

Design overtakes retail sector as biggest contributor to the UK economy

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- Design contributed £136.7bn in GVA in 2023, 40% more than in 2019, compared with 23% growth across the wider UK economy.
- The design economy supports 2.27 million jobs, following a 15% increase in employment since 2020.
- Design is contributing to regional growth, with an 88% increase in design GVA in Wales, 67% in the Northeast and 32% in Scotland since 2019.
- UK design is valued globally with 10% of all British exports coming from design goods and services.

The UK design economy contributed £136.7 billion to the economy in 2023, equivalent to 5.5% of UK Gross Value Added (GVA) - approximately £1 in every £20 - according to new research from the Design Council.

Design Economy 2026, the Design Council's flagship tri-annual study into the value of design, shows the scale of design's contribution across industries, places and jobs, and argues that strengthening design capability will be critical to delivering good growth across the UK.

The findings show that design-led growth is being felt well beyond London and the Southeast. Since 2019, design GVA has increased by 88% in Wales and 67% in the Northeast. The Design Council says this growing regional contribution demonstrates the potential for design to support successful devolution, place-based innovation and community-led economic development, helping regions translate investment into higher-value jobs and stronger local economies.

Overall, the design economy grew by 40% between 2019 and 2023, compared with 24% growth across the wider UK economy. Its contribution is now larger than the **UK's entire retail sector**, worth £114 billion, and nearly twice the size of the accommodation and food service industry, worth £70 billion. While inflation was unusually high over the period, the figures underline the increasing economic weight of design across the UK.

Crucially, design's value is not confined to specialist design businesses. Two-thirds of the GVA created by the design economy - £90.6 billion - comes from designers working outside the design industries, in sectors including manufacturing, engineering, healthcare, finance, retail and the public sector. Around 80% of designers now work in non-design industries, while employment of designers in non-design industries grew by 20% between 2020 and 2025, compared with 6% employment growth in design industries. The findings suggest that organisations are increasingly bringing design capability in-house as a core part of how they innovate and grow.

The report also points to rising productivity. In 2023, productivity among designers working inside and outside the design industries was estimated at £60,704 per person, up around 18% from 2019. Product and industrial design generated the highest economic value per employee, at £96,200. A case study in the report looks at Lloyds Banking Group and the role of digital design in supporting wider business growth, illustrating how design skills are increasingly embedded within major organisations rather than operating only as an external creative service.

Employment growth reinforces that picture. More than 2.27 million people were employed across the design economy in 2025, up 15% since 2020 - an increase of approximately 297,000 jobs - while total UK employment grew by less than 2.5% over the same period. Of those working in the design economy, around 1.88 million are employed in design occupations, which now account for 6.2% of all UK employment.

UK design also has significant international reach. Design service exports reached £71 billion in 2022, up from £56 billion in 2019, and represented 17% of all UK service exports - equivalent to around 77% of the value of UK financial services exports. Digital design accounts for more than £50 billion of these service exports, reflecting the growing international demand for UK digital design capability.

However, the report warns that future growth cannot be taken for granted. Entries for Design and Technology GCSEs have fallen by 68% over the decade to *2024, raising concerns about the future skills pipeline at a time when businesses need design capabilities to respond to rapid technological change, including AI. Progress on workforce diversity also remains slow: women account for only 25% of designers, while Black designers make up 2% of the design workforce compared with 5% of the wider UK working population.

Mat Hunter, Chief Executive of the Design Council:

“These figures should change the way we think about design. It is not a niche creative activity sitting at the edge of the economy; it is a £136.7 billion capability embedded in the way organisations effectively innovate, tackle complex problems and grow. The opportunity now is to make sure that capability is available everywhere - in businesses and public services, across every region and nation - and that we invest in the skills and diversity needed to sustain it for the future.”

Professor Mariana Mazzucato, Professor in the Economics of Innovation and Public Value at University College London, Founding Director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose and author of The Common Good Economy: A New Compass:

“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.”

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

"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."

Fiona Cousins, Chief Operating Officer – Total Design and Executive Director, Arup:

"I have spent my career in the built environment, where a single decision about a building or a piece of infrastructure shapes how people live, work and move for decades to come. That makes design an economic driver as much as a creative one. The value comes from working holistically: staying curious, understanding the broadest context, connecting ideas across disciplines and collaborating well beyond our own walls. If we want growth that also answers the challenges in front of us, from climate to skills, we have to design for the future we want rather than the one we can already see."

Design Economy 2026 is published by the Design Council and is available to view / download: [Design Economy - Design Council](#).

The Design Council is calling for government, businesses and public bodies to strengthen design capability across the economy, support regional design ecosystems and invest in the skills pipeline needed to sustain the UK's competitive advantage.

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Notes to editors

IMAGES

[*https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/jun/15/dt-could-be-gone-from-national-curriculum-in-four-years-business-leaders-warn](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/jun/15/dt-could-be-gone-from-national-curriculum-in-four-years-business-leaders-warn)

About 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 Economy programme highlights the significant economic impact of the design sector, helping to grow the UK economy, and our Design for Planet mission continues to support the 1.97 million people working in the UK design economy to accelerate us towards a regenerative future for all.

[Designcouncil.org.uk](https://designcouncil.org.uk)

Definitions:

The “design economy” encompasses design activity in specialist design industries and design activity across the wider economy. “Design occupations” include designers working both within and outside design industries.

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.

GVA: Gross Value Added measures the value generated by economic activity. Inflation was particularly high during 2019-2023, at around 22%, and should be considered when interpreting nominal growth figures.

Regional data: Regional GVA growth figures compare 2019 with 2023.

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