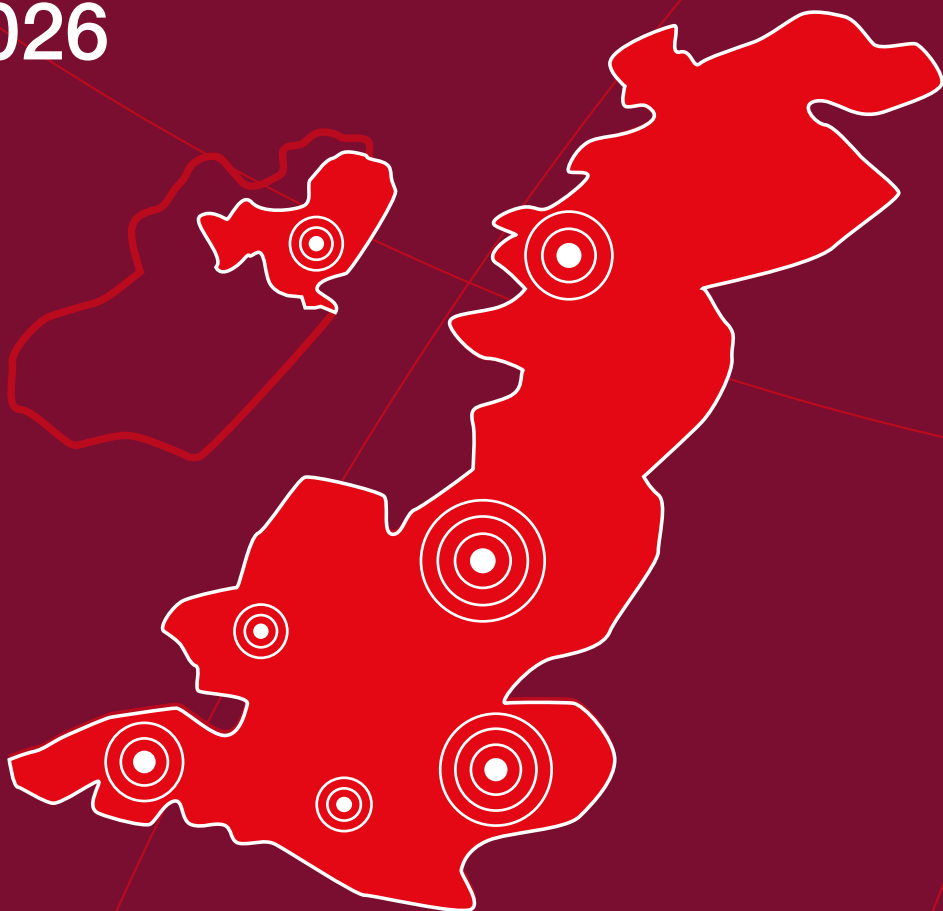


Design Economy

Driving Good Growth across the UK

2026



Exclusive Media Partner



Why Design?

From the pixel to the city, everything not made by nature has been designed.

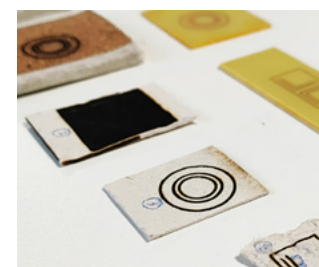
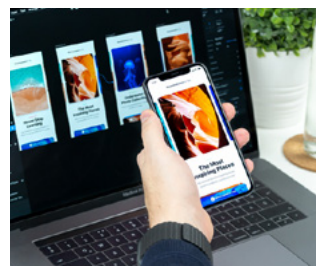
Design turns ideas into products, services, systems and physical spaces that shape how people live and work. It bridges the gap between invention and adoption, innovation and commercialisation, making it a key ingredient in economic growth as well as social and environmental progress.

Since the last edition of Design Economy in 2022, the UK has faced significant economic, technological and geopolitical change. From inflationary pressures and energy insecurity to rapid advances in artificial intelligence and shifting global markets, organisations have had to adapt at pace. At the same time, there is renewed focus across government on long-term growth, productivity and regional prosperity. As policymakers seek to strengthen the UK's industrial base and spread opportunity more evenly across the country, organisations will need better ways to turn innovation into real-world outcomes.

Design has an increasingly important role to play in this dynamic landscape. It can help organisations respond to complex challenges by developing new products and systems, driving good growth and ensuring that technological innovation delivers meaningful benefits for people and communities. Previous Design Council research found that 66% of designers worked to address environmental issues and 60% to address social issues.¹

Design is a strong part of the creative industries, but it reaches far beyond too, with most designers working in 'non-design' sectors. Designers can be found across manufacturing, engineering, healthcare, finance, retail and the public sector. From identifying opportunities and understanding user needs, through to development, delivery and continuous improvement, design contributes at every stage of innovation.

This report focuses on the economic value of design. It shows that the design economy is growing faster than the wider UK economy, supporting employment, productivity and growth in every nation and region of the UK. From identifying opportunities and understanding user needs, to development, delivery and continuous improvement, and finally disassembly and re-use – design contributes at every stage of innovation.



Defining the Design Economy

Designers

The design occupations and design industries in this report are drawn from the Office for National Statistics' Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) and Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes. They are agreed internationally every 10 years.

This report uses the 2007 SIC and 2010 SOC classifications because at the time of analysis the new codes had not been fully adopted into all the datasets used to calculate the design economy. While these codes enable comparison, they don't perfectly capture all the roles in the design economy (see Limitations p25).

Designers operate across the whole economy in occupations that have been identified as design *occupations* through previous iterations of this research using a combination of SOC codes and consultation with designers.

Designers may work within design *industries*, described below (e.g. architects) or other sectors (e.g. construction). Design occupations are grouped into eight *disciplines*: advertising; architecture and built environment; clothing design; craft; digital design; graphic design; multidisciplinary design; and product and industrial design.

Advertising

e.g. creative directors, account managers

Multidisciplinary Design

e.g. furniture designers, interior designers, fashion designers

Craft

e.g. ceramicists, furniture makers, weavers

Digital Design

e.g. UX designers, web designers, systems analysts

Graphic Design

e.g. graphic designers, illustrators, commercial artists

Product & industrial

e.g. design engineers, development engineers, technologists

Architecture & built environment

e.g. architects, urban planners, civil engineers

Clothing design

e.g. tailors, dressmakers, fabric cutters

Design industry

A design industry is one that has been identified through previous iterations of this research as having a 30% or higher proportion of its workers in design occupations². There are six design industries: architecture and built environment; clothing design; craft; digital design; multidisciplinary design; and product and industrial design*.

Design economy

This encompasses all design activity, both in design industries and across the wider economy, including activity carried out by other roles within design industries that support the main function (e.g. administration or finance roles).

*There is some overlap between our definitions of design industries, and those of the creative industries and digital sector.

This analysis looks at the three role types that make up the total design economy: designers working in design industries, designers working outside of design industries, and non-designers working in design industries.



Foreword

Design is one of the UK's great strengths. It drives innovation, supports growth, creates high-value jobs and helps businesses, public services and communities respond to a rapidly changing world. As a government, we are committed to unlocking that potential through driving growth, backing innovation and ensuring opportunity reaches every postcode.

Design is a critical enabler of innovation, turning ideas, research and new technologies into products, services, places and systems that people can use, trust and benefit from. As the government delivers its Industrial Strategy, design will be an important capability in helping businesses commercialise new ideas, adopt emerging technologies, improve productivity and compete in global markets.

The findings in Design Economy 2026 demonstrate the scale and significance of UK design. They show a discipline that reaches far beyond the design sector itself, with designers contributing across the wider economy and helping organisations innovate, adapt and grow. The report also highlights the growing importance of digital design, the strength of UK design exports, and design's contribution to productivity and international competitiveness.



Rt Hon Ian Murray MP
Minister of State for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Design Economy Ambassador

This is a story that extends beyond London. Across the UK, design supports local economies, creates high-value jobs and helps places build distinctive strengths. As we deliver our Industrial Strategy and Creative Industries Sector Plan, the evidence here shows how design can support growth and opportunity in every region and nation.

The UK has long been recognised as a global leader in design, from the built environment and digital products to fashion, services and emerging technologies. Maintaining that leadership depends on continued investment in people, skills and innovation, so individuals and businesses can adapt and thrive.

The UK's design community is a source of world-class talent, creativity and ambition, and will be central to growing the economy and strengthening the UK's position as a global creative superpower.

I welcome Design Economy 2026 as an important contribution to our understanding of this dynamic sector and the opportunities ahead.

Ambassadors



Lord Bilimoria
Chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)



George Clarke
Architect, TV Presenter & Founder, MOBIE



Jane Geraghty
Global CEO, WPP Brand & Design



Usman Haque
Co-founder, HAQUE TAN



Professor Mariana Mazzucato
Founding Director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose



Michelle Ogundehin
Author, Brand Consultant and TV Presenter



Tracy Brabin
Labour Mayor of West Yorkshire



Professor Martyn Evans
Director of the Institute for the Creative Industries Manchester Metropolitan University



Merle Hall
Global Head of Design, Engineering & Science PA Consulting



Yinka Ilori MBE
Multi-disciplinary Artist and Designer



The Rt Hon Ian Murray MP
Minister of State in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

About

The Research

This report presents the findings of the latest iteration of the Design Economy research programme, the Design Council's flagship study into the value of design. It specifically focuses on the economic value of design, exploring the contribution that design makes to the UK as a whole, as well as its economic significance in the regions and devolved nations of the UK. We have now published seven Design Economy reports over the past decade (since 2015)

The Data

This research builds on the methodology used to deliver previous iterations of the Design Economy in the 2022 and 2018 reports³. It assesses the size, geography, demographics and economic value of design, primarily through data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

We have baselined all the metrics in this report from the point of the last Design Economy publication. This ranges from 2019-2021. The latest data in this report ranges from 2022-2025, depending on what is available from the ONS. The full list of data sources can be found on p48 and the data tables **downloaded here**.

The Design Council

The Design Council is the UK's national champion for design and a Royal Charter charity. We help government, businesses and public bodies harness the power of design to drive innovation, deliver better places and services, and make life better by design.

For over 80 years, we have combined evidence, policy, thought leadership, capability-building and practical design tools and expertise to help organisations tackle complex challenges, unlock opportunities and achieve lasting impact, strengthening the use and value of design. Our Design for Planet mission continues to support the UK design economy to accelerate us towards a regenerative future for all.

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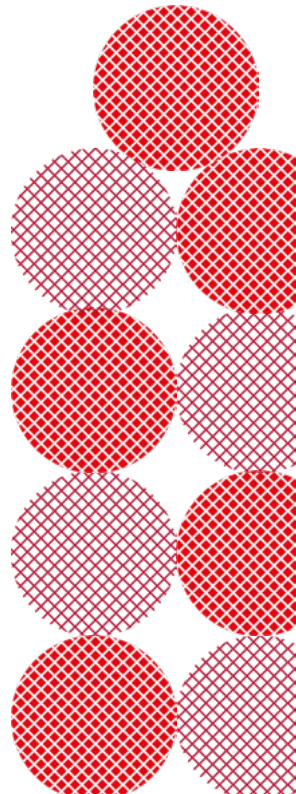
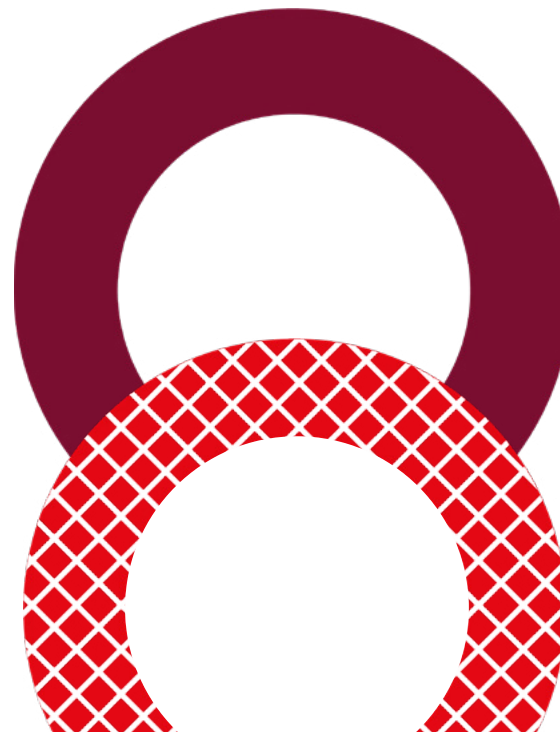
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Design Drives Growth

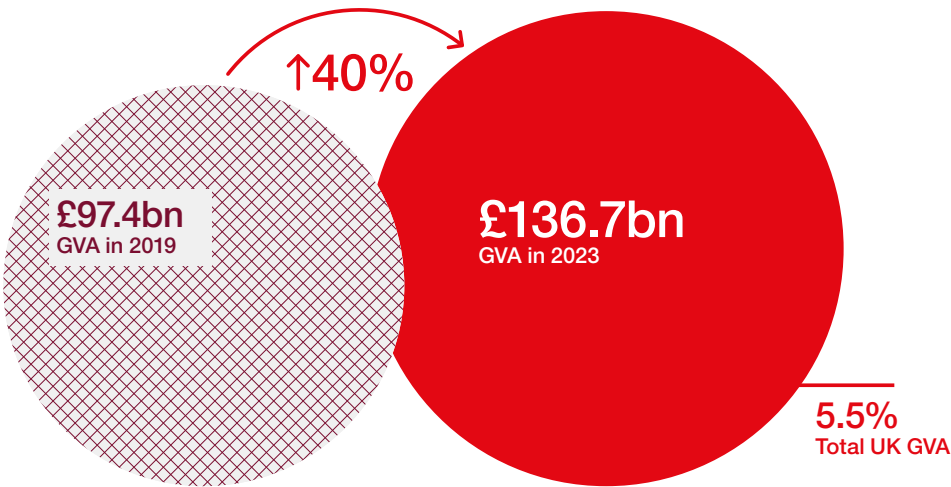
Growing faster than the UK economy as a whole.

In 2023⁴, the total GVA (Gross Added Value) of the design economy was £136.7bn. This represents a 40% increase compared to 2019, when design contributed £97.4bn to the UK economy. In the same period, total UK GVA increased by 24%, indicating that design is growing in value almost twice as fast as the economy as a whole.⁵

The design economy now accounts for 5.5% of total GVA in the UK. This is a 14% increase compared to 2019. To put this into context, the value of the design economy is larger than:

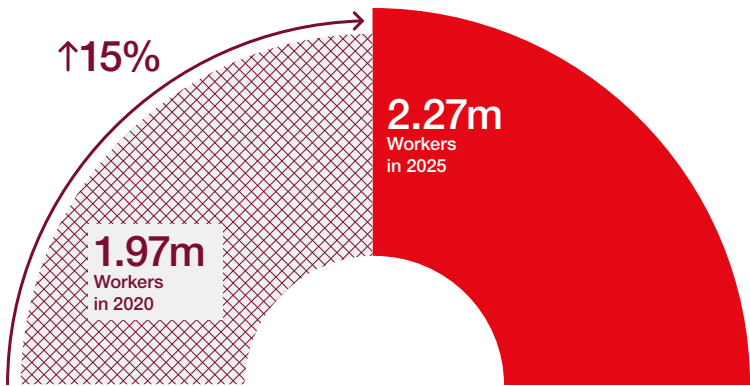
- the UK's entire retail sector (£114bn).
- the entire accommodation and food service industry (£70bn).

Figure 1: Total GVA for design economy (2019, 2023) and percentage change from 2019 - 2023



the Design Economy has grown nearly twice as fast as the UK economy

Figure 2: Employment across the design economy (2020, 2025) and percentage change from 2020-2025.



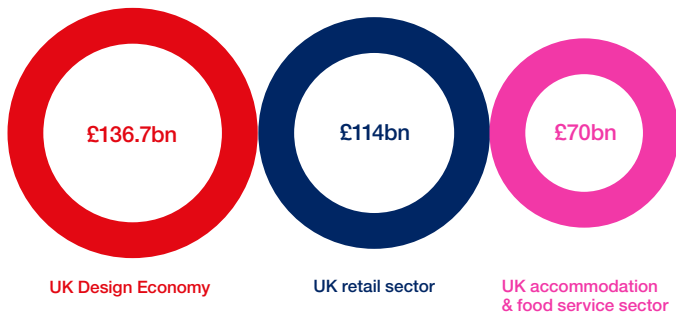
More than 2 million jobs in the design economy.

In 2025 there were over 2.27 million people employed in the design economy. 1.88 million of those were employed in design occupations (i.e. designers operating both within and outside of the design industries).

This is a 15% increase in overall employment since 2020, representing 297,000 additional jobs, comparable to the population of Nottingham (c.300,000). This is remarkable growth given that during the same period, total UK employment increased by less than 2.5%.

Employment in design occupations now accounts for 6.2% of all UK employment. This is notably higher than in 2020, when design occupation employment accounted for 5% of all UK employment. One likely driver of this is the continued and increasing strength of digital design, which has seen 222,126 jobs created across design and non-design industries.

Figure 3: Design economy GVA compared to other industries (2023)



Design's value lies far beyond design firms.

Two thirds of the GVA created by the design economy is derived from designers working outside of the design industries (66%; £90.6bn). This reinforces the idea that design is a foundational economic capability that creates value by transforming how other sectors organise production, develop services, adopt technologies and respond to social needs.

The overall contribution of designers outside of design industries has increased by 42% since 2020, equivalent to an additional £27bn GVA. It remains stable as a proportion of total design GVA compared with 2020. Half of the GVA generated by designers outside the design industries (51%; £46bn) is generated specifically by digital designers.

According to insight from Innovate UK, designers are working across the economy: in the public sector (e.g. policy designers and innovation leads); in healthcare (e.g. improvement leads and transformation managers); in financial services (e.g. product managers and customer strategy leads); in manufacturing (e.g. digital transformation leads); in energy (e.g. transition managers); in digital (e.g. product managers and customer success staff); and in education (e.g. learning experience designers and innovation leads).⁶



Design increasingly demonstrates that it is not merely another productive sector. It is a strategic capability that shapes how products are made, services are organised, technologies are governed, institutions operate and places develop in fields including healthcare, finance, advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, and the built environment. The report therefore provides evidence not simply of economic expansion, but of design's role in steering economic transformation."

Professor Mariana Mazzucato
Founding Director of the UCL
Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

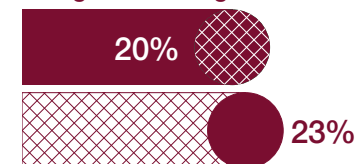
More designers working 'in house'.

Between 2020 and 2025 there was a 6% increase in employment in design industries, and a 20% increase in designers employed in non-design industries. The significantly higher increase in employment for designers in non-design industries suggests that more organisations are recognising the importance of design skills and bringing these roles 'in-house'. This is seen especially with the 76% increase in graphic designers working in non-design industries compared to the 9% decrease in graphic designers working in the design industries.

There has also been a significant increase in digital design employment outside of the design industries – around 143k jobs (a 30% increase). Architecture & built environment has seen an increase in nearly 20k employees working outside of the design industries since 2020; in graphic design this was an increase of more than 50k.

Figure 4: Percentage of designers working inside and outside the design industries (2020, 2025)

Designers in design industries

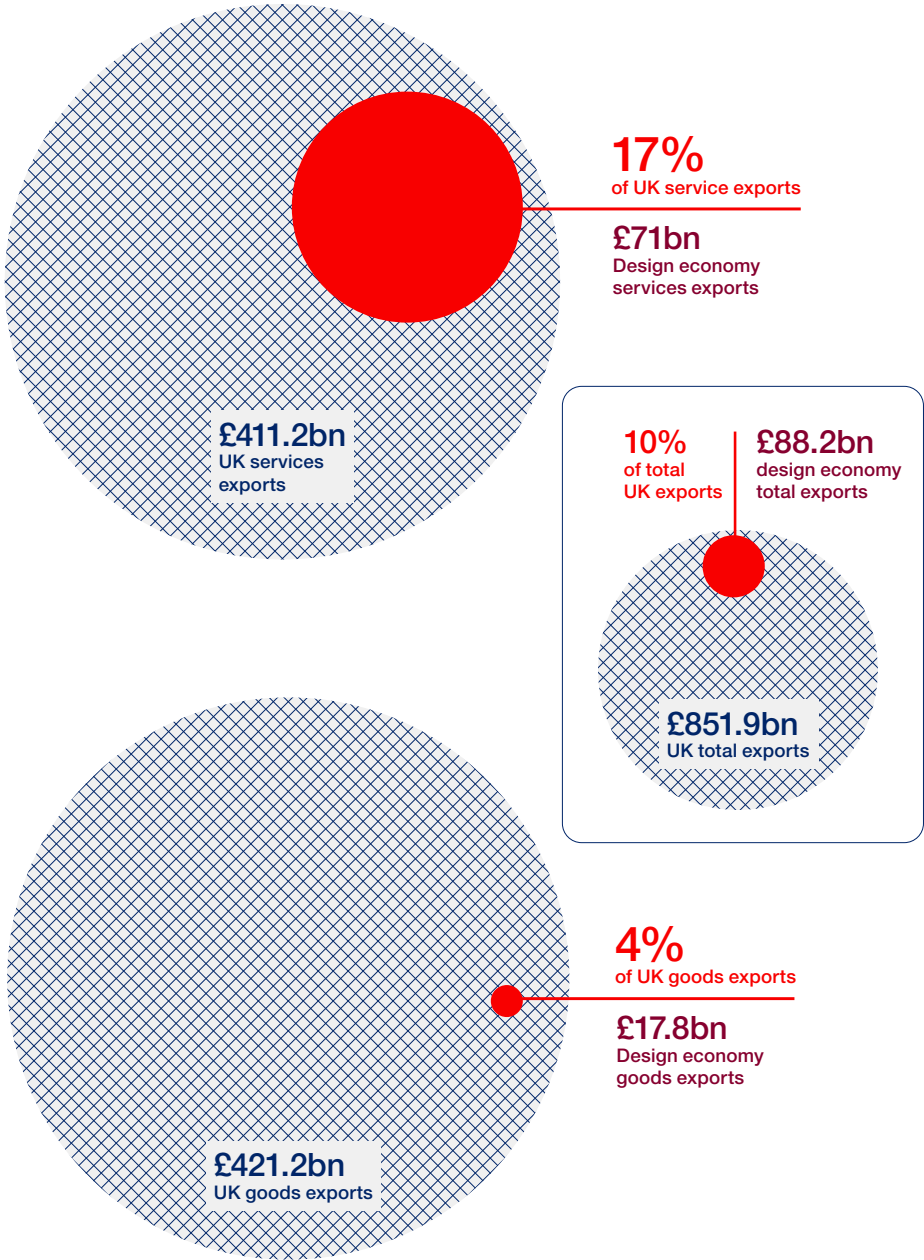


Designers in non-design industries



2020 2025

Figure 5: Design economy exports as a proportion of UK exports, broken down by services (2022), goods (2025), and total exports (2022)



UK Design is Valued Globally

The design economy's total export value was £88.2bn in 2022⁷, making up 10% of the UK's overall exports. This includes both 'goods' exports (e.g. consumer products like furniture and tech products) and 'services' exports (e.g. overseas firms commissioning work from architects, product designers and digital designers). 80% of this export value comes from design services.

The total value of design service exports rose from £56bn in 2019 to £71bn in 2022⁸, of which £50.4bn was from digital design.

Overall, design services made up 17% of total UK service exports in 2022. This is equivalent to around 77% of the value of the UK's total financial services exports⁹.

Goods exports increasing in value.

The value of design economy goods exports in 2025 was £17.8bn, a 36% increase since 2020. 96% of this comes from non-design industries.

The highest value of goods exports came from digital design (e.g., consumer tech products and hardware), up 50% since 2020 at £8.7bn. Advertising goods exports (e.g., packaging and merchandise) were the fastest growing, up 65% since 2020 to £542m.

Most design disciplines experienced significant growth in goods export value between 2020-2025. Craft grew more slowly by 10%, and clothing design, having fallen 25% between 2017 and 2019, fell by a further 50%.¹⁰

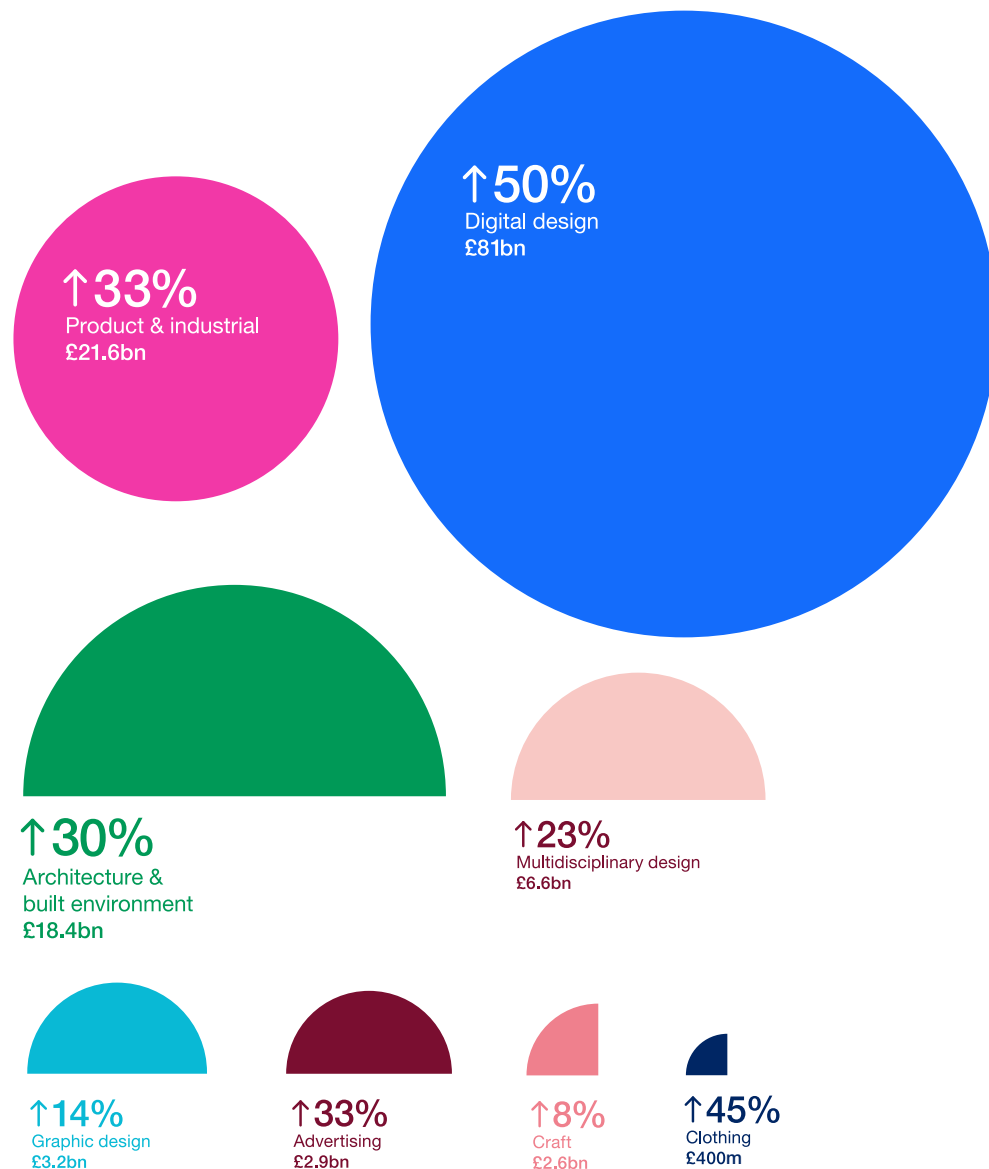


We're seeing strong international demand for UK expertise in transport and infrastructure projects, where British design's real competitive advantage lies in combining creativity with technical excellence. While recent oil price rises linked to the conflict in Iran have affected budgets and delayed some projects, demand for high-quality UK design remains resilient."

Geraint Edwards
Chief Growth Officer, tangerine



Figure 6: GVA broken down by design discipline (2023)
and percentage growth between 2019-2023



All design disciplines are growing – especially digital.

All design disciplines within the design economy have seen increases in GVA, with the growth of digital being particularly strong (50%). Aside from digital, the largest increases have been in product and industrial design (up £5.3bn; 33%) and architecture and built environment (up £4.2bn; 30%). There was also a large percentage increase in advertising design, though it represents a smaller change in absolute value (up 33%, equivalent to £715m).

Growth has also been strong within design-intensive industries (see Defining the Design Economy p5). Their combined GVA was £46bn in 2023, equivalent to a 59% increase since 2019.

However, the increase in the design industries overall GVA is driven almost entirely by digital design, which rose by £15.6bn during this period (an 81% increase). In contrast, all other design disciplines had growth of between 13% (clothing and multidisciplinary design) and 17% (craft). In some cases, this is the result of some design industries starting from a lower base (for example, the 17% increase in craft design is smaller in value terms than the 16% increase in architecture and built environment – £93m and £800m respectively).

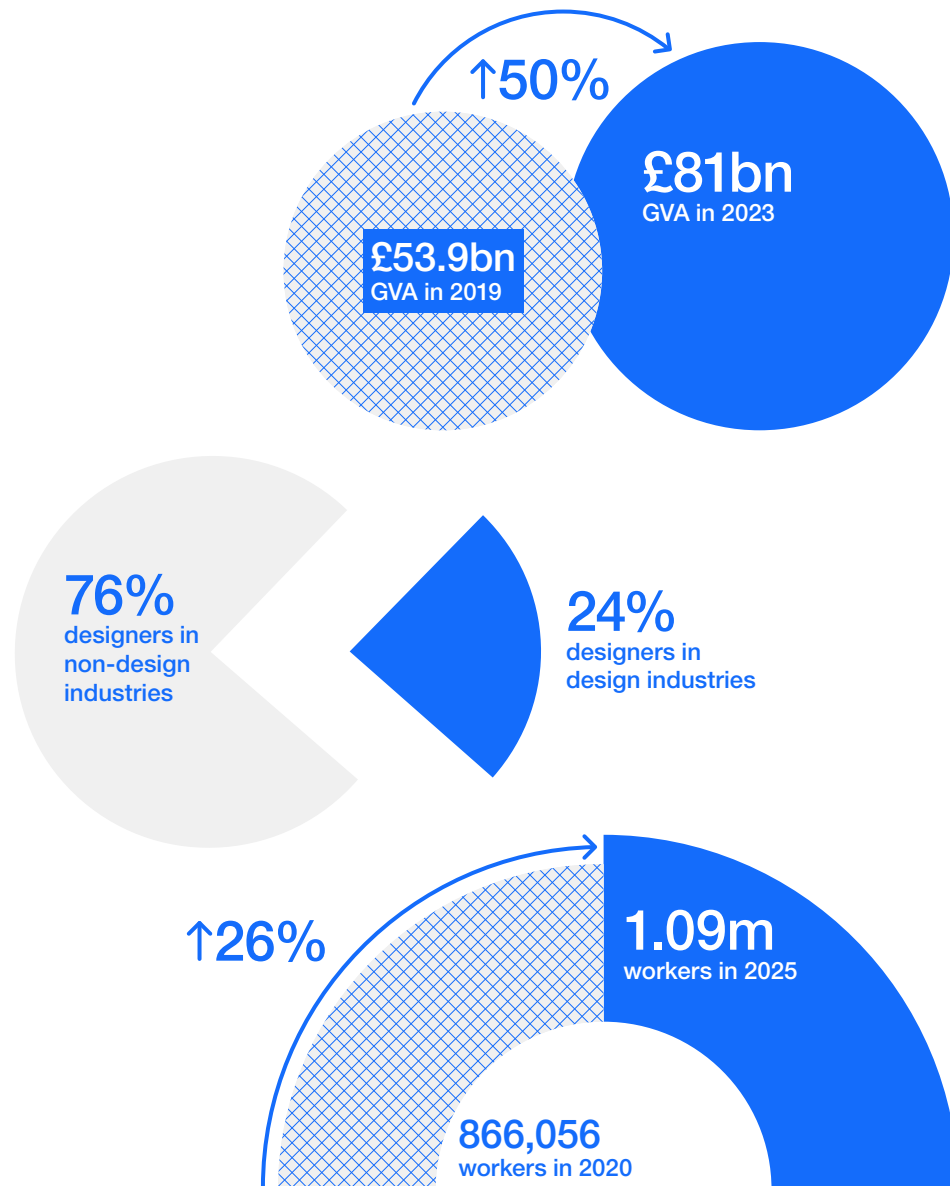


Liz Newell

Head of Design, Creative Concern

"What I love about Manchester's digital design scene is how collaborative it is – independent studios are genuinely generous with knowledge and connections. I've watched design for social and environmental impact grow here in real, meaningful ways. Overall, it's still a field where women are underrepresented and as a working mother, flexibility has been what's kept my career sustainable. I also lecture at the University of Salford, and I'd love my students to see more women reaching senior roles – leadership they can actually picture themselves in."

Figure 7: Digital design spotlight: GVA (2019, 2023) and percentage change 2019-2023; percentage of digital designers working inside and outside design industries (2025); digital design employment (2020, 2025) and percentage change 2020-2025



Digital Design is Booming

Digital designers driving value across the economy.

As reflected throughout this report, digital design is a significant driving force for the design economy. Digital designers work in roles such as service and user-experience design, web and app development, video-games design and digital production and publishing roles.

The total value of digital design is now £81bn, £46bn of which is generated by designers outside the design industries. There are more than 1 million people employed in digital design across a range of industries, which is nearly half (48%) of all design economy employment. The largest share of GVA generated by designers working outside design industries also comes from digital designers, showing the demand for digital design skills across the economy. The average productivity of digital designers is £72,400 per employee, which is above the average for the design economy (see p17).

London remains a hotspot for digital design, but there are also clusters of digital design employment in the East of England – e.g. in South Cambridge and Cambridgeshire – and there has been a notable growth in digital design employment in Manchester and Trafford, as well as in Bristol.

It's important to note that the digital design workforce remains overwhelmingly male (80%) which is unrepresentative of the population. This imbalance is likely to undermine the inclusivity of digital products, despite the best efforts of user-centred design. While this latest figure is 5 percentage points lower than in 2020, this improvement indicates slow progress towards an industry that is benefiting everyone equally.

Design Drives Job Growth

Growing demand for graphic and digital design.

The largest growth in employment is in digital design, which added 222,440 roles between 2020 and 2025, an increase of 26%¹¹. Graphic design employment also grew during the same period, at 37%, by just under 45,500 new roles.

Whilst overall design employment increased, employment numbers in some design disciplines remained static or saw decreases between 2020 and 2025.

For example, the number of employees in clothing design decreased by nearly 8,000 employees between 2020 and 2025 (-32%). Year on year comparisons show that this has risen and fallen significantly each year, suggesting that wider economic conditions (as outlined in the Introduction on p2) have contributed to these changes.

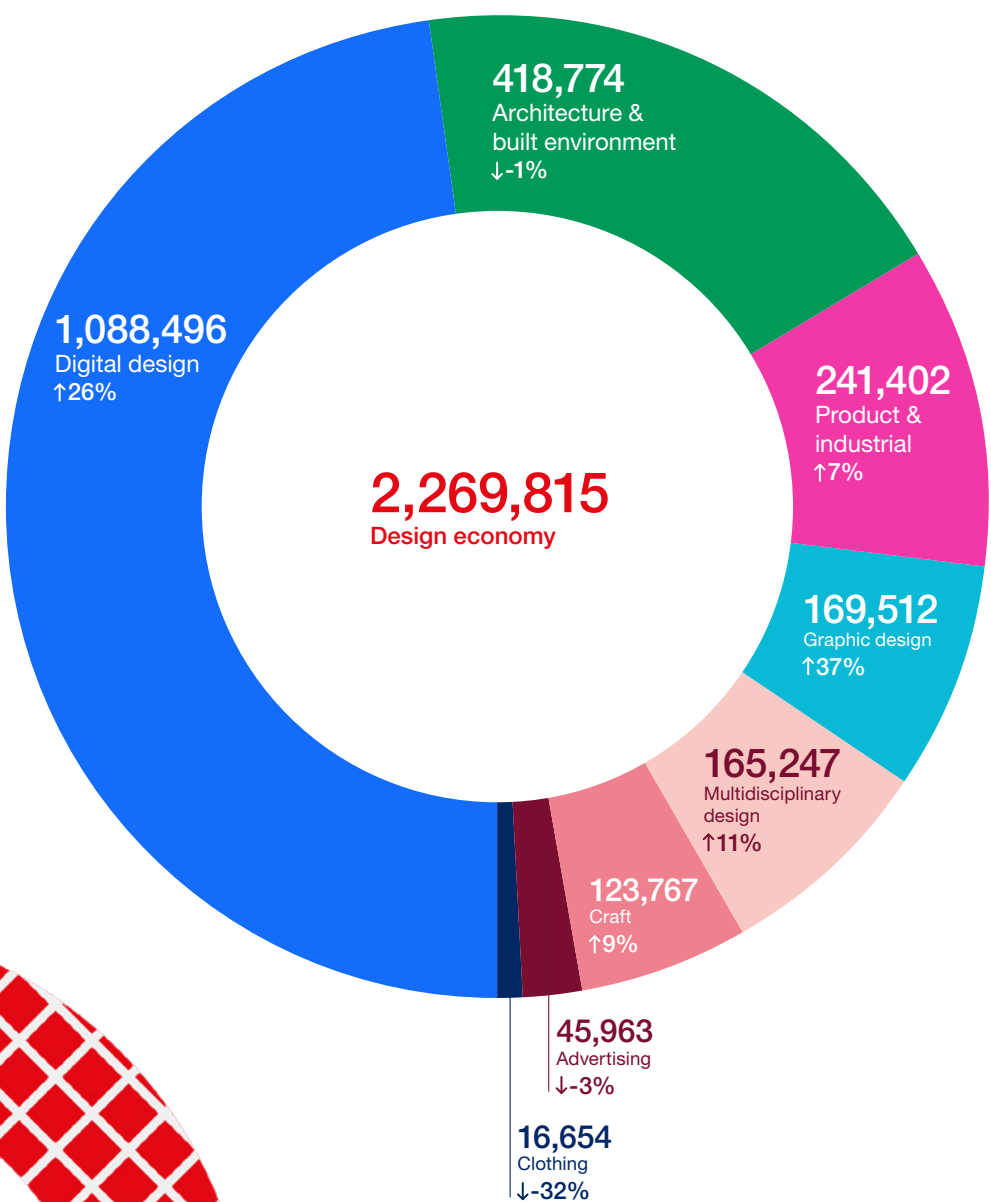
Currently our data does not suggest any negative impact from AI on design roles, though this may change in the future.

Design productivity is increasing in some sectors.

Productivity measures the average economic value generated per employee, focusing solely on financial output and not the wider social or environmental benefits created through work; as with GVA, it is influenced by inflation.

In 2023, productivity among designers working both inside and outside the design industries was estimated at £60,704 per person in employment, up around 18% from £51,279 in 2019. Product and industrial design generated the highest economic value per employee (£96,200) and an above-inflation increase of 31%.

Figure 8: Number of people employed in different design disciplines (2025) and percentage growth between 2020 and 2025



Design is Growing Across the UK

Design strengthens regional economies.

London and the South East continue to generate the largest share of design GVA, contributing a combined £66.7 billion in 2023, 49% of the UK total, effectively unchanged from 48% in 2019. Given the general concentration of businesses and economic activity in these regions, and the fact that design is embedded across all sectors, this level of contribution is unsurprising.

However, design growth is being felt across the UK. Since 2019, Wales and the North East recorded even faster growth than London in design GVA, increasing by 88%, 67% and 59% respectively. Beyond London and the South East, the largest increases in absolute value were recorded in the East of England and the North West, where design GVA grew by £3.5 billion and £3.1 billion respectively.

The West Midlands experienced the slowest growth in design GVA, rising by 18% between 2019 and 2023. The region also recorded the lowest overall GVA growth across the wider economy, suggesting that broader economic factors, including structural changes in traditional industries, have influenced its performance.

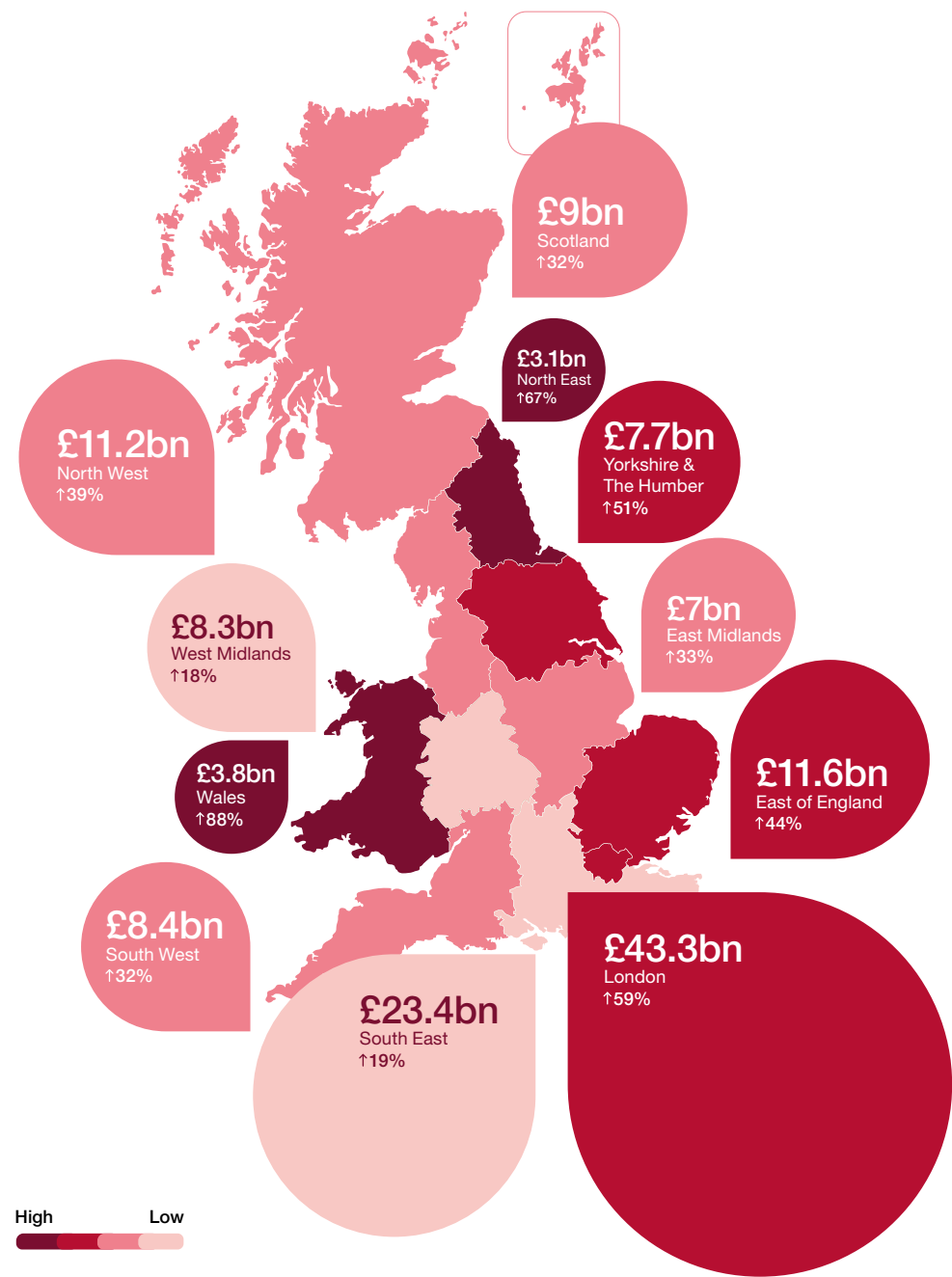
Design increased its share of total regional GVA in every nation and region except the West Midlands, with gains ranging from 0.1 percentage points in Yorkshire and the Humber to 1.9 percentage points in Wales. This demonstrates that design is not only growing across the UK but becoming an increasingly important contributor to regional economies.



It is positive news that there has been such growth in design employment in Wales. The success of creative industries highlights the skills, resources and places Wales has to offer. We are keen to see the importance of design and the value it can add recognised in all organisations, particularly the public sector."

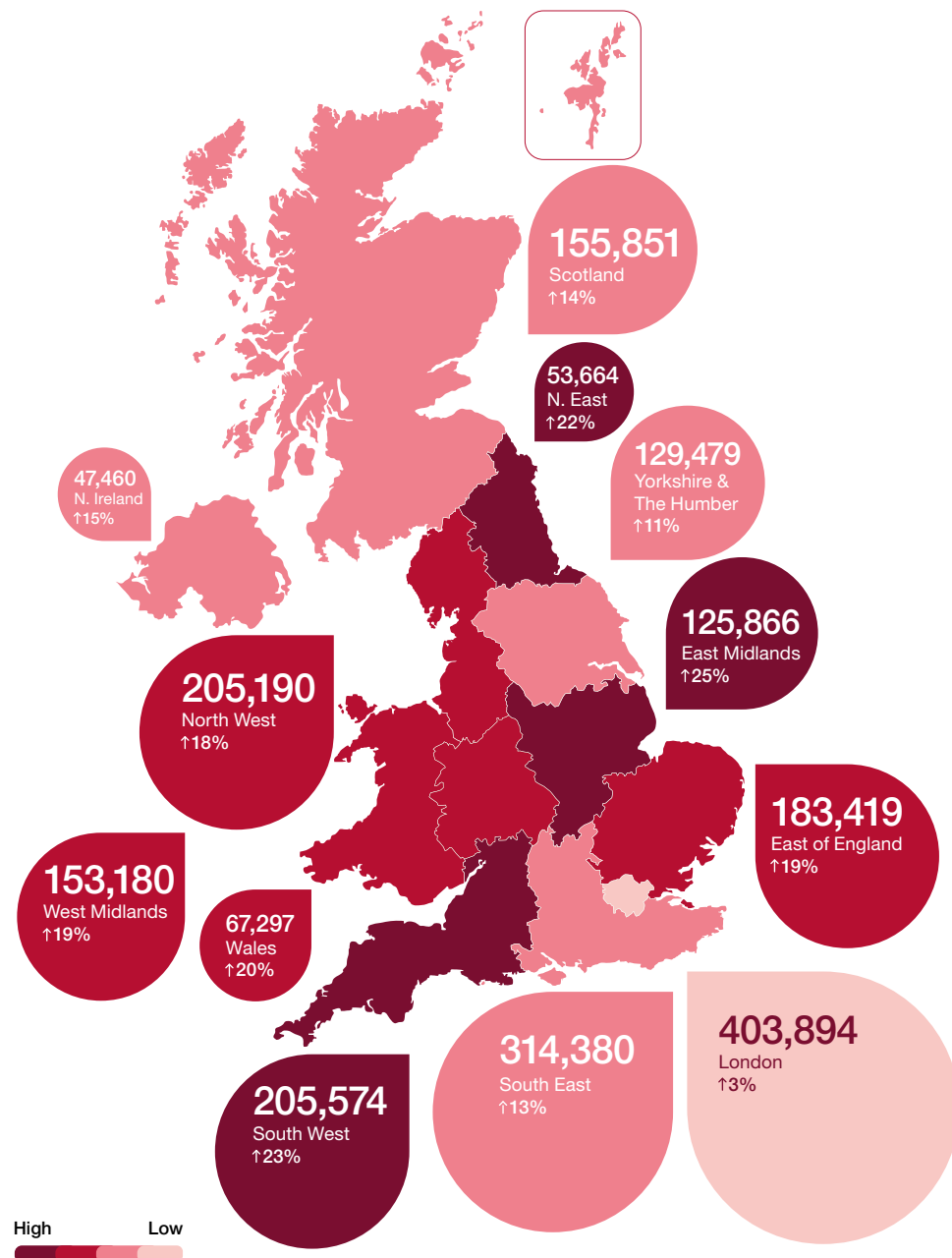
Jen Heal
Chief Executive, Design Commission for Wales

Figure 9: Design economy GVA by region (2023) and percentage change between 2019-2023



High Low

Figure 10: Number of people employed in the design economy by region (2025) and percentage growth between 2020-2025



Design Job Growth is Distributed Nationally

Growth in regional design employment outpaces London.

In line with the data on GVA, employment is concentrated in London and the South East, with more than a third of all roles based in this area (35%, equivalent to 718k designers). But there are also large representations of designers working in the South West (206k) and North West (205k).

The three regions with the highest level of design occupation employment as a proportion of the overall regional economy are London (8%), the South West (7%) and the South East (7%).

The lowest proportion of design occupation employment is in the North East (5%), but this region also saw one of the highest percentage increases in design occupation employment between 2020-2025, potentially indicating a burgeoning regional design economy.

Other regions that saw significant increases were the East Midlands (25% - the largest increase), the South West (23%) and Wales (20%). By contrast, London saw the lowest increase of 3%.



Sarah Valentin & Julia Harris

Founders, DATI Clothing

"Working in sustainable fashion in Wales has given us the opportunity to be part of a close-knit community of designers who collaborate, share skills and champion one another's work. While this collective spirit is a real strength, increasing visibility beyond Wales and into wider UK and European fashion networks remains a challenge. Sustainability and education underpin our practice, most recently through our State of Play project, where we introduced 16- 25-year-olds to upcycling, pattern cutting, sewing, styling and fashion design, equipping the next generation with the skills to help shape a more circular, responsible and inclusive fashion industry."

Design Creates Growth Clusters

New design clusters are emerging.

Location quotient (LQ) measures how concentrated an industry is in a place compared with the national average. An LQ above 1 means the activity is more specialised locally than nationally¹², while an LQ below 1 means it is under-represented. LQs allow us to look at areas of clustering and specialisation across the UK.

Architecture and built environment and multidisciplinary design employment are particularly concentrated in London, which is home to four of the five strongest clusters for these design disciplines. Other design disciplines (craft, clothing, and product and industrial design) are distributed more widely across the UK.

Both craft and product and industrial design are particularly spread out, with clusters stretching all the way from the South East coast (Hastings for both design disciplines) through the Midlands (Stoke-on-Trent – craft, West Lindsey – product and industrial design), and out to Scotland (East Renfrewshire – product and industrial design; Orkney Islands – craft).

New clusters are emerging nationally: the South West corridor of North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, and the Cotswolds have all seen increased clustering in architecture and built environment employment between 2019 and 2024, Middlesborough is emerging as a digital design cluster, and North East Derbyshire experienced sustained growth in multidisciplinary design. These trends could suggest movement of jobs and industry outside of traditional economic centres as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design is playing an increasingly important role in Scotland's regional economies and contributing to growth in Scotland overall. The strong product and industrial design cluster in East Renfrewshire and the craft cluster in the Orkneys both demonstrate the value of investing in Scotland's creative ecosystems and local design industries. This is essential to driving innovation, productivity and long-term economic growth."

Dr. Jen Ballie
Head of Design Research, V&A Dundee

Figure 11: Highest location quotient (LQ)* values by region, colour coded by design discipline.*LQ indicates design clusters, see explanation pg left.

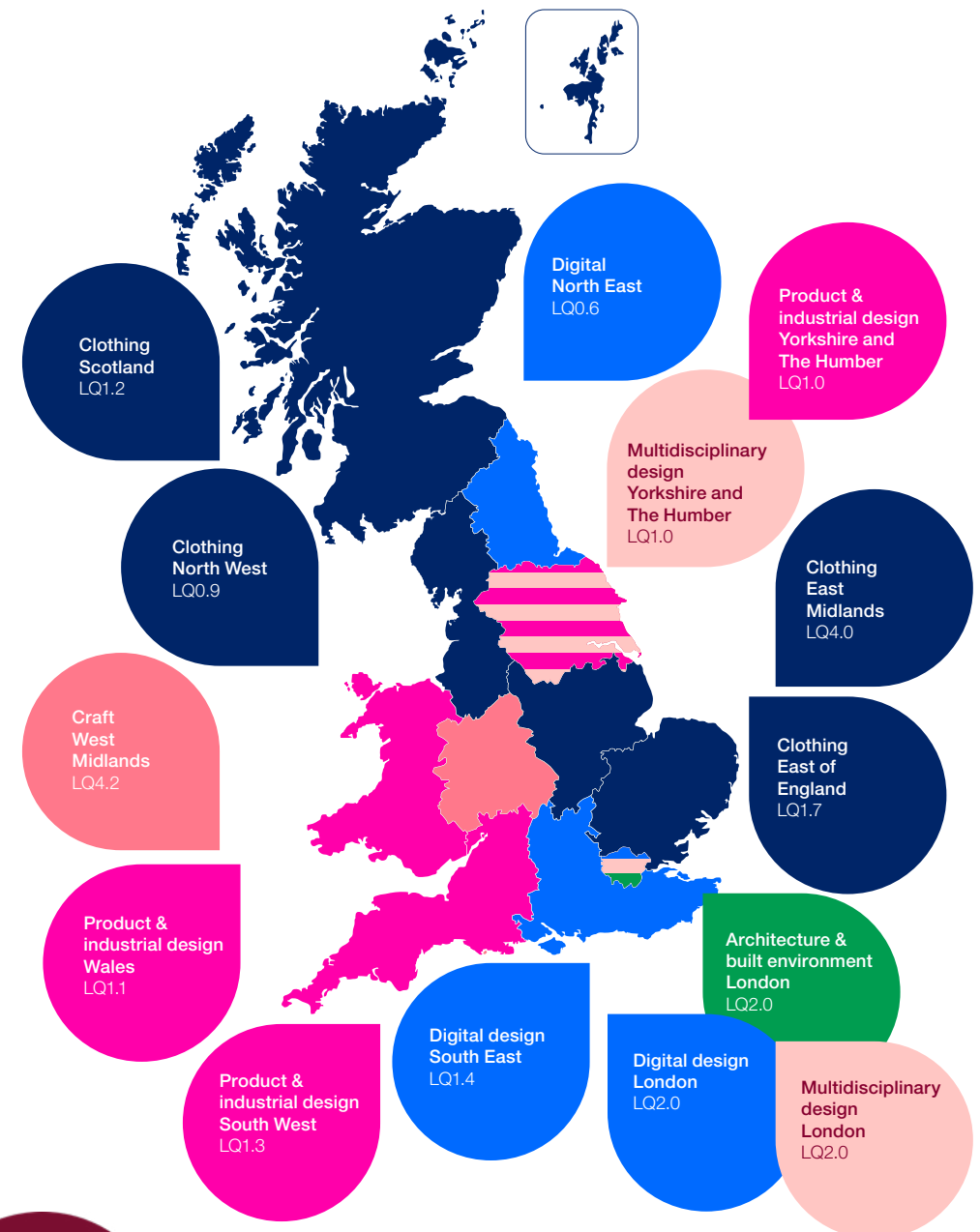
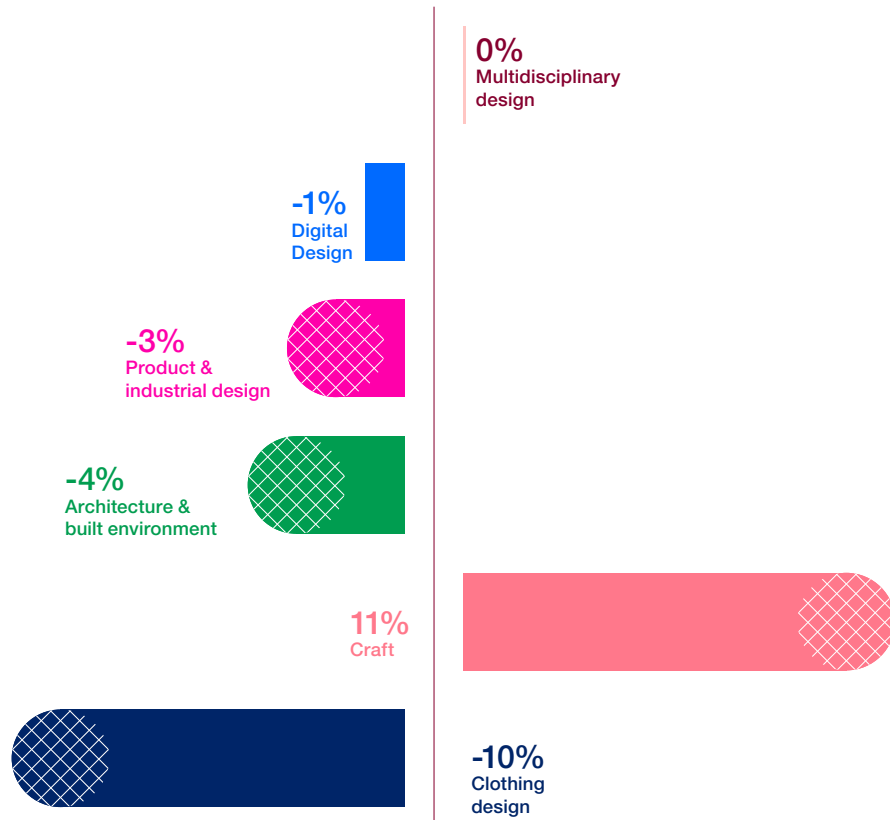


Figure 12: Percentage change in number of design firms by industry between 2021-2025



The story of craft is a story of place, skills and resilience. Across the UK, makers are helping to build distinctive local economies, drawing on specialist knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship. To realise the sector's full potential, we must strengthen the pathways that enable people of all backgrounds to discover, develop and sustain careers in craft."

Nicky Dewar
Director of Programmes, Crafts Council

Concentration in Value of Design Firms

There are fewer firms, but many are scaling up.

The exceptional growth in design economy GVA and healthy regional employment increases have happened alongside a 1.4% decrease in design firms since 2021.

This could indicate that while there are fewer businesses overall, they are getting larger and producing more value. Designer employment data also suggests that while numbers of design firms are slightly lower, individual firms may be larger: in 2020, 28% of designers worked in firms with more than 500 employees, increasing to 32% of designers in 2025.

The largest absolute increase in numbers of design firms is in craft (180). It is the only design discipline not to see static or falling numbers of firms since 2021.



Emily Johnson

Creative Director, Co-Founder
and Owner of 1882 Ltd.

"Anchored in Stoke-on-Trent, the UK ceramics manufacturing industry relies entirely on world-class human creative and technical mastery. Our greatest challenge is preserving these specialised heritage skills. Yet, this presents an extraordinary opportunity. By championing, passing on, and creating spaces to evolve these skills, and by pairing this generational craft knowledge with creative, contemporary design-driven innovation, the Stoke ceramics industry can adapt traditional skills for modern and future production, ensuring our people remain the heartbeat of highest quality UK manufacturing."

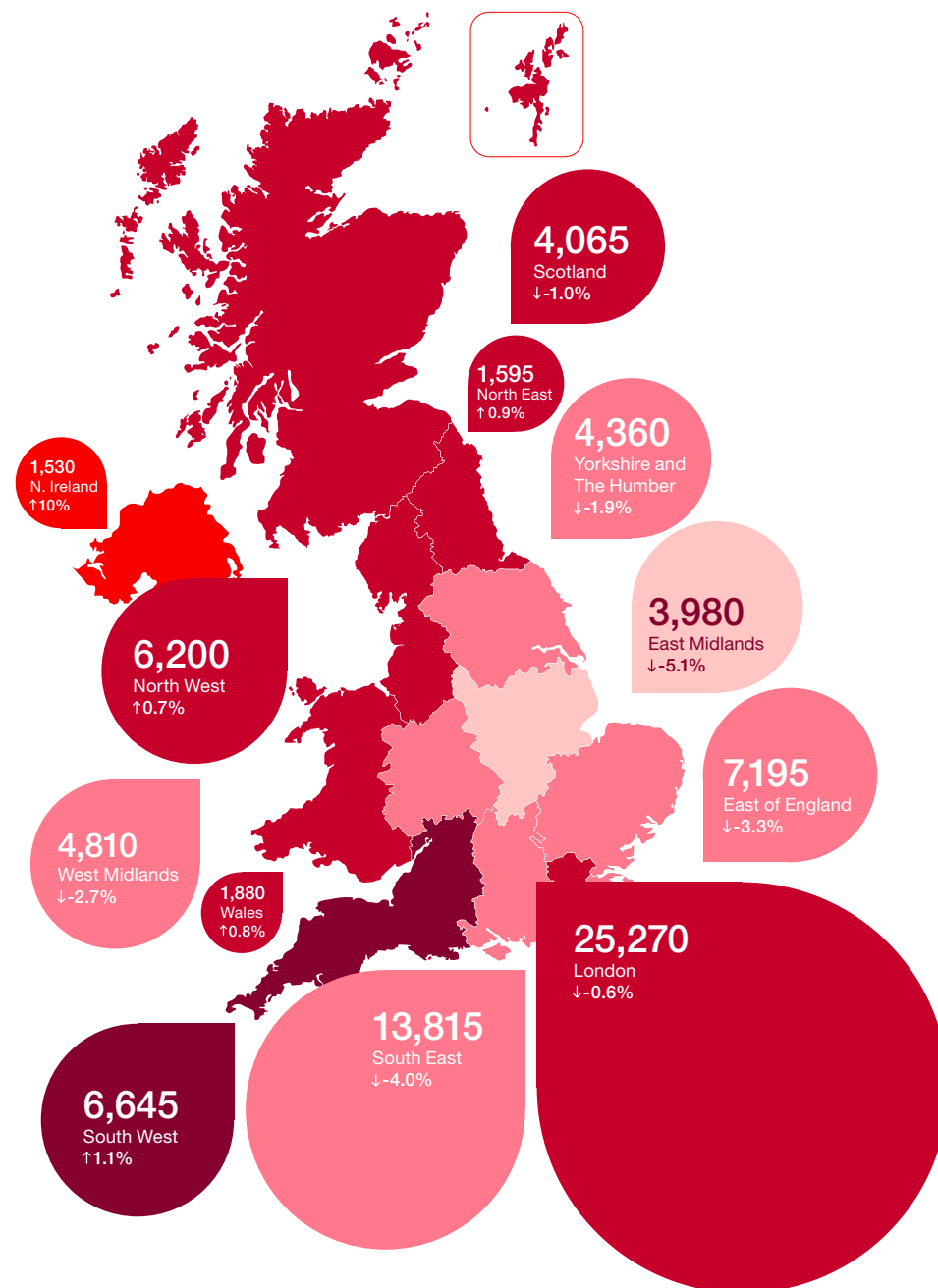
Uneven growth of design firm numbers across regions.

Design industries are concentrated in London and the South East, where 48% of design firms can be found. But the highest increase in design firms between 2021 and 2025 has been Northern Ireland, which saw a 10% increase (1,395 up to 1,530). This is the only region where design firms have increased materially; other regions have remained static or decreased slightly.

This data is in the context of increased GVA across the UK and increased distribution of design roles within non-design industries. Some of the regions with strong design GVA growth also have falling numbers of design firms, including Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East of England. This does not necessarily mean design firms are failing; it can also mean firms have relocated or merged with other firms, and/or those same design capabilities are now being applied within non-design industries.

The share of design firms in the total within each region has remained relatively stable between 2019 and 2025, which suggests the industry has demonstrated a level of resilience to the challenging conditions of COVID-19.

Figure 13: Heat map of design firm counts by region (2025), with percentage change between 2021-2025



The experience of the creative industries sector in Northern Ireland is that if a direct intervention is made at community level, with training delivered in the communities, then young people can gain the skills necessary to leapfrog the education system which has failed them and progress to real work in the multiple settings. These new skills bases help to facilitate an increase in design companies in the region, supporting all aspects of the design ecosystem in Northern Ireland."

Professor Paul Moore
Director Future Screens NI, Co-Director Ulster Creative Industries Institute (CII)

Design Jobs are Good Jobs

Most designers now on above-average salaries and in high-level professional roles.

In 2025 the gross annual salary for around two thirds (63%) of designers was £41,000 or over, slightly above the UK median of £39,000,¹⁴ an increase since 2020 when under half of designers (46%) earned this amount. Digital designers and product and industrial designers are most likely to receive the highest salary band¹⁵.

The proportion of designers in higher managerial, administrative, and professional positions has increased from 74% in 2020 to 81% in 2025. Around a fifth of designers are self-employed, more than the UK workforce generally (13%). Clothing design has the highest proportion of self-employed designers (54%), whilst digital design has the lowest (8%). There are 260,291 freelancers in the design economy.

Figure 14: Percentage of designers in employment and self-employment (2025)

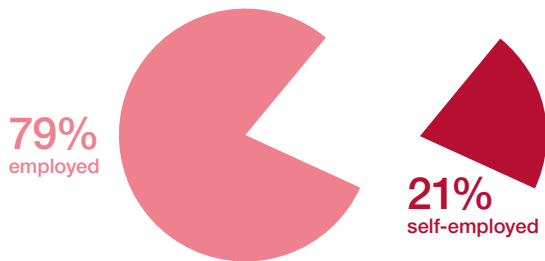
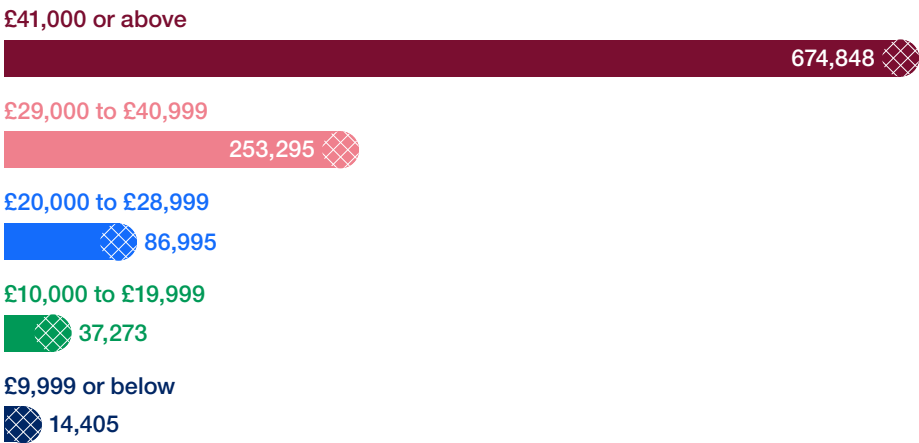


Figure 15: Number of designers in each salary band (2025).



Design is a Highly Skilled Profession

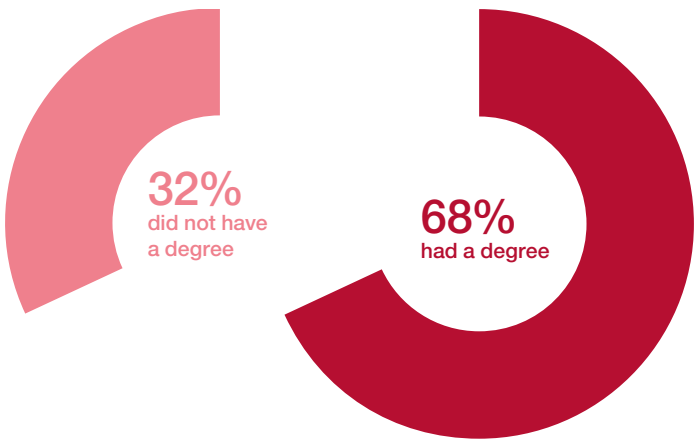
The design education pipeline is key.

In 2025, 68% of designers held a degree or equivalent qualification, 6 percentage points higher than in 2020. A further fifth hold GCSEs, GCE 'A' levels or equivalent as their highest qualification level (21%).

Within design disciplines, the highest proportion of designers holding degrees or equivalent are in digital and graphic design (77% and 75% respectively). In contrast, only 28% of designers in craft hold a degree or equivalent – likely partly due to the practical nature of skills acquisition in this field.

Worryingly, there has been a longer-term decline in students taking design and technology GCSEs; with 68% fewer students taking D&T over the decade up to 2024.¹³ This raises urgent questions for the industry in how to secure the design skills pipeline for the future and get a diversity of young people excited about careers in design.

Figure 16: Percentage of designers with and without a degree (2025)



Rebuilding the design talent pipeline starts in our schools. Our Regional Membership Initiative connects education, industry and communities, inspiring more young people to see design, innovation and engineering as exciting career pathways.”

Tony Ryan
CEO, Design & Technology Association

Diversity is Critical for Good Design

Designers must be representative of the wider public if the products, services, buildings and public spaces they produce are to be truly inclusive and accessible.

Over the years of our Design Economy research, we've seen a disappointing lack of improvement particularly in the representation of designers who identify as women and designers from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Uneven changes in ethnic diversity.

Across the design economy, there has been an increase in the proportion of designers from global majority backgrounds, rising from 14% in 2020 to 17% in 2025. This is predominantly driven by an increase in designers from Asian backgrounds (11% in 2025 compared to 8% in 2020).

When comparing the design economy to the UK context, the proportion of white designers (including white British, white Irish, and other white ethnicities) is the same as the UK working population (83% each). There are more designers from Asian backgrounds in the design economy (11% compared with 9%); however, there are fewer Black designers than the working population (2% compared to 5%).

Figure 17: Ethnicity within the design economy, compared with the UK working population (2025)

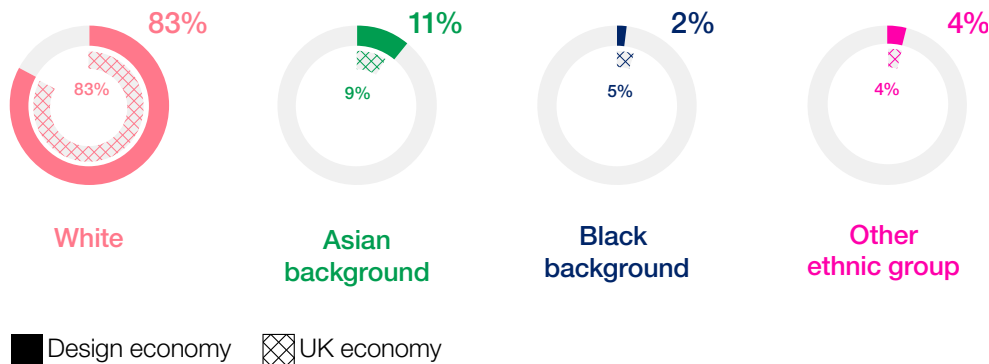
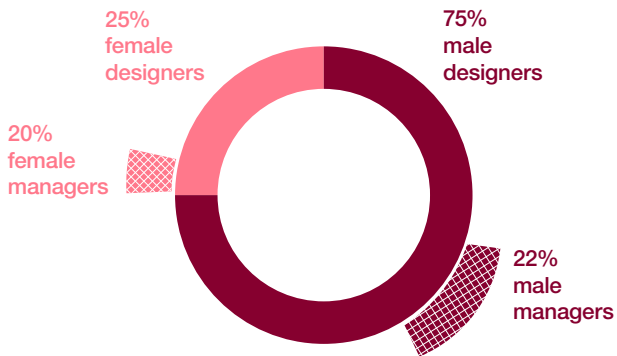


Figure 18: Gender identity within the design economy, and percentage of managers by gender (2025)



Gender imbalance in the design workforce.

Overall, employment in the design economy continues to be dominated by male employees. In 2025, three quarters of designers identified as male (75%). This is largely the same as in 2020 (77%).

Due to limitations of ONS data, we are only able to report on binary gender categories and therefore this data does not represent the experiences of transgender and non-binary designers.

Within design disciplines, this imbalance continues, increasing to nearly all designers in product & industrial design (91% male in 2025). However, clothing designers are overwhelmingly female¹⁶, and 63% of multidisciplinary designers identified as female in 2025.

Although female workers make up a smaller proportion of the overall workforce, they are as likely to have senior roles within the design economy. In 2025, 20% of female workers were managers or supervisors, compared to 22% of male workers.

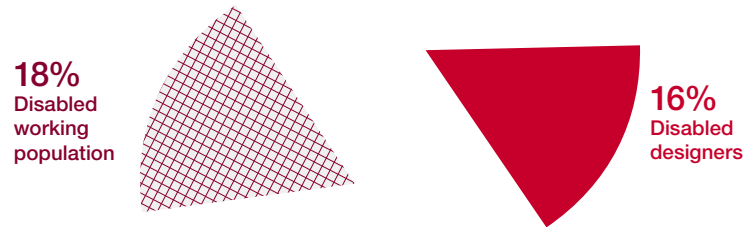


Alisha Morenike-Fisher

Founder of Black Females in Architecture

“Talent exists everywhere, but opportunities do not. As a born and bred Londoner, I’m passionate about creating opportunities that build confidence, challenge racial and gender inequity, develop skills, and help people recognise and realise their potential. That’s why I founded Black Females in Architecture. I look forward to the day when Black women can look across London’s buildings, landscapes, and public spaces and see themselves reflected in the city; knowing that women who look like us have helped design, shape, and transform it, and feel inspired to do the same.”

Figure 19: Disability status of designers (2025) compared to UK working population in England & Wales



Mixed picture for disabled designers.

16% of designers in the design economy identify as disabled in 2025, compared to 18% of the UK working population. There has been limited change compared with 2020 (down one percentage point).

Graphic design currently has the highest proportion of disabled designers (23% in 2025) - higher than the UK average - whilst product and industrial design has the lowest (10%).



Design has evolved from designing for disabled people to designing with us. The next step is designing by disabled people, where lived experience becomes creative leadership. When disabled designers lead, accessibility is no longer an afterthought - it becomes embedded from the start, creating richer, more innovative and inclusive outcomes for everyone."

Chris Laing
Founder, Deaf Architecture Front and Studio Yokwesi Ltd

Design is a Critical Sector for the Future

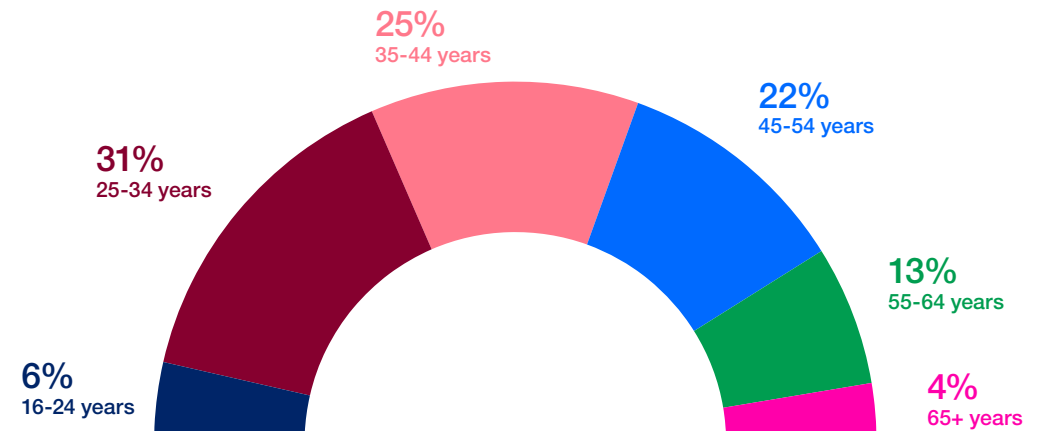
Design enables young people to progress.

Designers are more likely to be younger than the UK labour force: whilst 34% of all people in employment are under 35, 37% of designers are under 35.

Two thirds of managers in the design economy are aged between 35 and 54 (67%), significantly higher than the overall proportion of employees in this age bracket (46%).

In 2025, around two thirds of designers in the design economy were under 44 (62%). Graphic design had the highest concentration of young designers (43% under 35) whilst craft had the highest concentration of older designers (35% over 55).

Figure 20: Age within the design economy (2025)



Case Stories

Lloyds Banking Group

The role of digital design in achieving good business growth.

The use of digital design within Lloyds Banking Group's demonstrates the benefit that design can bring to industries like financial services.

Lloyds consolidated its Experience Design team in 2017 as a mechanism for ensuring a unified design approach across the business. Designers from the team are embedded in multi-disciplinary squads made up of staff from all areas of the business.

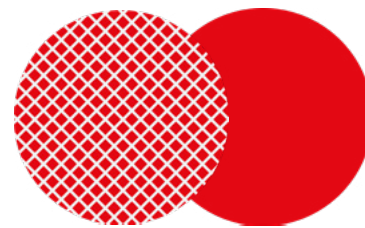
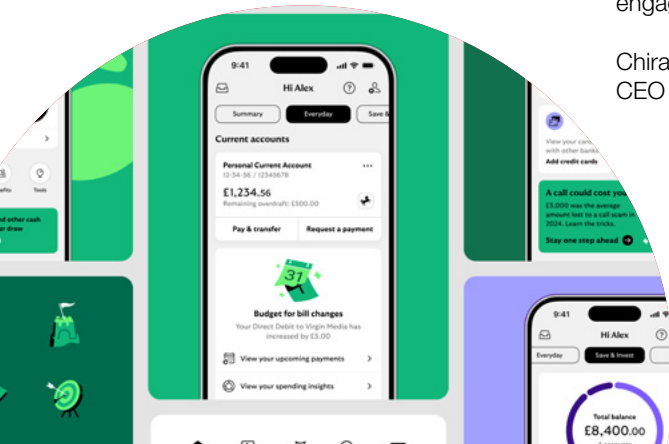
These squads are therefore able to respond to the complex, ambiguous, and interconnected problems that arise during testing and development of Lloyds' platforms and services, driven by a focus on customer need and evidence-led decision making.

For example, the redesigned digital journey for maturing balances has retained around two-thirds of these accounts into new fixed accounts, seen nearly 80% of customers undertake the journey solely through this digital channel, cut complaints by 30%, and delivered over £500k in savings for reinvestment. In addition, Scottish Widows app registrations have grown nearly fivefold since 2023.

Lloyds is also using design skills to shape their approach to AI. Teams are on the first step of this journey, and it is hoped that marrying these new technologies with classic human-centred approaches will provide a powerful foundation for sustained business growth.

"Too many people are missing opportunities to improve their financial future because planning can feel complex, overwhelming and inaccessible. That's why we use design to create digital experiences that are intuitive, engaging and accessible for customers."

Chira Barua,
CEO of Scottish Widows



Specsavers

Transforming health outcomes through design.

Specsavers has been using service design approaches to deliver a comprehensive transformation programme, which aims to re-shape the way it delivers its services – both for customers and colleagues. In this way, design is supporting Specsavers in its mission to improve quality of life through better sight and hearing and encourage preventative care.

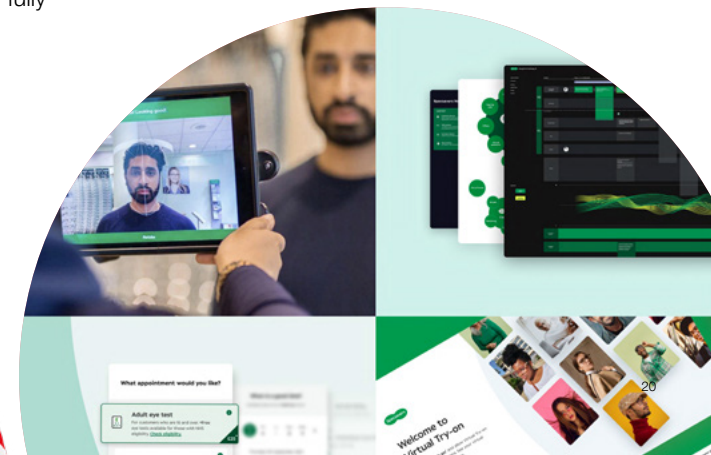
An important aim of the programme is to deliver consistency across the user experience, including by providing easier ways for patients to book appointments, access and manage their information. For colleagues, it means having more intuitive ways to interact with systems for appointments and diagnostics and better joining-up online systems and in-person services.

Grounded in a user-centred design approach, and using an iterative research and testing model, the programme works to ensure these solutions are centred on human need, creating simpler, more intuitive, and fully accessible systems.

To reflect this cross-functional approach, Specsavers is working in partnership with marketing agency VML, for Service Design UX and UI, alongside other teams of developers, product managers, and business stakeholders. This approach supports Specsavers to address a wide range of issues faced by their customers and colleagues, demonstrating the role of user-centred design in good business transformation.

"Our partnership with VML has been instrumental in helping us shape the design foundations for our transformation programme. By combining deep Specsavers knowledge with VML's expertise in service design, UX and experience strategy, we've been able to create a clearer vision for our future customer and colleague experiences."

Kirsten Groves,
Director of Digital Products,
Specsavers



Case Stories

Levy

Embedding sustainability across the supply chain.

Levy is one of the leading hospitality businesses in the UK, working across entertainment and sporting experiences and event catering. Levy has used design thinking to embed sustainability and resilience across its supply chain, including through reusing existing items and recycled and waste-derived materials.

One of the ways this is demonstrated is through Levy's Biohub, a 92-acre regenerative farming project in Yorkshire. Over the last five years Levy has transitioned the farm from a traditional livestock farm to one that includes an integrated water management system, sustainable forestry and biodiversity-led pasture and meadow management.

By taking a whole-system design approach, Levy embeds sustainable practices from the farm to the final product. This approach has enabled Levy to strengthen commercial relationships across multiple sectors and expand collaboration with a wider range of stakeholders. As a result, sales have doubled over the last six years, demonstrating that its circular and regenerative supply chain model supports business growth as well as sustainability.

"Design is the invisible thread that runs through every facet of our business. Whether we are designing our menus to reflect seasonal provenance, crafting our venue interiors to enhance the guest experience, or architecting our supply chain for greater transparency, we use circular and regenerative principles to support our design methodology across every project."

Kevin Watson,
Sustainability Director at Levy

Ksquared

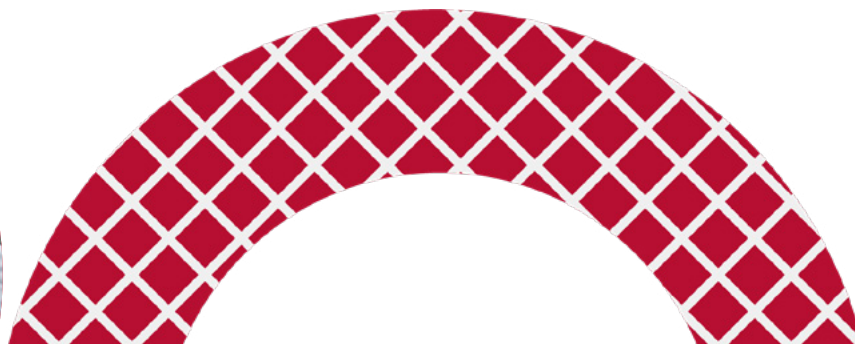
Delivering sustainable retrofitting works for social housing.

Ksquared's work addresses the design challenge of safeguarding social housing stock while building societal resilience amid the climate crisis. It is a social enterprise that helps social landlords fund, design, and deliver sustainable retrofitting works, supporting social housing landlords from the development of the business case through to project delivery.

In a field dominated by commercial contractors, Ksquared is founded by architects who apply proven design knowledge to realise economic, social and environmental value. This means ensuring best professional practice, prioritising better outcomes for residents and stakeholders, securing funding routes to offset both upfront and ongoing maintenance costs, and bridging the gap between sustainability, governance and finance.

"Everything we do at Ksquared starts with one simple belief: better buildings create better lives. By making sustainability practical, collaborative and people-focused, we're helping our clients create homes and places that strengthen communities today and leave a lasting legacy for tomorrow."

Kasang Kajang,
Founding Director of Ksquared



Case Stories

Future Island-Island

Co-designing the green transition.

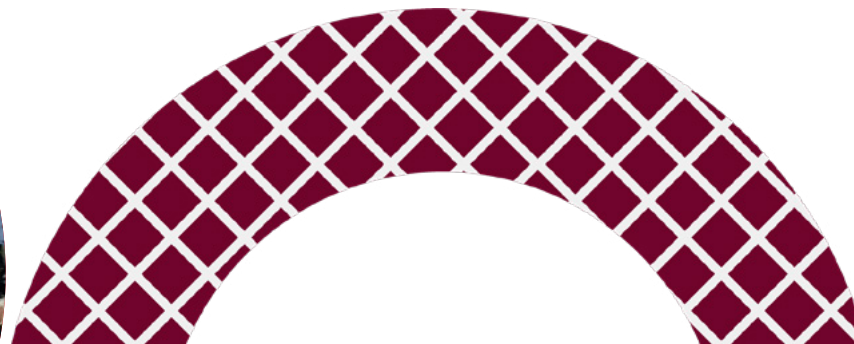
Future Island-Island (FII) is a project that translates design-led research into practical approaches for addressing the climate crisis. It's based in and co-designed with the community of Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland. FII demonstrates the real-world impact of design across sectors including clean energies and digital technologies.¹⁷

For example, Beach Clean 2.0 introduced a circular citizen litter-picking activity to include on-site sorting of materials – moving beyond just removing waste to enabling its onward use. Another workstream developed uses for Rathlin wool, historically a waste product on the island. This included turning it into rope used in kelp farming, a more environmentally sound option than the commonly used plastic rope.

FII has also explored novel 3D rendering technologies to generate reduced carbon digital twins of the natural environment that help to preserve heritage artefacts and make them more widely accessible.

“Future Island-Island is advancing knowledge of circular economies by demonstrating how hyper-local, place-based design can generate solutions with global relevance. By working alongside island communities, we are exploring how local resources, circular materials and traditional knowledge can support greener ways of living, creating scalable models for a more regenerative future.”

Dr Clare Mulholland,
Senior Lecturer in Architecture, School of
Natural and Built Environment (Queens
University Belfast) and Co-director of the
Future Island-Island GTE



Microneedle Solutions

Design-led advanced manufacturing in the West Yorkshire health tech corridor.

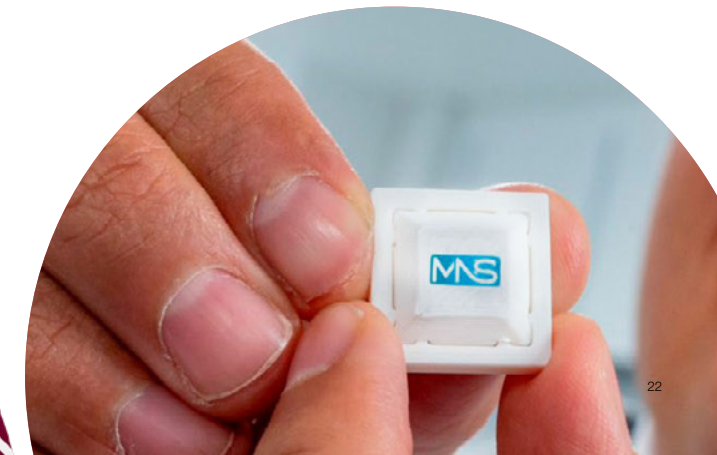
Leeds-based Microneedle Solutions is developing drug delivery patches that aim to save money, reduce the environmental footprint of vaccinations, and create a more positive experience for patients. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the team started to question how the evolution of microneedle technology could improve vaccination experiences, which led to the development of innovative vaccination patches.

Economic modelling has suggested that the patches will save between £20 and £50 per vaccination for the NHS, whilst the design of the patches mean that they can be administered anywhere and at any time, removing the need for trained health professionals in routine vaccinations.

Offering up to 97% efficacy, the patches are now in human clinical trial stage, which is being delivered in collaboration with the NHS. Longer term, the patches could help to remove many of the traditional barriers to vaccine access globally, reducing global health inequalities.

“Design has been fundamental to turning this scientific innovation into a product that people can use confidently and intuitively. By considering usability, manufacturability and the patient experience from the outset, good design has helped us create a more compelling product and provided a stronger foundation for sustainable commercial growth.”

Henry Dunne,
CEO and Co-Founder, Microneedle Solutions



Conclusion

Design Economy 2026 demonstrates the way design is shaping the future of the UK. Across major economic indicators, the evidence shows a sector that continues to grow faster than the overall economy, creating jobs, increasing productivity, driving exports and generating value in every nation and region.

The findings also show that design's influence extends far beyond the specific design industries. Designers are producing increasing value across industries including manufacturing, healthcare, finance, and energy. The above-average increase in design employment and the economic contribution of design to many regional economies reveals that it is a foundational cross-cutting capability within the UK economy.

At the same time, design faces significant emerging challenges. The impact of rapid technological change on future design jobs remains uncertain; there is urgent need for design skills to develop alongside the advancement of AI and to address the climate crisis.¹⁸

Those within the design economy must take more decisive action in addressing the lack of gender- and ethnic-diversity across its workforce, where little progress has been made. The precipitous drop in students entering specific design education is also a risk to the shape of the future design workforce.

Finally, though design is clearly strengthening regional economies, the pace of growth is uneven. For instance, regions like the West Midlands and South East experienced some of the slowest growth in the design economy though they play important roles in the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy (the West Midlands as an advanced manufacturing hub, and the South East as an innovation region in life sciences and frontier technologies). This reinforces the importance of strengthening regional design capability to translate Industrial Strategy aims into productivity gains, innovation adoption and high-quality jobs.

The design economy provides a solid foundation from which designers and design industries can meet these challenges and continue to demonstrate design's value to the UK's growth agenda. By strengthening design capability across businesses and public services, enabling innovation and ensuring the UK remains internationally competitive, design can help deliver more productive businesses, stronger local economies and better outcomes for people and communities.

Credits & Acknowledgements

Many thanks to:

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*The Design Economy 2026 Advisory Network are: Jen Ballie (V&A Dundee), Rupert Daniels (Former Department for Business Innovation Science and Trade), Deborah Dawton (Design Business Association), Nicky Dewar (Crafts Council), Martyn Evans (Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University), Belinda Gordon (Landscape Institute), Andrew Haley (Ministerial Advisory Group NI), Jen Heal (Design Commission for Wales), Catherine Kerfoot (AHRC), Harry Kerr (Innovate UK), David Leigh Pemberton (British Fashion Council), Jim Macdonald (Architecture & Design Scotland), Dids Macdonald, (Anti Copying in Design, ACID), Justin McGuirk (Design Museum), Natalie Melton (Crafts Council), Gwyn Owens (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), George Watson (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), Sabine Zetteler (Design Can).

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Endnotes

1. Design Council, The Environmental and Social Value of Design (2025), <https://catalogus.boekman.nl/pub/designeconomy2025environmentsocial.pdf>
2. Some of these industries have since seen a drop below 30%. We continue to report on these to maintain consistency. There may now also be emerging design industries by this measure that have not been included in these findings.
3. Kimbell, L., Bailey, J., Nold, C., Kaszynska, P., Todd, J. and Mazzearella, F. (2021). Design Economy Scoping Project: Introductory Paper. London: Design Council, designcouncil.org.uk
4. Latest data available from ONS at the time of writing.
5. It should be noted that in this period, inflation was particularly high, with total inflation over the period of around 22% (Source: GDP Deflator and UK Consumer Price Index).
6. With thanks to Harry Kerr, Head of Design at InnovateUK for providing this insight.
7. Latest data available from ONS at the time of writing.
8. Latest data available from ONS at the time of writing.
9. International trade in Services, and UK trade: goods and services publication tables, ONS
10. Note that 'clothing design' focuses on a comparatively narrow strand of overall fashion design, which was defined in previous iterations of this research using the SIC and SOC codes in the appendix. As such, it excludes significant contributors to the clothing trade such as the commercial and wholesale retail of clothing which generate substantive goods exports.
11. Employment data in this section has been calculated using the Annual Population Survey (APS), so these figures include information on freelance employment.
12. For example, an area with an employment LQ of 2 for a sector indicates that it has twice the concentration of employment in that sector than the UK average.
13. ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Nov 2025
14. Due to suppressed values within these categories, it is not possible to provide exact % figures, however it is around three quarters of employees in both cases.
15. Design & Technology Association (2024) <https://www.designtechnology.org.uk/news/in-the-press/>
16. Due to suppression rules specific figures for male clothing designers are not available, so it is not possible to provide percentages. For context, 79% of clothing designers in 2020 identified as female.
17. FI is funded by the AHRC in collaboration with the Design Museum's Future Observatory (AH/Y003780/1). The project is led by Ulster University, in collaboration with Queen's University, Glasgow School of Art, University of the Arts London and works directly with residents alongside more than 125 organisations from research, business and the public and third sectors (<https://www.futureisland-island.org/>)
18. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, Creative Industries Summary Report (2026) <https://pec.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Creative-Industries-Skills-Audits-Summary-Report.pdf>

Photo Credits

Image Credits in order of appearance:

Fairphone 4 broken down into repairable parts.
Credit: Fairphone

POINT Pressureless tennis ball designed by Noé Chouraqui, Design for Planet Prize winner 2025. Credit: Noé Chouraqui

Aerende Derby Potters throwing pottery lesson.
Credit: www.emmacollinsphotography.co.uk

Student at school studying technology.
Credit: Jeswin Thomas via Unsplash

Limited edition charging banks with off cut products. Credit: Gomi

UX UI designer working on wireframes.
Credit: Shutterstock

Architect designer hand drawing sketch plan with blueprint and selecting materials and colour samples.
Credit: Shutterstock

Labrum London models at London Fashion Week show 2024.
Credit: Labrum London

Woman riding a bicycle in the city on a bike path.
Credit: Shutterstock

Designer working on UX app and website design.
Credit: Daniel Korpai via Unsplash

Goldsmith Street exterior corner of house. Credit: Design Council

New Tube for London (NTfL). Credit: Priest ManGoode

Solar panels farm built on a waste dump and wind turbine farm.
Credit: Shutterstock

PulpaTronics RFID tags group image.
Credit: PulpaTronics

Graphic designer working on a laptop.
Credit: Antoni Shkraba via Pexels

Birmingham Design Festival 2023 Day 1 workshop designing large canvas Credit: www.thombartley.com

Data Sources

Annual Business Survey
Office for National Statistics, released 02 April 2026, ONS SRS Metadata Catalogue, dataset, Annual Business Survey - GB, ONS
Annual Business Survey - GB @ 313

Annual Population Survey
Office for National Statistics, released 16 June 2026, ONS SRS Metadata Catalogue, dataset, Annual Population Survey - UK, ONS
Annual Population Survey - UK @ 316

Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings
Office for National Statistics, released 24 July 2026, ONS SRS Metadata Catalogue, dataset, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings - GB, ONS
Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings - GB @ 322

Annual International Trade in Services
Office for National Statistics, released 19 March 2025, ONS SRS Metadata Catalogue, dataset, Annual International Trade in Services - UK, ONS
Annual International Trade in Services - UK @ 365

Business Register and Employment Survey
Office for National Statistics, released 28 October 2025, NOMIS Access
Business Register and Employment Survey: open access, 2015-2024

UK Business Counts
Office for National Statistics, released 14 October 2025, NOMIS Access
UK Business Counts, 2010-2025

UN COMTRADE
United Nations Statistics Division (2026) UN Comtrade Database.
Available at: UN Comtrade Database (Accessed: June 2026)

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Data Limitations

The use of ONS data enables consistent comparison with previous Design Economy reports, allowing us to build a decade long time-series of evidence, as well as providing credibility and robustness. However, the use of this data also has several key limitations:

SIC and SOC Codes allow for comparison between sectors in the economy, but do not perfectly map to all occupations and roles within the design economy, especially newer roles.

Because of how some design occupations are grouped together by SIC and SOC codes, some analysis is limited for specific design disciplines. For instance, multidisciplinary design bundles together fashion designers, product designers, interaction designers and theatre-set designers. This also means that clothing design does not include all fashion designers. As noted by the Craft Council, the full range of craft practices is not captured by existing SIC codes (see: <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/make-craft-seen>).

Many designers work as freelancers or as sole traders, which means that they do not appear fully in the ONS datasets. This is particularly the case for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) dataset. Additionally those that operate below the VAT threshold will not be fully visible in total estimates or GVA – this issue is particularly prominent in craft practices.

Equality, diversity and inclusion data relies on binary categories and is not granular enough to allow for intersectional analysis.

The geographical coverage of data means insights into Northern Ireland are more limited than other parts of the UK.

