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Strategic Placemaking Project - Final Report and Next Steps

August 2026

Introduction

The Design Commission for Wales has delivered the Strategic Placemaking Project with project funding from the Welsh Government to explore how a placemaking-led approach can support Local Development Plan preparation and help identify opportunities for sustainable growth within existing settlements.

This work responds to the strategic placemaking ambitions of Future Wales, which encourages planning authorities to establish a vision for each town and city, supported by a spatial framework that guides growth and regeneration and provides a structure within which towns and cities can grow, evolve, diversify and flourish over time. The project explores one practical methodology that could help planning authorities develop the evidence, understanding and place-based thinking needed to support those ambitions.

Through the project we worked with eight planning authorities across Wales, exploring development opportunities in 16 towns and neighbourhoods. These ranged from city neighbourhoods and valley communities to market towns and rural settlements, helping to test the methodology across a diverse range of places and planning contexts.

Through a series of workshops, the project tested a practical approach for identifying opportunities for housing and mixed-use development within existing settlements. The work sought to complement traditional strategic site allocations by exploring how smaller-scale infill, redevelopment and densification opportunities can contribute to housing delivery while supporting placemaking objectives.

Project Approach

Through the project we developed, tested and refined an approach that can be applied across Wales. The approach involves:

- High level settlement analysis
- Identification of local assets and opportunities
- Site identification and assessment
- Development of placemaking principles for settlements
- Preparation of indicative development frameworks and design principles for sites
- Consideration of implementation and delivery mechanisms

The approach was deliberately practical, visual and collaborative, bringing together officers from planning, regeneration, housing, transport, estates and other departments.



Strategic Placemaking Workshop in Swansea

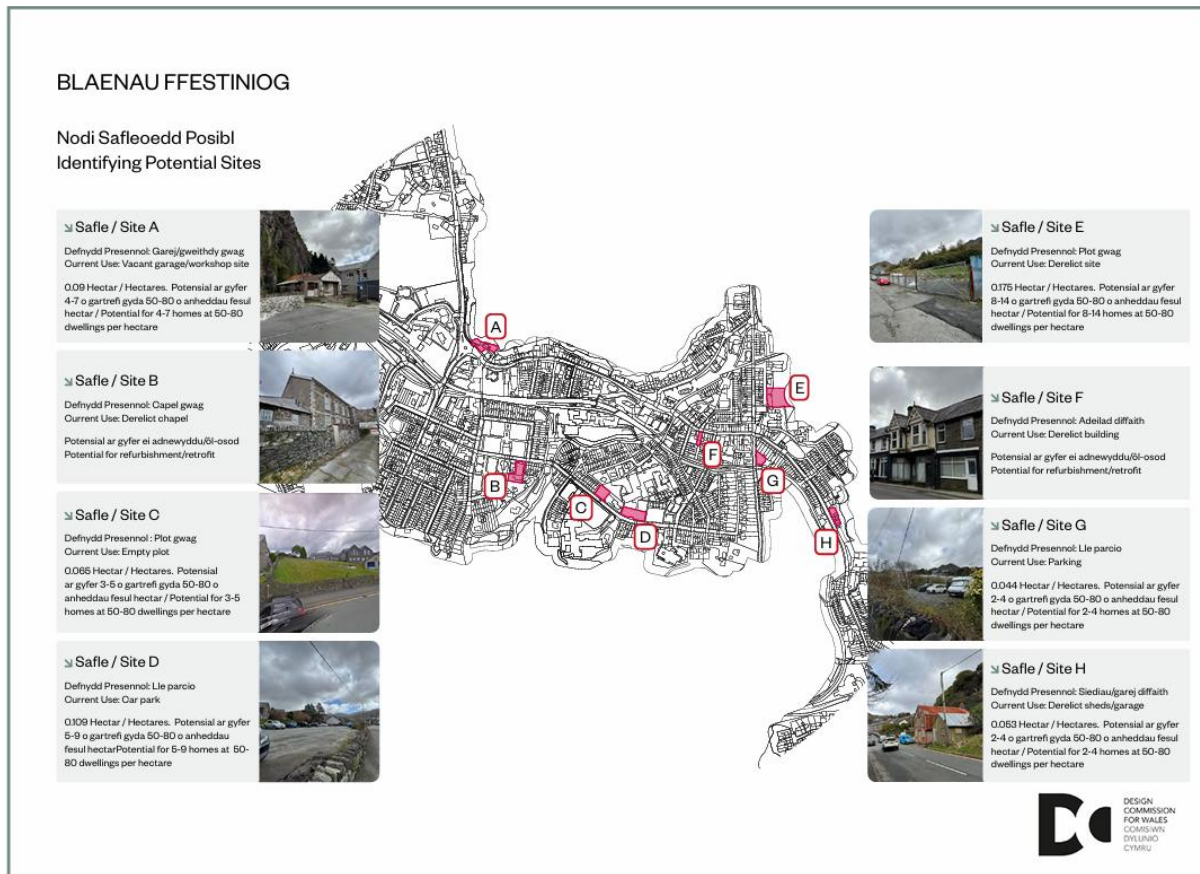
Key Findings

Finding 1 – There are significant development opportunities within existing settlements

Across all participating authorities, the project identified development opportunities within existing settlements that had not previously been considered through conventional candidate site and urban capacity study processes. These opportunities included:

- Underused and vacant sites
- Surplus public sector land

- Redevelopment opportunities
- Infill development
- Making better use of land within existing housing estate
- Development above existing uses
- Small urban extensions that strengthen settlement form



Identified development opportunities in Blaenau Ffestiniog

Whilst many of the opportunities identified are relatively small in scale, typically accommodating between 5 and 50 homes, some larger redevelopment opportunities have the potential to deliver significantly more. Collectively, these opportunities have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to housing delivery. Across the participating authorities, the project identified a significant number of opportunities that could collectively support the delivery of several hundred homes within existing settlements. Importantly, the opportunities identified are also located close to services, facilities, employment opportunities and public transport. As a result, they have the potential to make better use of existing infrastructure, support town centres and local services, and enable more people to meet their day-to-day needs through walking, cycling and public transport.

Finding 2 – There are barriers to delivery that need to be addressed

Whilst opportunities were identified across all participating authorities, a number of common barriers emerged. These included:

- Viability challenges
- Highway requirements and parking standards
- Land ownership issues
- Resource and capacity constraints
- Fragmented responsibilities across departments
- Limited mechanisms to proactively bring forward sites
- Managing flood risk

The project highlighted that identifying opportunities is often not the principal challenge. Rather, the difficulty lies in creating the conditions necessary for delivery. Many of the barriers identified are not unique to individual sites but reflect wider challenges relating to policy, process, viability and delivery. This suggests that, alongside identifying opportunities, greater emphasis should be placed on how planning policy, guidance and collaboration can help address barriers, provide greater certainty and support delivery. This reinforces the need to move beyond simply identifying development opportunities towards a more place-based approach to understanding and shaping future growth, whilst creating the conditions necessary for successful delivery.

Finding 3 - Planning authorities can play a stronger enabling role

The project supported the potential for planning authorities to take a proactive role in understanding development potential, shaping future growth and enabling development opportunities within existing settlements. Rather than focusing primarily on the assessment of candidate sites, authorities can help establish a shared understanding of places, identify opportunities, develop place-based design principles and create greater certainty about how settlements can evolve over time. We highlighted the potential of:

- Settlement-wide opportunity studies or audits
- Area-based placemaking frameworks
- Development briefs
- Design principles for sites
- Cross-department collaboration
- Early engagement with landowners and development partners
- Raising awareness of the types of opportunities that may be acceptable

Planning authorities can play an important role not only in regulating development but also in identifying opportunities, shaping development outcomes, providing greater clarity and certainty for landowners, developers and communities.



Illustrative Framework Plan informed by workshop discussions, showing how key design principles could be applied to a site next to Neath Train Station.

However, the project also highlighted the challenges authorities face in adopting this role. Planning teams are generally focused on statutory responsibilities, such as determining planning applications and preparing Local Development Plans, leaving limited capacity to undertake this proactive work. Whilst identifying opportunities within existing settlements, establishing the policies and other measures needed to enable their development, and shaping future growth is an achievable objective, it requires time, resources, design expertise and a different way of working than is typically undertaken. Many authorities have limited capacity to undertake this type of work, particularly where specialist urban design and placemaking skills are not available in-house.

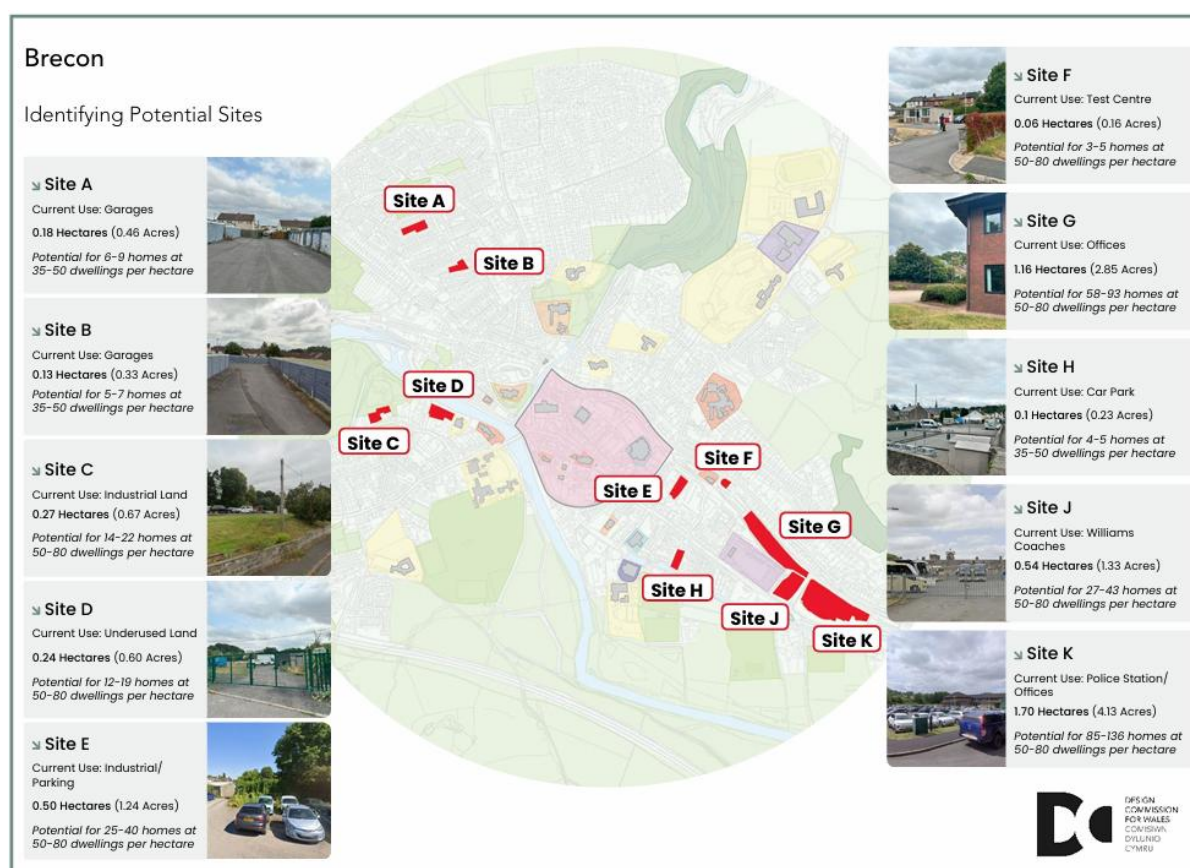
The project suggests that this type of work could form a more integral part of the Local Development Plan process, helping authorities better understand the capacity and potential of existing settlements and supporting the strategic placemaking ambitions of Future Wales. Embedding this approach within plan preparation could enable opportunities within existing settlements to be considered more systematically and allow planning

authorities to dedicate greater time and resources to this work, rather than viewing it as an additional activity separate from their core responsibilities. This approach enables planning authorities to move beyond identifying development sites towards developing a shared understanding of how places can grow, evolve and respond to future needs.

There may also be opportunities to share responsibility across departments, including housing, regeneration and estates teams. Bringing together local knowledge, resources and objectives could help authorities identify opportunities more effectively and create the conditions necessary to bring them forward.

Finding 4 – A place-based approach to planning provides a more effective way of understanding and unlocking development potential

The project showed that opportunities for growth are often overlooked when planning focuses primarily on strategic allocations, developer-led site promotion or high-level capacity assessments. By taking a proactive, place-based approach, we were able to identify a wider range of opportunities within existing settlements and consider how these could contribute to housing delivery, regeneration and wider placemaking objectives.



Example of the range of development opportunities identified in Brecon

The workshops demonstrated the value of spending time in places, understanding their assets and challenges, and bringing together colleagues from different departments to share knowledge and perspectives. This helped identify opportunities that may not have emerged through more conventional planning exercises and enabled discussion about the types of development most appropriate to each location, within a multi-disciplinary context.

The project suggests there is value in evolving the way planning authorities plan for growth to support the strategic placemaking ambitions of Future Wales. Rather than focusing primarily on identifying candidate sites or producing numerical estimates of development capacity, a place-based approach can help authorities develop a richer understanding of the character and function of settlements, identify development opportunities, explore appropriate development typologies and establish the design principles needed to shape future growth and support delivery.

Designing for Growth in Port Talbot

The key to growing Port Talbot from within is to focus on mixed-use development of post-industrial land to the south west in such a way that it connects well to town centre facilities. Other smaller infill sites within the town centre may also supplement this, although the existing grain of streets and lanes is tight. There has previously been objections to development of garage and back lane sites from Highways where normal access widths, turning heads and parking standards are not feasible. However, greater flexibility would open up opportunities for more housing within existing neighbourhoods and make use of redundant plots.

Example of a place-based strategy for growing Port Talbot

Whilst the project benefited from collaboration across local authority and national park authority departments, future programmes could also incorporate greater engagement with communities, businesses, landowners and other local stakeholders. This would help ensure that local knowledge and aspirations inform the identification of opportunities and the development of place-based responses. This approach can help create a stronger link between understanding development potential, shaping future growth and securing high-quality placemaking outcomes.

The project also suggests that this approach could provide an important foundation for the development of the spatial frameworks envisaged by Future Wales, helping planning authorities move beyond identifying development opportunities towards shaping the long-term growth and evolution of settlements.

Finding 5 - Design quality is critical to unlocking development opportunities

A key theme throughout the project was the importance of design in enabling development within existing settlements. Many of the opportunities identified were small, constrained or complex sites where standard development models and layouts may struggle to respond successfully to local circumstances.

The project demonstrated that good design can help overcome many of the challenges typically associated with infill, redevelopment and densification, including issues relating to privacy, overlooking, parking, access, landscape integration and relationships with neighbouring properties. Through the use of case studies and practical design exercises, the workshops explored how design-led approaches can maximise the potential of sites while delivering positive outcomes for existing and future communities.



Challender Court Bristol

Units: 8 one-bed apartments

Tenure: Council Housing

Site typology: GARAGE SITE
BACK OF HOUSES

Building typology: PASSIVHAUS
APARTMENTS

Architect: Emmett Russell Architects

Developer: Bristol City Council

This new-build council housing on a former garage site at the back of existing houses achieves Passivhaus standards, whilst making efficient use of the tight, irregular site. Screened balconies help to prevent overlooking and, combined with integrated bike stores, define the entrances. Despite needing to meet Bristol City Council's housing standards to be robust, low maintenance and energy efficient, carefully considered design has created a delightful and sustainable place to live.

STRATEGIC PLACEMAKING - HOUSING CASE STUDY



Aerial view before



Aerial view after

MAIN CHALLENGES:

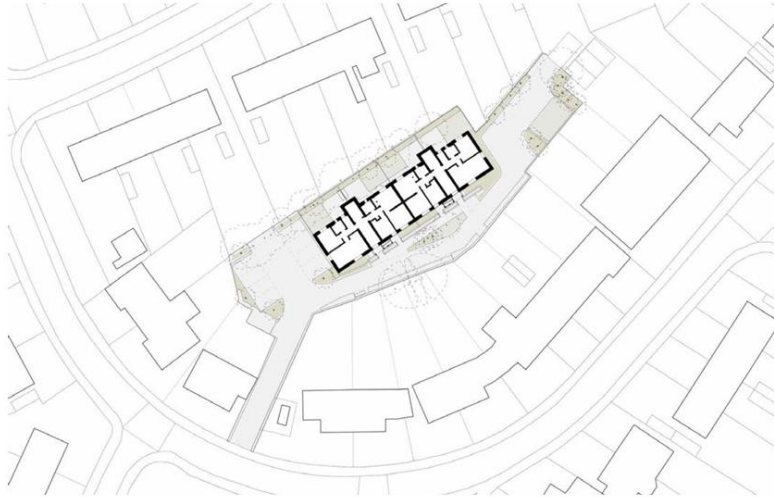
- Making efficient use of a tight brownfield site
- Avoiding overlooking of existing properties

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES: The well-considered, compact floor plans create one-bedroom apartments which feel spacious and comfortable and meet Lifetime Homes standards, but make efficient use of the site.

Bike storage helps to articulate the entrances, while bins and parking occupy the irregular spaces at the edges of the site. First floor flats have metal screened balconies which avoid overlooking the neighbouring properties, and rooflights are located to improve daylight levels.

DESIGN FOR PLACEMAKING: The landscape around the building have been thoughtfully designed to ensure there is no 'left over' space. SUDS and planting have been incorporated to define thresholds and deal with a slight change in level across the site.

The project makes good use of a challenging site to address an identified need for smaller housing units.

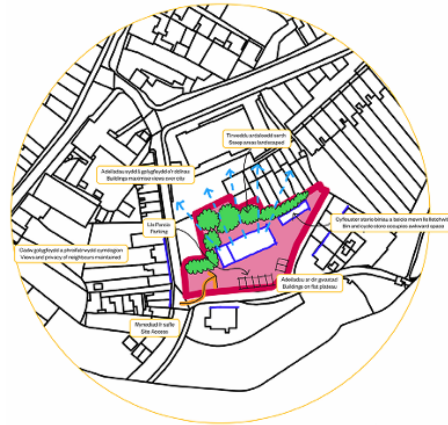


Example case study showing how the challenges of constrained sites can be overcome with good design

The project also demonstrated that design quality and development viability should not be viewed as competing objectives. Good design can help unlock constrained sites, make more efficient use of land, address potential concerns at an early stage and provide greater confidence in the development process. By establishing clear design principles from the outset, authorities and developers can create better outcomes for communities whilst maximising the potential of development opportunities.

Taking into account the ideas, discussion and analysis from the workshop, an example set of design principles for the site could include:

- Development should provide one-bed homes with their own front doors.
- Homes should take the form of flats with buildings two to three storeys high, facing onto both the street and green space to the rear of the site.
- Parking should be limited to one space per home or less, and arranged so that it does not dominate the street scape.
- A pedestrian route to the south side of the Town Hall should be retained and enhanced.
- Amenity space, including play, should be included and integrated with SuDS and biodiversity enhancement measures. This could utilise green space adjacent to the site.



Example Design Principles Plans

Identified opportunities and constraints can inform options for layouts, which help to establish potential design principles.

Example of design principles for the development of sites in Bangor

The project also highlighted the importance of design skills and expertise in this process. Identifying and shaping opportunities within existing settlements requires more than assessing land availability or development capacity. It involves understanding the place, testing development typologies, exploring design responses and establishing principles that can guide future development. Whilst some authorities have access to urban design expertise, most face resource and capacity constraints that limit their ability to undertake this work. This suggests there may be value in providing additional design support, training and practical tools to help authorities identify, assess and shape opportunities more effectively.

This reinforces the importance of moving beyond a simple focus on site capacity and housing numbers. Many of the opportunities identified through the project are small, constrained or likely to come forward incrementally over time. Their success will depend on the quality of the design response and the ability to develop solutions tailored to the specific characteristics of individual places and sites. Design should therefore be embedded within the process of identifying, assessing and enabling development opportunities from the outset, helping to maximise development potential while ensuring new development contributes positively to the character, function and long-term quality of places.

The project also highlighted the benefits of bringing together planning, housing, regeneration, transport and other disciplines to explore opportunities collaboratively. The workshops created time and space for discussion that is not always possible through day-to-day planning processes and enabled participants to draw on a wider range of knowledge

and expertise. The involvement of DCFW as an independent facilitator provided additional design expertise, challenge and support, helping to test ideas, explore alternatives and establish design principles that could inform future development.

Next Steps

Next Step 1 – Embed place-based opportunity studies within plan-making

The project has demonstrated the value of a more place-based approach to understanding development potential within existing settlements.

As a next step, DCFW will explore with Welsh Government how place-based opportunity studies could support the Local Development Plan process by helping planning authorities develop the evidence, understanding and place-based thinking needed to shape future growth and support the aspirations of Future Wales. This will include exploring with Welsh Government what policy and guidance changes may be required to integrate this approach into the Local Development Plan process, including consideration of Planning Policy Wales, Future Wales and the Development Plans Manual.

This next step would primarily involve further work between DCFW and Welsh Government to explore how the approach could be reflected in policy, guidance and working practices. Implementation would also require planning authorities to dedicate time and resources to undertaking place-based opportunity studies as part of Local Development Plan preparation.

Next Step 2 – Provide support and training to help authorities apply the approach

The project has demonstrated that place-based opportunity studies can provide a practical way of identifying development opportunities and shaping growth within existing settlements. However, applying this approach requires a combination of planning, placemaking and design skills that are not always available within local planning authorities.

Building on the findings of the project, DCFW will explore the development of a support and training offer to help planning authorities apply the approach as part of Local Development Plan preparation and wider placemaking activities.

This could involve a series of workshop-based training sessions, bringing together groups of planning authorities to introduce the methodology, demonstrate how opportunities can be identified and assessed, and provide practical tools, examples and case studies drawn from the Strategic Placemaking Project. Authorities would then be encouraged to

undertake their own place-based opportunity studies, supported by a follow-up review session where findings, opportunities and emerging design principles could be shared, discussed and tested. This would create opportunities for peer learning, knowledge exchange and the sharing of good practice between authorities whilst making effective use of DCFW resources.

This approach would help build capacity within planning authorities, support knowledge sharing and encourage wider adoption of place-based approaches to understanding development potential.

Resource implications – DCFW would provide this support through its existing budget as part of our programme of design support for planning authorities. The effectiveness of the offer, demand from planning authorities and DCFW's capacity to support wider uptake would be monitored to inform future development.

Next Step 3 – Develop a delivery-focused small sites programme

The project highlighted that identifying opportunities is often not the principal challenge. Rather, the difficulty lies in creating the conditions necessary for delivery. Building on the opportunities identified through the Strategic Placemaking Project, DCFW will continue discussions with Welsh Government Place Division and other partners to explore opportunities for a delivery-focused programme that tests how small and constrained sites can be brought forward in practice.

The programme should focus on understanding and addressing barriers relating to land assembly, design, viability and delivery through a collaborative partnership involving stakeholders, such as the Development Bank of Wales, local authorities, Registered Social Landlords, local authority housing teams, SME developers, self-builders, community-led organisations and other delivery partners. There would also be value in drawing on learning from similar initiatives in Bristol and London that have sought to identify, shape and unlock small-scale development opportunities within existing urban areas.

The aim would be to establish a practical and replicable approach to unlocking development opportunities within existing settlements whilst delivering high-quality placemaking outcomes.

DCFW could provide design-led support to help shape opportunities, test development options, establish design principles and facilitate collaboration between partners. This

would help ensure that delivery-focused work continues to prioritise design quality and placemaking outcomes alongside housing delivery.

Resource Implications – If progressed, a programme of this nature would require a partnership approach and additional funding to enable DCFW to provide design support and facilitation, helping to engage stakeholders, bring partners together and explore development opportunities in greater detail.



Example of an infill housing development of seven dwellings in Presteigne, Powys, demonstrating how well-designed development on a small site can contribute to housing delivery within an existing settlement.

Conclusion

The Strategic Placemaking Project has shown that there is considerable untapped development potential within existing settlements across Wales. More importantly, it has demonstrated a practical methodology for identifying, understanding and shaping that potential through a collaborative, place-based and design-led approach.

The opportunity now is to build on this work through continued collaboration between DCFW, Welsh Government and planning authorities. Rather than relying primarily on candidate site assessments and numerical capacity estimates, the methodology developed through the project provides a practical starting point for helping planning authorities better understand development potential, identify opportunities, establish place-based design principles and create the conditions necessary for sustainable growth and successful delivery.

Future work could build on this foundation to explore how the methodology developed through the project can play a wider role in shaping the future growth and evolution of towns and cities, supporting the long-term ambitions for strategic placemaking set out in Future Wales. Achieving this will require continued collaboration across planning, housing, regeneration and other disciplines, alongside sustained focus on addressing barriers to delivery and providing design expertise needed to help unlock opportunities and maximise their benefits for communities and places.