

DESIGN TEST: DOES OUR BIGGEST CLIENT PASS OR FAIL?

Five years after a high-profile report advocating 16 ways to build better buildings, Peter Stewart, former head of design review at CABE, gives his verdict on the government's efforts so far



■ Do not regard good design as an optional extra	✗	Central government makes the right noises, but many public sector clients still don't understand what is meant by good design – and CABE and the design champions haven't succeeded in explaining it to them.
■ Never assume lowest cost is best value	✗	Not much progress here. Although clients pay lip service to this slogan, the bean-counters have their own – buildings must be "affordable".
■ Procure on the basis of whole-life cost rather than capital cost	✗	This is something the PFI was meant to be good at. But go round a new hospital and decide for yourself whether materials and finishes, inside and outside, have been chosen with an eye to whole-life costs.
■ Stop ignoring the civic significance of public buildings	✓	Many public sector clients have got this message, and tender documentation reflects this.
■ Do not be frightened to take calculated risks	✗	The PFI was presented as a way for the cautious public sector to tap into the flair of the private sector. This hasn't worked – bidders with a will to be creative are put off by the risk of being deemed non-compliant with the strict standard PFI documentation.
■ Never assume that the public does not care	✓	Until recently, ministers have probably calculated that the public is easily satisfied – as they were at the time by 1960s council estates. More recently, some have spotted that voters may realise they are being palmed off with some pretty tatty projects.
■ Insist that the choice of designer is reviewed by the design champion	✗	As mediocre projects are still winning out over good ones, this can't be working.
■ Promote high-quality design on PFI projects in line with Treasury Note 7	✓	The guide referred to has been overtaken by better documents from CABE, the Office of Government Commerce and, importantly, the National Audit Office, which has explicitly recognised the contribution good design can make to value for money.
■ Support local authorities who apply good architectural and urban design standards	✓	Awarding a tick here is generous, but the Better Public Buildings programme has been one significant way in which this happens, and it does generate decent media coverage every year.
■ Encourage planning authorities to insist on appropriately high design standards	✗	There's no planning guidance that says "give PFI projects an easy ride" – but this is what happens. Few planning officers or committees have the stomach to turn down poor designs knowing they will be accused of standing in the way of desperately needed facilities.
■ Allow enough design time for projects of real quality to emerge	✗	"Get it built in time for the next election" seems to be the priority for schools and hospitals, yet we've waited decades for the programme now under way, and we will live with the results for decades to come.
■ Measure efficiency and waste in construction	✗	This has always sounded like enlightened self-interest for contractors, and the best of the bunch are doing it. Most, though, aren't – have you noticed less waste on building sites you've passed recently?
■ Appoint integrated teams focusing on the whole-life impact and performance of a development	✗	Some exemplary projects, such as last year's Better Public Building winner, the Bingley Relief Road, have demonstrated integrated team working. But most of the time, insufficient thought is given to whole-life issues.
■ Encourage longer-term relationships with integrated project teams, subject to rigorous performance review	✓	This is happening more, with the encouragement of framework agreements and the like.
■ Use whole-life costing in the value-for-money assessment of buildings	✓	Whole-life costing – yes. Whole-life value is something different.
■ Ensure there is single-point client responsibility for any given project, with authority	✗	This remains rare.

Conclusion

Seen in the round, there has been progress in public building procurement over five years. But who was the advice in *Better Public Buildings* intended for? Not design teams – we have to hope they want to do the right thing already. Nor is it really for contractors or bidders – they just want clear briefs and parameters to bid within. It's the public sector clients who have to take responsibility. A great

deal of good advice is now available – from CABE, the OGC, the NAO and others.

Most project documentation now says the right things about design aspirations, and most projects have design champions. But I don't think most bidders think that the clients' hearts are in it. They calculate, usually correctly, that a cheap bid will trump a great design.