

Building Schools for the Future

The role of a design champion



Building Schools for the Future: the role of a design champion

The design of learning environments can have a significant impact on the attainment and behaviour of the pupils attending a school. Staff can feel more valued and motivated in better-designed buildings and people who live locally are more likely to use the facilities that are available to them.

Over the next 15 years, the government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme will rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in England. To carry out the programme, joint ventures between local authorities and private sector partners are established, through the central government delivery vehicle Partnerships for Schools (PfS).

BSF is a unique opportunity to improve our learning environments for generations to come. The central aim of the programme is to transform education rather than just replace buildings – but doing this requires vision and leadership. At the outset, the strategy for change states this vision. But as the project progresses, the complexities of delivery can mean the loss of the original aspiration. Strong leadership is required to keep the project on track.

A successful project needs someone at high level to champion design and ensure that original high aspirations do not get lost along the way.

What is a design champion?

A design champion is a senior person within the client organisation, advocating and monitoring good design with decision makers and the project team throughout the project. They could be an elected member of the local council, a member of the BSF project board or a head teacher who is going to have an ongoing role beyond their own school.

While the ideal design champion may be a cabinet-level councillor, a knowledgeable backbencher or a committed senior officer can drive forward good design equally well. The important thing is that the design champion is well briefed by either in-house or external support with education and architectural knowledge, and is able to really influence decision makers if project priorities are seen to be drifting away from quality and focusing exclusively on programme and budget.

Why are design champions important in BSF?

Each new school building or refurbishment should be seen as an opportunity to enhance the quality of the built environment. There is a real danger that high initial aspirations get watered down in the complex process of BSF. CABE believes that the appointment of a design champion can help to focus minds and ensure that design issues are placed firmly on the agenda of the local authority when planning school developments.

'Delivering design quality requires strong local leadership. There is a real risk that high initial aspirations get watered down in the complex process of BSF'

Bedminster Down School by NVB Architects © Andrew Beard



**‘Does your local authority have the skills to consider design effectively?
Do you need to implement a training or recruitment policy?’**

What do you need to be a design champion?

Your purpose as a design champion is to:

- Provide leadership, generate enthusiasm for design quality and ensure commitment is followed through in school design
- Promote the benefits of good design and negotiate the necessary funding and timescales to achieve it
- Co-ordinate efforts, promoting co-operation and joint action across the local authority
- Ensure the process promotes the delivery of high design quality, and be willing to make a strong defence for design when you are confronted with difficult decisions.

You should be:

- A well-respected, excellent communicator who is able to promote the need for good design to a wide variety of audiences, both within the council and externally. You should be able to persuade colleagues and the wider community of the benefits of well-designed schools
- A consensus builder, able to bring together the various stakeholders, both within the local authority and the wider community
- Able to see the bigger picture and help develop a vision
- A councillor, preferably at cabinet level, or an executive officer with the support of a councillor. This is not meant to be prescriptive: authorities should tailor the role to suit local strengths and conditions. What is important is that this role is not for status but for influence and action.

You should have:

- A commitment and passion for design, and educational transformation. While a working knowledge of architectural and education issues would be an advantage, it is not essential. Professional skills within your authority should complement your enthusiasm for the subject
- The ear of influential decision makers within the authority
- An understanding of the workings of all departments within your authority and an appreciation of the role that each can play in delivering good design
- An interest in the way school buildings can meet the needs and aspirations of their users.



Quick wins

‘A well-briefed design champion is able to really influence decision makers if project priorities are seen to be drifting’

There is a series of actions that you as a design champion can put in place quickly to drive forward achievements relating to the environment and design quality of new and refurbished school buildings and grounds.

Officer skills audit

Does your local authority have the skills to consider design effectively? You can ensure an audit is done to gauge the urban design/architectural skills at officer level in the planning and building procurement departments. Do you need to carry out training or recruitment?

Raising members’ awareness

Ensure members, officers and stakeholders have the chance to see best practice in the built environment, not only in your own area, but across the country, and in good quality public buildings other than schools.

Does the local authority have a design vision?

Successful local authorities have developed a strong, shared vision for specific priority areas. Is there a clear educational vision that all departments are committed to deliver?

Community buy-in

Are the education visions supported by the people the authority serves? Have they been involved? Does the authority know what local people think of their schools and community?

Break down the barriers

Ensure that departments are working together and sharing best practice. For example, are your leisure services talking to your education officers to explore shared facilities? Are your client design advisors talking to educationalists?

Should organisational structures change to ensure more integrated working to deliver a shared vision and deliver on the extended schools and 14-19 agenda?

For more information on BSF design champions, please contact Jo Wilson, enabling programme officer at CABE, email on jwilson@cabe.org.uk



Kingsley High School by Nicholas Hare Architects © Tim Crocker

Key moments for design champion involvement

What to do	Why
Project initiation	
Ensure sufficient skills are in place within the authority, or consultants hired to work on the project	The team should have adequate expertise when designs and briefs are developed. The appointment of a client design advisor with sufficient time and skills will ensure options are scrutinised in detail, and consultation with users is structured
Set high aspirations for design quality within your authority and ensure a strong design intention is made clear from the outset that is linked to the educational vision	A private sector partner will respond to wherever the quality standard is set by the authority
Learn from others: source best practice (from other LA client teams or completed buildings) and learn from it	To avoid reinventing the wheel and making the same mistakes other authorities have already made
Strategic planning	
Check if opportunities for joined-up working and funding within the authority have been explored	Because BSF provides the opportunity to have wider community use of school facilities
Ensure plans for thorough stakeholder engagement and participation are put in place	Without buy-in from relevant parties, the project will always be less successful than it could be
Make sure that the project timetable allows adequate design and consultation time at feasibility and at bid stage	Experience so far has shown that lack of time invested to develop good-quality designs lessens the chance of achieving educational transformation. Investment in good design saves money in the long term
Ensure adequate funding is being made available to complete the project to a good standard	Investment in advice up-front may seem costly at the time, but gives the opportunity to explore a variety of options
Check that change management is being planned and adequately resourced	Changes in teaching and learning require the buy-in and training of existing staff <i>before</i> buildings are occupied, not after
Make sure that feasibility work is of a high standard and informed by full stakeholder consultation	Feasibility work is not only useful in preparing the ground for the bidders, it also helps stakeholders become familiar with the issues and terminology involved in the design of the school
Ensure the consideration of future proofing . Flexible and adaptable spaces and designs are essential, in order that changes to policy and learning in the future will not require spending money on changing the building	The average length of a head teacher's tenure is seven years, and technology is constantly changing. These buildings are to last over 30 years
Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU)	
Advocate for the inclusion of a high 'design threshold' clause into the OJEU notice	To ensure that all shortlisted bids meet a defined minimum level of design quality
Shortlisting bidders	
When evaluating, ensure that the shortlisted bidders are those who demonstrate a commitment to design quality	To ensure tenders are evaluated on best value not lowest cost
Development of proposals	
Ensure cost issues are adequately assessed	So that design time will not be wasted producing schemes that you cannot afford
Development of scheme	
Check that the design vision has not been diluted	Value engineering exercises at this stage can put severe pressure on design quality
Selection of private sector partner	
Make sure that stakeholders understand the implications of signing off the design	Changes after this stage will be extremely expensive and disruptive to the programme
Refinement	
Ensure continued buy-in to original project aspirations.	By this stage, stakeholders and client team at every level may have moved on.

Building Schools for the Future will see every secondary school in England rebuilt or refurbished. It is important to have leaders at local level to help the initiative succeed. CABE believes that 'design champions' can fulfil that role. This guide outlines who is best placed to perform the role of the design champion, what their contribution should be, and at what stages of the project.

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**Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment**

**The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space**

Published in 2007 by the
Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment.

Front cover photo:
Charter School by Penoyre &
Prasad © Kilian O'Sullivan/Light
Room Architectural Photography.

Graphic design by John and
Alex Bury.

Printed by Seacourt Ltd on
Revive recycled paper, using the
waterless offset printing process
(0 per cent water and 0 per cent
isopropyl alcohol or harmful
substitutes), 100 per cent
renewable energy and vegetable
oil-based inks. Seacourt Ltd
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