

# In austere Britain, design has the potential to inspire innovation, improve quality, and encourage collaboration in public service provision

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*In times of recession the UK tends to leave the shape of public services as they were. Yet after a two-year pilot study of service transformation run by the Design Council and sponsored by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) [Lord Michael Bichard](#) argues that good design can both achieve savings and offer better public services.*

Last November, HRH The Duke of Edinburgh presented his 51st Annual [Designers Prize](#). The prize was introduced in 1959 to recognize products that stood out from the utilitarian designs in 1950s Britain. It attempted to stimulate more stylish product design in a country struggling with the austerity of the post-war emerging economy. The 2010 winner was Bill

Moggridge, director of the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York. Mr Moggridge changed the way we live and work today: he designed the world's first laptop computer. The '[Grid Compass](#)', as it was called, went on sale in 1982 at a cost of over \$8,000. Bill Moggridge's laptop underlines the impact which design and technology can have when they come together. Not since industrialization has technology had such a profound impact on our lives, and mobile technology will continue to transform the way we engage with each other and with organizations.

The Duke of Edinburgh's prize is especially relevant now because it highlights the importance of design in periods of extreme austerity. Good design not only liberates the potential of scientific and technological innovation, it also fuels the success of business and therefore economic recovery, and is key to achieving better public services at less cost. Given that deficits in a number of countries will largely be reduced by savings in the public sector, this is crucial.

Too often in the past when faced with a recession the response has been to increase efficiency, improve productivity and defer nonessential projects. The UK has tended to leave the shape of public services much as they were. This period of sustained pressure on public finances means that the old approach will not be sufficient. This time we have to transform our public services so that they are designed around clients; so that they integrate technology; and so that they are accessible, seamless and reflect the way people live their lives today. We also have to make our public bodies less risk averse, and more innovative.

By way of example, the Department of Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) sponsored the Design Council to run a two-year pilot programme, '[Public services by design](#)', focused on service transformation. This pilot has just finished, and the early results are encouraging. It shows how a simple and recognized intervention can bring economic and service benefits.

Service design brings together frontline staff and managers working with designers to achieve savings and better services. The programme encourages a collaborative and imaginative culture, instils a strong customer focus, and builds the capability of the public sector to commission new services. The initiative, which involved 10 public sector projects, has led to a projected return on investment of £26 for every £1 spent.

Three examples highlight the public services by design intervention and the consequent productivity benefits:

- The London Borough of Lewisham's [Housing Option's Centre](#) used design to put preventative approaches at the forefront of service delivery. Lewisham has reduced the numbers of priority

homeless and families in temporary accommodation by improving customer journeys and targeting resources to those in greatest need.

- The [North East Improvement & Efficiency Partnership](#) and local adult social services have used design methodologies to reduce long-term dependency among adults requiring social care. Early customer-focused intervention has lowered the demand for acute health services and high-level care input for over 50-year-olds and women with complex support needs.

- Design has also been integral in moving essential central government services online. HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and [Companies House](#) have been working to reduce the administrative burden on business, a priority issue for government as it seeks to stimulate economic growth. Designers have helped provide a joined-up online service of company and tax registration, managed and hosted by

Companies House, and made available on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). The website makes it quicker and easier to set up a company and is releasing efficiency savings back to government.

All three cases show that design can improve the operational effectiveness of public bodies. In return, citizens receive a better service and savings are released back into the system. Further, as with the HMRC case, by easing the burden the government places on businesses, design can help with economic recovery.

The UK, in common with other countries, faces a number of complex public policy problems—balancing the public finances, building a sustainable economy, meeting the needs of an ageing society, easing the burden of chronic health conditions and reducing unacceptable levels of reoffending. These are not the responsibility of a single department or public body and will not be resolved unless organizations work collaboratively, use new approaches and look with fresh eyes at complex problems. Coupled with this are the increased demands being placed on services by consumer expectations; and in particular how people wish to access and control the services they receive: technology being the biggest factor here. But, as Bill Moggridge showed with his laptop computer, the combination of design and technology shaped by the needs of users brings many benefits.

The challenge for UK public services in the 21st century is three-fold:

- First, new ways need to be found to deliver services during a period of austerity.
- Second, how we try to break the UK's cultural problem of failing to implement innovative ideas, whether service or product.
- Third, how we can overcome fragmented service provision, to improve both the quality and delivery of public services to citizens.

Design offers the potential to help solve all three.

*This article first appeared in [Public Money & Management](#) in March 2011, based on a speech Lord Bichard gave to a joint Design Council/PMPA lecture on 24 November 2010 in London.*