Partnership for Change

Project design: best practice principles

2026

AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTORS ASSOCIATION

CONSULT AUSTRALIA

Partnership for Change

The Australian Constructors Association and Consult Australia continue to work together to present sector-wide reform proposals through our Partnership for Change initiative.

The joint Partnership for Change papers provide the basis for collaborative discussions between government, constructors and consultants to drive positive change.

We acknowledge the input of the Construction Industry Leadership Forum (CILF) in the development of the principles outlined in this paper. CILF brings together senior representatives from the Commonwealth government and state governments (NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia), together with industry leaders.

Past Partnership for Change papers include:

- Digital technology (2022)
- Model client (2022)
- Multiple design reviews (2022)
- Reliance information (2022).

Introduction

In 2022, the Partnership for Change paper on multiple design reviews outlined the opportunity for greater efficiency and value creation by streamlining design reviews. The Australian Constructors Association (ACA) and Consult Australia have been working with key clients to realise this opportunity.

Fast forward to 2026, with continued project disruptions and the increasing costs of project delivery, there is a heightened client focus on cost certainty. The construction industry continues to face a productivity challenge. An efficient and effective design process remains integral to delivering improved outcomes.

To inform and progress reform of the design process, the ACA, Consult Australia and CILF collaborated to develop a set of **best practice principles**. The principles are based on direct experience of what works in practice and defines what constitutes good practice in delivering an efficient, disciplined design process that supports high quality outcomes. The principles are intended for public and private clients, designers and delivery teams on major projects.

Adoption of the **best practice principles** will support clients and delivery teams to:

- deliver to scope and support quality
- improve schedule certainty and productivity
- reduce rework and late-stage change
- manage design risk and minimise costs
- deliver better value for money for the community.

ACA and Consult Australia look forward to continuing the partnership with government clients to deliver improvements in design processes.

The problem to be addressed

The following persistent problems hamper effective design processes:

- **Ambiguity of project objective or scope:** Poorly defined project objectives or benefits limit the ability to translate desired outcomes into design. This reduces perceived design quality and can drive an overly complex review process and ultimately limits project success.
- **Lack of early engagement to inform design:** Constructors and third parties, such as utilities and property owners, are commonly engaged too late or inconsistently to inform the design process. This limits the consideration of third-party requirements in design or the constructability of a design. This has implications for design time and cost.
- **Limited flexibility and innovation:** The way reference and concept designs are used can limit the designer's and contractor's ability to innovate and add value. Proposing alternative solutions can impose a heavy burden at tender if multiple submissions are required for each alternative.
- **Unclear design review purpose:** It is often not clear whether a specific review is intended to confirm compliance, build consensus or reconsider scope. This ambiguity drives rework and delay. It can also result in project completion without close-out of review comments.
- **Poor management of scope changes**: Late changes to scope often need to be actioned in constrained timeframes with no allowance to adjust contract end dates. This impacts project cost, quality and time.
- **Unclear responsibilities and decision rights:** Responsibilities for reviewing, responding to and closing out comments are frequently undefined or misaligned. Decision-making authority is often unclear or sits with parties who cannot make binding decisions.
- **Duplicated effort:** Clients, designers, contractors and independent reviewers often perform overlapping design review tasks, adding time and cost without commensurate value.
- **Excessive reviewers and review rounds:** Large numbers of reviewers and multiple review cycles frequently generate thousands of comments, many of which add limited value. The effort required to manage these comments increases project timeframes and costs.

Best practice principles for project design

Adoption of these best practice principles will set up the design process, and subsequently the project, for success. Combined, these principles reinforce the importance of early engagement and an active client approach to improve risk management, promote cost certainty, and deliver value and better outcomes across projects.

Principle 1: Stakeholder engagement is led by clients and informs project scope

Project scope and requirements should be informed by early and meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholder groups. Effective stakeholder engagement helps define project outcomes, builds alignment and reduces late-stage scope change and redesign.

Stakeholder engagement should support clear decision-making by identifying stakeholder needs, expectations and impacts early in the design process, while maintaining client accountability for balancing competing interests and determining final project requirements.

What good looks like in practice

- Relevant stakeholders are identified as early as possible and engagement is proportionate to the scale, complexity and impact of the project.
- Stakeholder engagement informs project objectives, user requirements and broader project outcomes before detailed design is progressed.
- Stakeholders clearly understand how their input will be considered and the extent of their influence on project decisions.
- Clear delineation is made between those stakeholders offering views for information, those to be consulted or involved as well as those with higher authority for setting requirements.
- Stakeholder feedback that may materially impact scope, cost, program or technical requirements is assessed and managed through appropriate governance processes.
- Clients retain accountability for decision-making in response to stakeholder feedback throughout the design process and determining final project scope and requirements.
- Stakeholder engagement is coordinated and managed to support timely decision-making and avoid unnecessary redesign, duplication or scope change throughout the design process.

Principle 2: Project design considers delivery impacts and is informed by early technical engagement

Early, structured engagement improves design quality and reduces downstream disruption. Project design should be informed by constructors, designers, operators and relevant third parties, such as utilities and property owners, to ensure technical requirements, interfaces and delivery constraints are considered from the outset.

What good looks like in practice

- Client ensures early in the project lifecycle that the scope, risk and technical requirements are informed by constructors, designers and relevant third parties such as utilities, property and asset owners.
- Where reference or concept designs are used, their purpose is clear and, ideally, supported by performance specifications that are defined prior to contract award.
- Where compliance with a concept or reference design is required, contractors can rely on the design provided.
- The designer and constructor work collaboratively to ensure seamless integration of the design throughout the project, regardless of contract model (e.g. construct only).
- The chosen contract model aligns with the intended design approach and level of client prescription.

Principle 3: The project design process has clear governance, decision-making and accountability that is enforced

Project design should be adequately planned and resourced within project schedules. A clear governance framework must be embedded, with clear decision-making authority and accountability across project teams.

What good looks like in practice

- Roles and responsibilities for clients, designers, constructors and independent reviewers are clearly defined by the clients.
- Authority within the project team to accept, reject or modify design review comments is unambiguous and is actively led by the client.
- Design risk is allocated to parties best placed to manage it, and decision rights reflect that allocation.
- Clients are accountable for resolving conflicting comments or any comments escalated for resolution.
- Constructors are responsible for managing compliance-related design risk within the agreed risk allocation.
- Design milestones, decision points and timelines (including time contingency) are clearly defined and agreed upfront and reflect project complexity and risk.
- Project schedules allow sufficient time for quality design and review, and all parties are accountable for meeting agreed timeframes.
- Impacts of delayed decisions or reviews are transparently managed using agreed escalation and resolution protocols.
- Independent escalation mechanisms, such as a design review or an issues resolution panel, (similar to a dispute resolution board) are considered where appropriate.

Principle 4: Design review has a clear purpose and is risk-based and efficient

Design review must be explicitly defined as a process to assure compliance with agreed scope and technical requirements. It should have clearly defined milestones that are iterative and limit the ability to revisit previously resolved comments and issues. Assurance activities must add value and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Design review processes should reflect the level and type of design risk as well as reinforce, not undermine, the agreed allocation of design risk.

What good looks like in practice

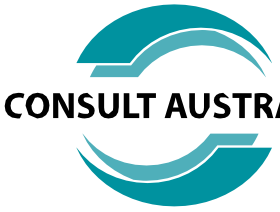
- Design review is limited to assessing compliance, not preference-based engineering or optioneering and preferably is undertaken once within the defined timeframe.
- Compliance related comments reference the relevant contractual, technical or specification requirements.
- Review participants and the matters upon which they can comment are clearly defined before reviews commence. Comment volumes are actively managed, with clear limits on relevance and scope, and an assessment of validity.
- Comments from reviewers clearly describe an identified issue and are actionable.
- Client feedback that goes beyond compliance is treated as a potential scope or requirement change and managed transparently.
- Clients manage and are actively engaged throughout the design review process and set clear expectations for all reviewers.
- The number of reviewers and review rounds is proportionate to design risk and complexity.

Principle 5: Digital collaboration is the default

High quality reviews can be supported by appropriate systems, processes and technology. They allow collaboration, traceability and enforce accountability. Digital applications and tools can enable efficient and meaningful design review including collaboration, continuous information sharing and collaboration.

What good looks like in practice

- Digital tools must reinforce and align with processes and systems to enable accountability and avoid waste.
- Digital platforms are used as a standard to manage design review development, review, comments and close out.
- Digital tools support transparency, traceability, version control and efficient collaboration across all parties. This includes supporting active comment management, identification of non-compliances and tracking schedule impacts.
- Digitalisation complements project team collaboration to deliver on the shared accountability for meeting design milestones.



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