

DEFINING AND DEVELOPING THE DESIGN CHAMPION ROLE

RESEARCH REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2023

Context and methodology

In November 2020, the UK's first 30-year [National Infrastructure Strategy](#) included the requirement that all projects were to have a board-level design champion in place by the end of 2021. The purpose of the design champion role is to enable application of the [National Infrastructure Commission's design principles](#). This aims not only to secure higher quality infrastructure for end users, but also to deliver wider public benefits for climate, communities and places.

The industry broadly welcomes this development but wants clarity on what the design champion role requires, to whom it would be suited and how it would work. The ICE published a working paper, [Defining and Developing the Design Champion Role](#), in August 2022. It then commissioned Birdi & Partners, supported by Frame Projects, to develop further insight.

A diverse and balanced spread of 27 individuals operating across the design, construction and infrastructure sectors were interviewed and the findings synthesised to create a shared understanding of the design champion role.

This stage of work provides some useful insights and strategic guidelines. The next stage (implementation) will require guidance for client bodies to enable them to set up design champions on their projects.

Key findings

1. There is a real need for design champions

There is broad support for a design champion role to be introduced on nationally significant infrastructure projects. Ultimately, the design champion's role is to ensure that the infrastructure we build is of a higher quality and creates wider benefits, changing the impression that infrastructure is being imposed, rather than built to better serve the public.

Infrastructure projects would benefit greatly from someone with the oversight and distance necessary to champion high-quality design. To achieve this, the responsibilities of the role would include helping to set the right brief and develop a project-specific vision and principles. A design champion could support the work to establish good design governance, including an appropriately resourced design team. Their ongoing role would be to ensure that the vision and principles inform decision-making, and that there is adequate reporting on design progress and value. Design champions would fill an important gap, helping to solve problems and create efficiencies.

2. Design champions should be non-executives at board level

Design champions will be most effective as non-executives sitting at board level. The call for good design must come from the top and the design champion cannot be too involved in the detail if they are to maintain oversight of the bigger picture and hold the project executives to account. To ensure genuine challenge, and because board places can be competitive, they must have the support of the chair. They would be a voice for design on the board in the same way that cost, programme or health and safety are represented. It is anticipated that one individual would perform the design champion role part-time, for approximately four to six days per month, on each infrastructure project of a significant size.

3. They should be one part of a tripartite governance structure

The design champion will not be able to achieve much alone, and will need to rely on a well-resourced executive design team. It is essential to have a clear relationship with the other governance structures in place. A tripartite structure is suggested, consisting of the design champion, the design executive and an independent design review panel, all working together. All three elements are needed to ensure that the design champion has influence and can enable design quality.

4. Design champions should be a legal requirement from the outset

For maximum added value, the requirement for a design champion should be baked into the Hybrid Bill or Development Consent Order from the outset. This will make the role a legal requirement, creating assurance that design is always high on the agenda. It will ensure that the design champion is involved in the early stages of a project, so can have a greater impact.

5. They should report to government on progress

By virtue of the design champion role being ingrained in legislation, and the nationally significant scale of projects, they should be required to report to government. To support this reporting, the project should develop a method of measuring design quality and weighing decisions in the balance.

6. The role should be advisory

For a design champion to be able to promote design quality and challenge any decisions that will compromise it, the role needs to be advisory. This means that the design champion does not make the final decisions or design the solutions, but they offer impartial advice to those who do. It is necessary to make this distinction so that those who may take on the role understand their accountability. This will attract individuals with the right skills and attributes by clarifying the extent of their responsibility. While they need to understand the impact of their decisions on the design team, programme and budget, they must remain independent advocates for the best interests of end users, without indemnity requirements being a barrier to their involvement.

7. Design champions must have the right skills and attributes

To be successful, the design champion must be respected, experienced and skilled, particularly in their critical judgement abilities. A design background is essential, but recruitment should be inclusive of all disciplines. They should have a broad knowledge of design, planning, engagement and procurement, and an appreciation of technical issues. Experience of relevant infrastructure projects would be advantageous, but it is more important that they have a good record of seeing significant and successful projects of comparable scale and complexity through from start to finish. To have a holistic view and break siloed working patterns, the design champion should be a polymath rather than a specialist. They should have recent experience of working in professional design practice and be senior enough to understand the management of teams, programmes and budgets.

8. They should facilitate knowledge exchange and succession

The design champion role should include responsibility for sharing relevant lessons learnt back into the project and with other infrastructure projects. This could be achieved by convening a network of design champions who meet regularly for cross-fertilisation of ideas, training and knowledge sharing. They should also mentor the next generation of design champions to ensure the legacy of the role and a smooth handover.

Opportunities for the ICE to promote the design champion role

There was broad consensus that the ICE is the right organisation to pioneer and manage a new network of design champions and help clients to appoint them on infrastructure projects. The potential next steps for the ICE are to:

- Develop a communications strategy to introduce the need for, and explain the benefits of, design champions to the infrastructure industry
- Create a simple process for appointing a design champion to help those running infrastructure projects – this needs a clear process diagram
- Produce a guide to help executives, design review panels and boards to understand where the design champion role fits into the project governance structure, the remit of the role and the expected responsibilities
- Develop a methodology for the recruitment of design champion candidates
- Create a register of design champions
- Establish a knowledge exchange forum through which design champions meet regularly for training, skills exchange and mentoring
- Develop a toolkit to support design champions in their work, including how to prioritise and measure value for end users and wider communities