions for Research in the UK

Lucy Kimbell, Catherine Durose,
Ramia Mazé, Liz Richardson

October 2023