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## **DCFW Affordable Housing Partnership Pilot**

*Pilot Overview*

July 2026

### **Introduction**

The Design Commission for Wales (DCFW) is inviting expressions of interest from affordable housing providers interested in participating in a pilot programme to support design quality throughout the development process, with a particular focus on the early stages of project development, with the aim of generating exemplars for the future.

Through our work with affordable housing projects across Wales, we have observed that many of the decisions that have the greatest influence on the quality of new homes are made before a design team is appointed and before projects engage with Design Review. Decisions relating to project objectives, site analysis, development potential, briefing, procurement and appointing the right design team can all have a significant impact on design quality, placemaking outcomes, sustainability and long-term value.

While Design Review can play an important role in supporting design quality, we are launching this pilot programme to provide additional support at earlier stages of project development, when key decisions are being made and the ability to influence outcomes is greatest. By helping project teams understand sites and their context, explore development potential, establish a clear vision and develop design principles, early design support can help create stronger foundations for successful projects.

This pilot will explore how a combination of early-stage design support and ongoing Design Review can feed into informed decision-making throughout project development. Through collaborative workshops, design-led discussion, briefing and procurement advice, and Design Review, the programme will help affordable housing providers deliver high-quality, sustainable and affordable homes that respond positively to their context, maximise the potential of sites and create successful places where people want to live.

## **About DCFW**

DCFW is the national advisory body for design quality in the built environment in Wales. Established and funded by Welsh Government, we support better outcomes through independent design advice, training and capacity building.

We provide the national Design Review Service for Wales, working with developers, design teams and planning authorities to support high-quality development. Through this work, we have developed extensive experience of the opportunities and challenges involved in delivering successful housing projects across Wales.

This pilot provides an opportunity to build on that experience by working with affordable housing providers at an earlier stage in the development process, helping to establish strong foundations before key decisions are made and before design teams are appointed.

## **Aim**

To work in partnership with two affordable housing providers to demonstrate how early-stage design support, combined with ongoing Design Review, can contribute to more informed decision-making, stronger project briefs and high-quality housing developments, while creating projects that can demonstrate the value of a design-led approach and provide learning and inspiration for the wider sector.

## **Who Should Apply?**

We are seeking expressions of interest from affordable housing providers that are:

- Developing or planning new affordable housing projects in Wales.
- Interested in exploring how design can add value at the earliest stages of project development.
- Willing to engage openly in a collaborative learning process.
- Able to identify one or more suitable projects at an early stage of development.
- Committed to participating throughout the pilot programme.

Projects must be at an early stage of development, prior to the appointment of a design team. This is essential to allow the pilot to influence the project's vision, design principles, briefing, procurement process and subsequent design development.

Participating organisations will be expected to engage throughout the programme, including attending workshops and Design Review sessions, sharing relevant project information and contributing to the learning and evaluation of the pilot.

## **Benefits of Participation**

Participating organisations will receive tailored support from DCFW throughout the project, helping to strengthen decision-making and embed design quality from project inception through to design development. The pilot aims to support participating organisations by:

- Developing a clear vision and design objectives from the outset.
- Unlocking the site's development potential.
- Strengthening project briefs and procurement processes.
- Supporting the appointment of the right design team.
- Embedding design quality considerations early and throughout project development.
- Addressing key issues and stakeholder requirements in a proactive and holistic way.
- Making best use of Design Review as part of the design process.
- Supporting informed decision-making at key project milestones.
- Sharing learning and good practice across the affordable housing sector.

## **Project Selection**

Two affordable housing providers will be selected to participate in the pilot. Projects will be assessed against the following criteria:

- The opportunity for the pilot to influence key decisions before appointment of a design team.
- The commitment of the participating organisation to engage throughout the programme.
- The potential for the pilot to add value and generate learning for the wider sector.
- The suitability, location and potential of the site.
- The potential to demonstrate how design-led approaches can unlock opportunities and create high-quality places.

The pilot aims to explore how design-led approaches can maximise the potential of sites within existing settlements and other sustainable locations with good access to local services, facilities and public transport. These locations often provide opportunities to support existing communities, make efficient use of infrastructure and create places that encourage walking, cycling and public transport use. As such, poorly connected, greenfield sites on the periphery of settlements are unlikely to be selected.

## **How the Partnership Will Work**

Participating organisations will have the opportunity to work with DCFW at key stages in project development, from early feasibility through to emerging design proposals. The partnership will be delivered through three stages.

### Stage 1 – Inception

The pilot will begin with an inception phase to establish a shared understanding of organisational ambitions, development priorities and potential projects.

This phase will include:

- An introductory meeting with participating organisations.
- Discussion of development ambitions and objectives.
- Review of proposed project(s).
- Selection of project for the pilot.
- Agreement of project scope, roles and expectations.

The aim is to ensure the project is suitable and establish a shared understanding of how the pilot can support project development before a design team is appointed.

### Stage 2 – Project Foundations

A key aspect of the pilot will be supporting projects before the appointment of a design team, when many of the decisions that shape project outcomes are being made.

The Project Foundations stage is intended to establish a clear vision for the project and ensure that this is reflected in the project brief, procurement process and subsequent design development.

#### A) Site Analysis and Design Workshop

Working with development teams and key stakeholders, DCFW will support site and context analysis and facilitate a collaborative workshop to explore project objectives, opportunities, constraints, development potential and placemaking ambitions.

This stage will include:

- Site and context analysis.
- Engagement with relevant stakeholders.
- Design-led workshop.
- Exploration of opportunities, constraints and development potential.
- Development of a site vision and design principles.

#### B) Brief Development

Following the workshop, DCFW will provide written advice to help translate the outcomes into a clear project brief. DCFW will also provide feedback on draft briefs, helping

participating organisations ensure that project objectives, quality aspirations, the site vision and design principles are clearly reflected before procurement of the design team.

This will include:

- A written summary of key findings.
- A vision for the site.
- Site-specific design principles.
- Simple diagrams where appropriate.
- Recommendations to inform the project brief and future design development.
- Review and comments on draft project briefs.

The aim is to ensure that the vision, opportunities and design principles identified through the workshop are embedded within the project brief and can guide future decision-making, procurement and design development.

### C) Procurement Support

DCFW will also support participating organisations with the procurement process, recognising the importance of appointing the right design team.

This will include:

- Advice on procurement approaches.
- Input into consultant selection criteria.
- Review of tender documentation.
- Participation in consultant interviews.

Particular emphasis will be placed on ensuring that procurement processes support the appointment of design teams capable of responding positively to the project's vision, design principles and ambitions.

By addressing key issues early, establishing a clear vision and supporting the appointment of the right design team, the programme aims to help project teams make informed decisions, unlock the site's full potential, reduce the risk of avoidable redesign and create the conditions for successful design outcomes.

### Stage 3 – Design Review

Following appointment of the design team, DCFW will continue to support participating projects through Design Review and ongoing engagement as proposals develop. Design Review will provide an opportunity to test emerging proposals against the vision, design

principles and project objectives established through the Project Foundations stage. This will include:

A) Design Review 1 – Early Design Development

- Following appointment of the design team.
- Testing the project vision, site strategy, placemaking principles and emerging design concepts.
- Reviewing how the design team has responded to the opportunities and priorities identified through the Project Foundations stage.

B) Design Review 2 – Developed Design

- Reviewing how the vision and design principles have been translated into the evolving scheme.
- Identifying opportunities for refinement prior to planning submission.
- Supporting continued focus on design quality as the project moves towards delivery.

This approach will help maintain continuity between the Project Foundations stage and subsequent design development, ensuring that key principles established early in the process continue to inform decision-making as proposals evolve.

### **Collaboration and Early Engagement**

A key benefit of the pilot is the opportunity to bring together relevant organisations and stakeholders at an early stage of project development, when opportunities to influence outcomes are greatest.

Depending on the project, this may include engagement with local planning and highway authorities, Welsh Government colleagues, Secured by Design officers, and other relevant stakeholders.

By establishing a shared understanding of the site's opportunities, constraints, vision and design principles, the pilot aims to support a coordinated and proactive approach to project development. This can help identify and address key considerations early, reduce the risk of avoidable redesign and support the delivery of high-quality housing developments.

The pilot will also be developed in dialogue with Welsh Government colleagues, including the Housing Standards team responsible for Affordable Housing Grant funding, helping to align project aspirations with wider quality and placemaking objectives.

## **Participant Commitment**

Participation in the pilot is free of charge. DCFW will provide workshops, advice and Design Review through existing resources. In return, participating organisations will be expected to:

- Commit appropriate staff time throughout the pilot.
- Attend meetings, workshops and Design Review sessions.
- Share relevant project information and emerging proposals.
- Engage DCFW in discussions around project briefing and procurement.
- Bring projects to Design Review at agreed stages.
- Share learning and feedback to support evaluation of the pilot.
- Support wider dissemination of learning where appropriate.

Participating organisations will also be expected to provide a suitable venue for workshops (or attend workshops at DCFW offices) and cover any associated catering costs.

## **Outputs**

The programme is expected to produce:

- Site-specific vision, design principles and recommendations.
- Advice to inform the project brief and procurement.
- Design Review reports to inform design development.
- Project case study documenting the development journey from inception through design development and, where feasible, into delivery and occupation.
- Lessons learned and recommendations that can be shared more widely across the sector.

## **Programme Timetable**

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Timing</u>
Expression of Interest Opens	1 July 2026
Expression of Interest Closes	7 August 2026
Selection of Pilot Participants	August 2026
Inception Meeting	September 2026
Project Foundations Stage	Autumn 2026 – Spring 2027
Design Review	Throughout 2027
Learning and Evaluation	2028

Timings are indicative and will be refined with participating organisations to reflect the needs and programme of individual projects.

## **Expressions of Interest**

Expressions of Interest should be submitted by **7 August 2026**. Following assessment of submissions, two affordable housing providers will be selected to participate in the pilot, with inception meetings taking place in September 2026.

Further information on the Expression of Interest process, including the information required and selection criteria, can be found in the application form.

If you would like to discuss the pilot before submitting an Expression of Interest, please contact DCFW at [connect@dcfw.org](mailto:connect@dcfw.org). We would be happy to discuss the programme and the suitability of potential projects.