design without designers

why democratising design is harder than we admit

sdingov 2026

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perago nesta

perago



omar idris

head of design

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andy marsden

design lead

this is a live discussion

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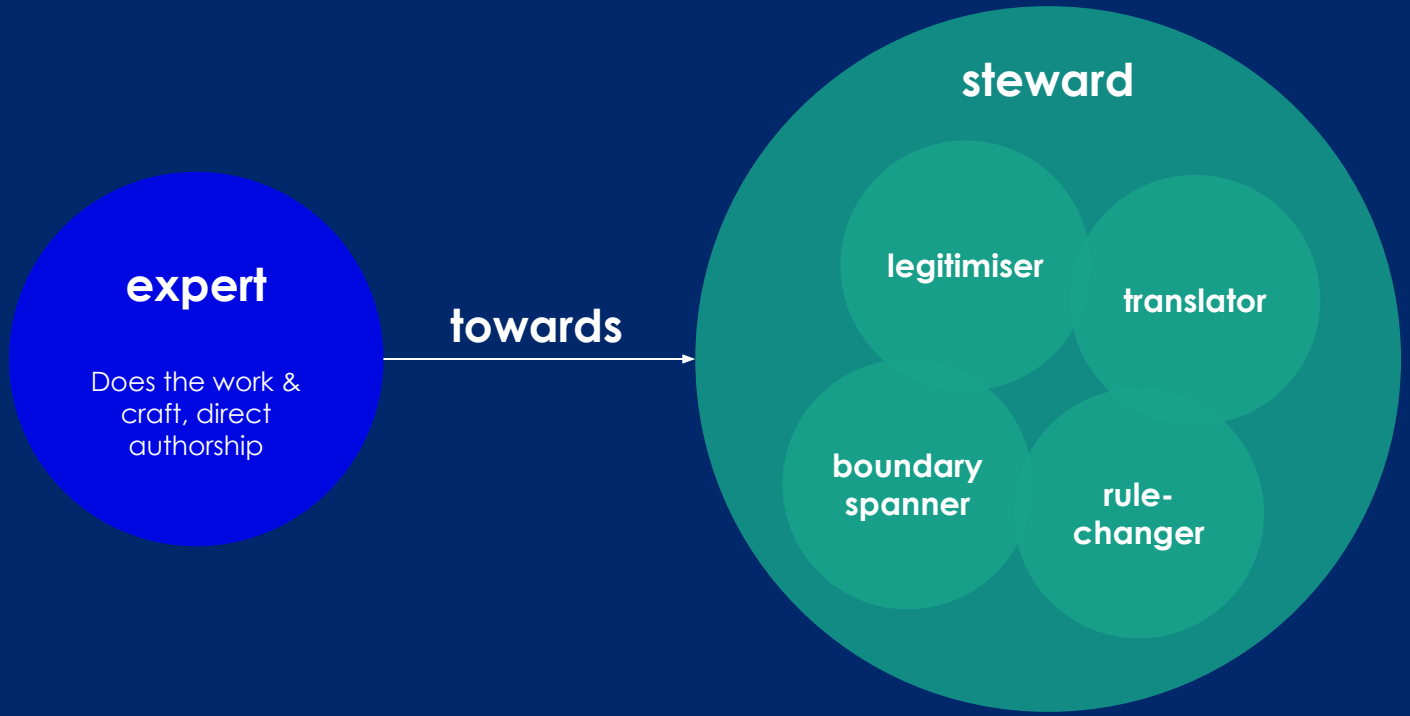

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so why now?

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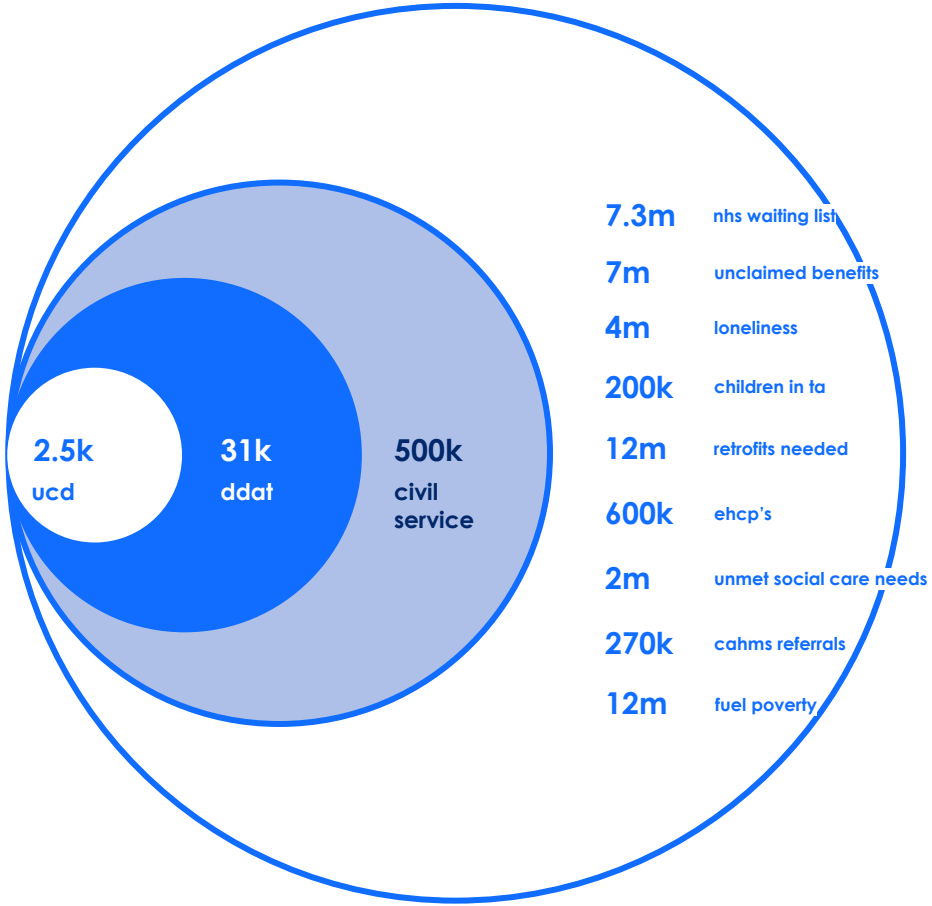

there will never be enough of us…

…and there are lots of complex problems in our complex world

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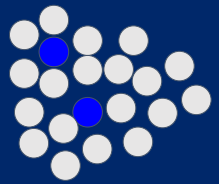
organisation



network



system



= those doing design
= expert designers

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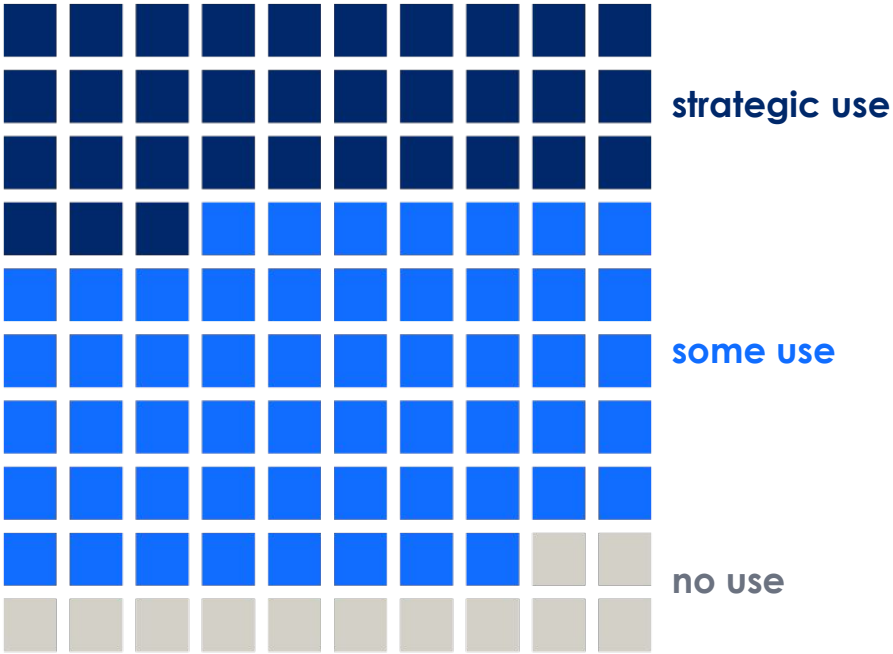
but we know democratisation is already happening…

so how we steward this is even more important when ‘everyone is a designer’

Design use across Local Government



Design Council, Public Design Beyond Central Government, 2025

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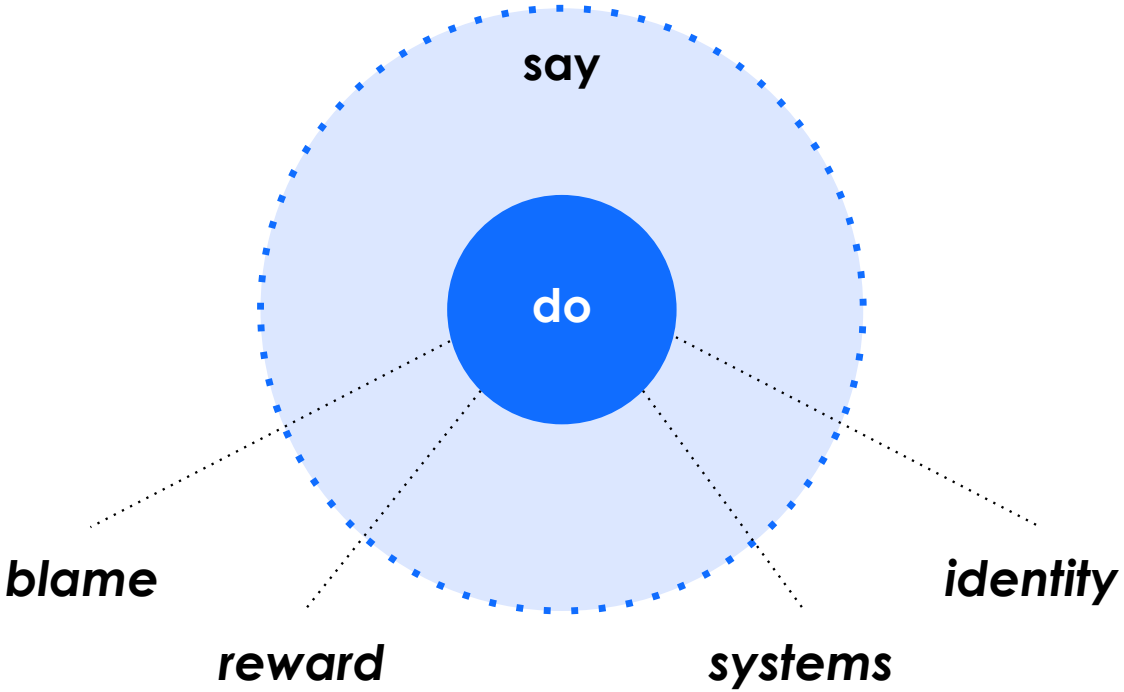
but there's a tension

we say democratise but we often still behave like owners



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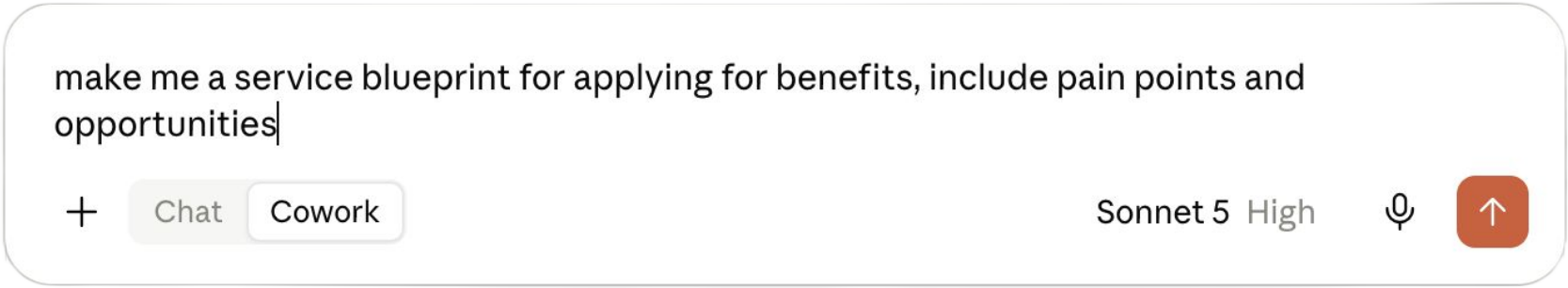
…or something else?



so what does democratising design mean to us?

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democratising does not equal deprofessionalising

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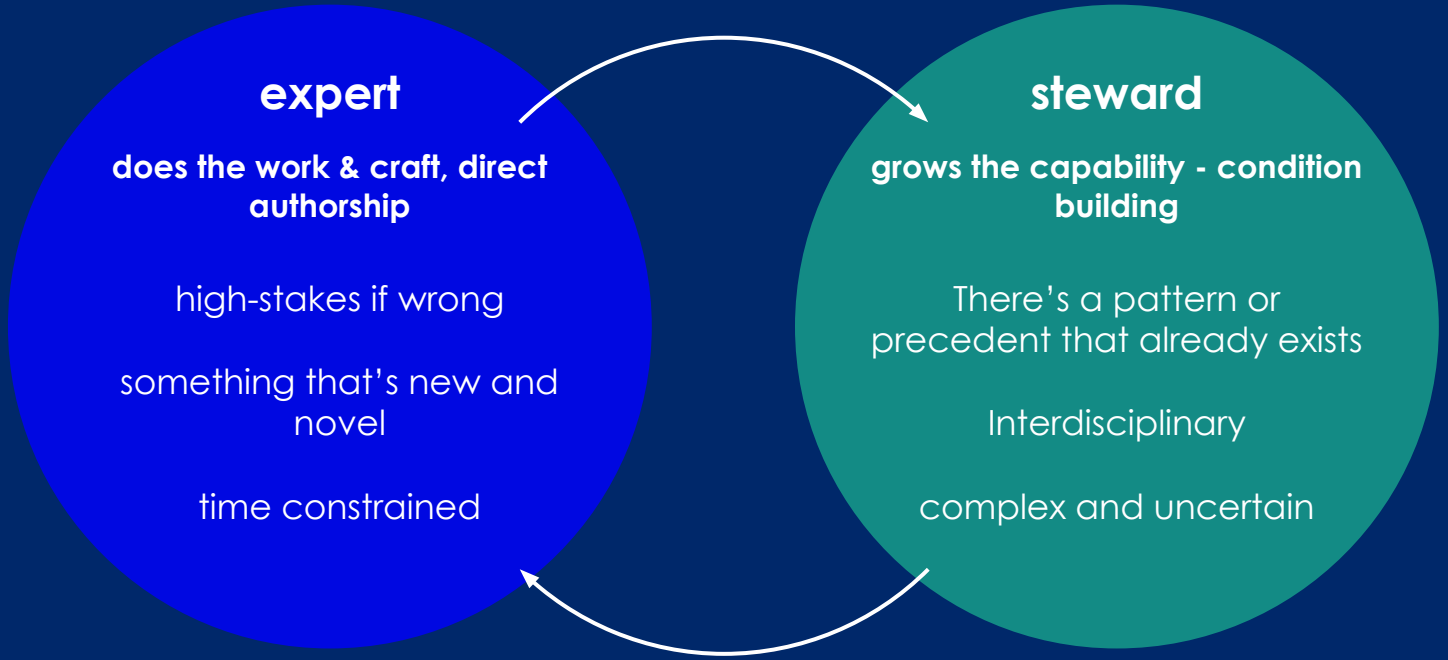

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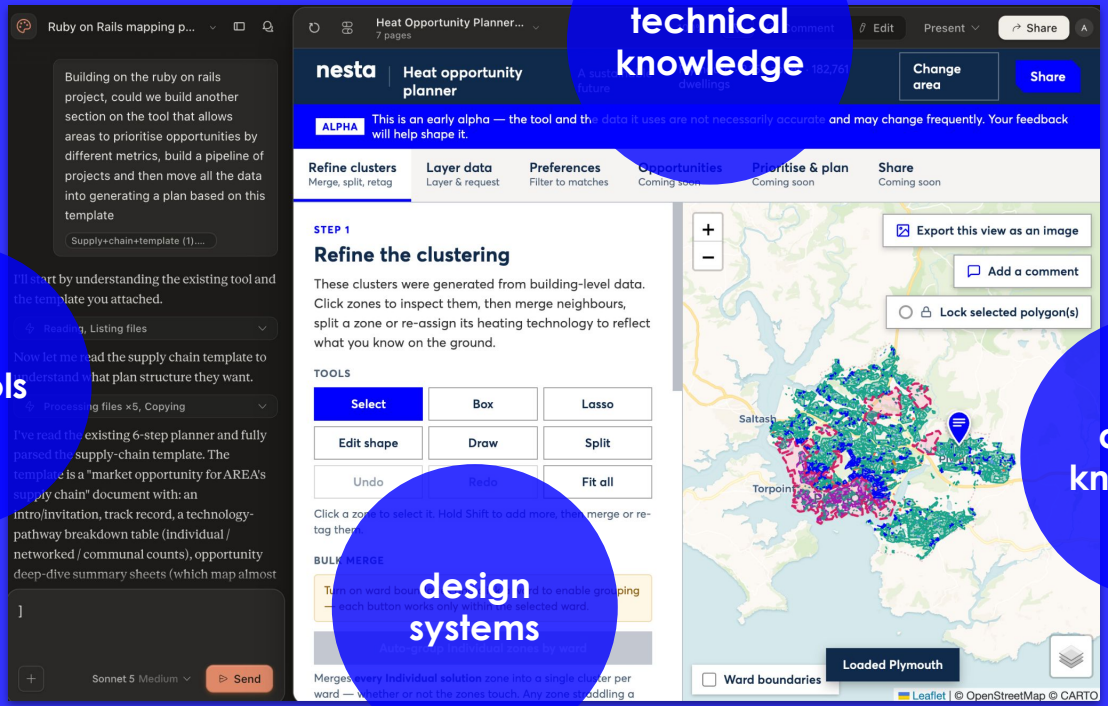
expert

technical knowledge

new tools

design systems

domain knowledge



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steward

to be a steward we may have to let go of

direct authorship - the credit of having made the thing → *legitimiser*

the pleasure of making things, there's no beautiful case-study slide for a funding formula, procurement framework or governance framework → *rule-changer*

fully belonging to one tribe, applying design processes across contexts. → *boundary spanner*

moving between logics and world views so people can make better decisions → *translator*

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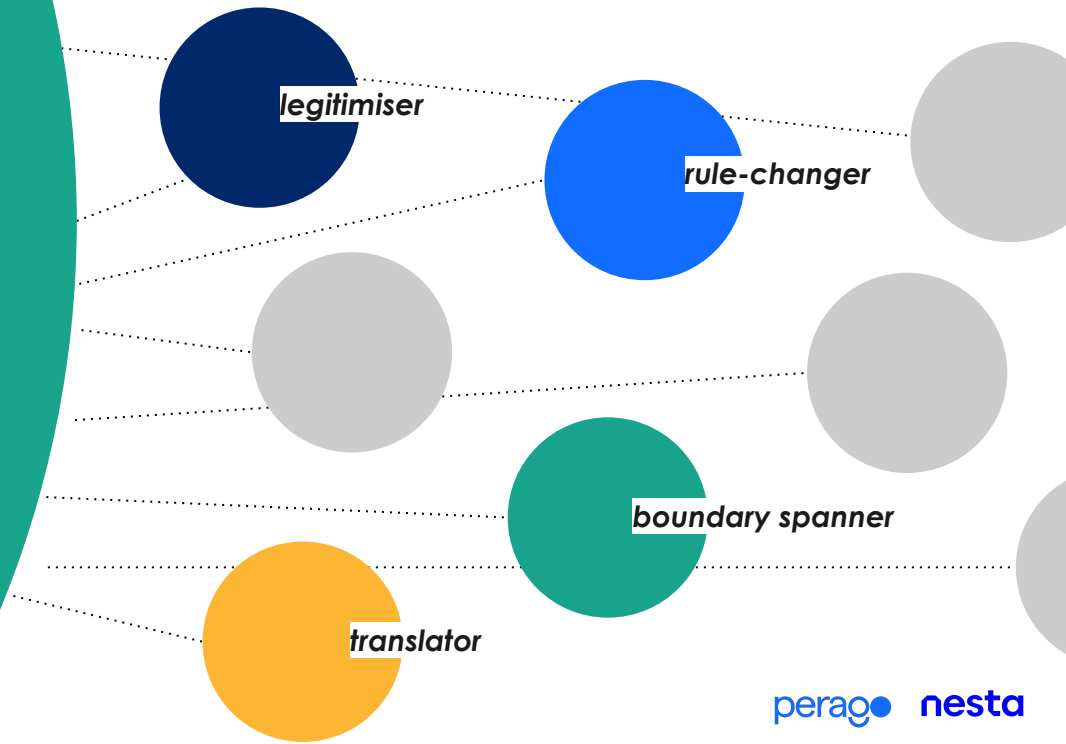
steward shows up in some unexpected ways

steward



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legitimiser

- sometimes the job isn't design but it's making it safe for someone else to try
- reframing what design is for - from fixing forms to reimagining relationships between citizens and government



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rule-changer

- the backstage of a blueprint is a rule, waiting to be redesigned
- these rules are usually designed but not necessarily on purpose
- some of the biggest levers rarely look like design: a funding formula, a procurement clause, a metric
- how do we make sure we continue to follow the line from service level insight through to actual rule changing



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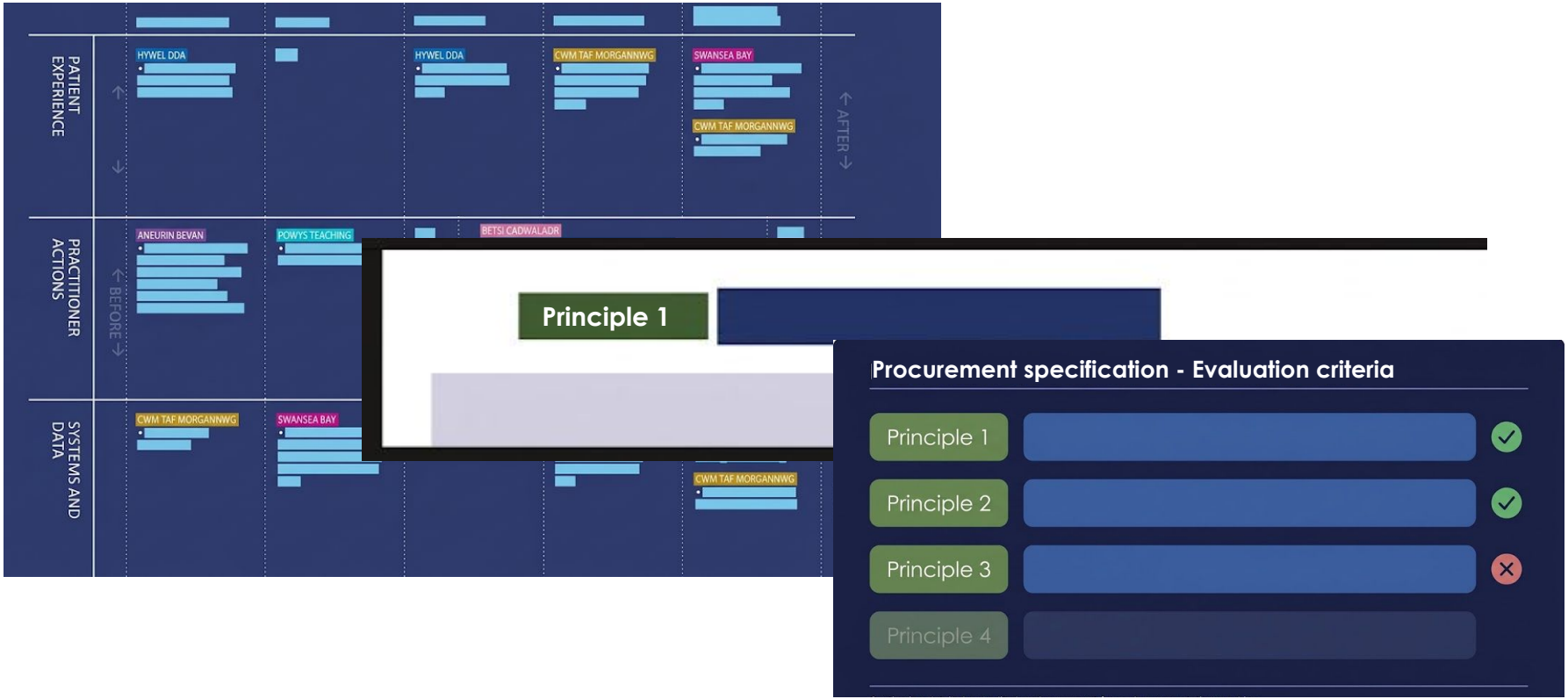
rule-changer



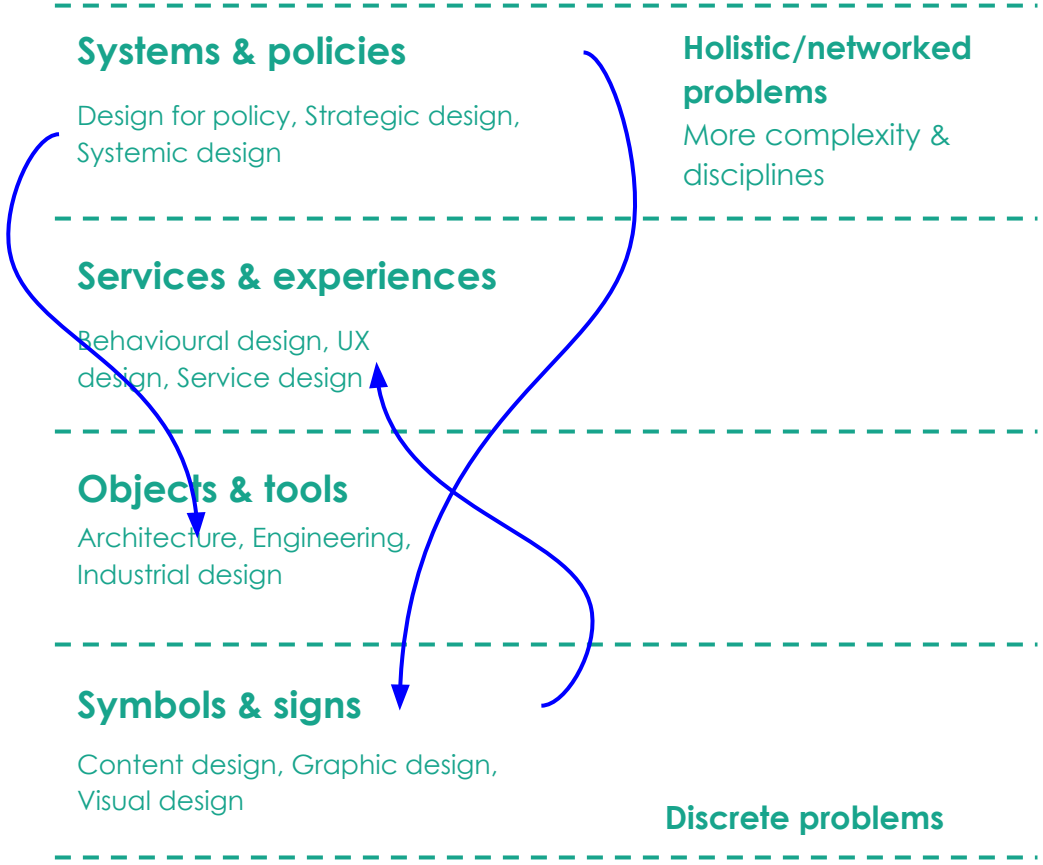
boundary spanner

we have great traction in design across the public sector, with an increasing appreciation for the value.

design is still defined by a particular outcome

where design and designers can supercharge impact is by working across boundaries, switching between scales and outcomes.

holding trust between divides



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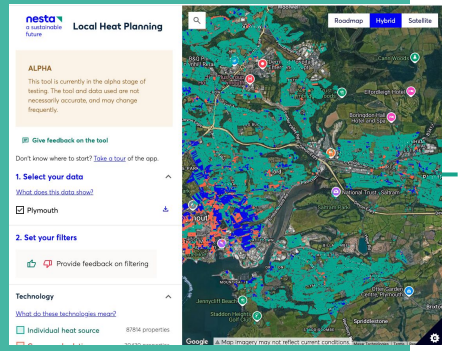
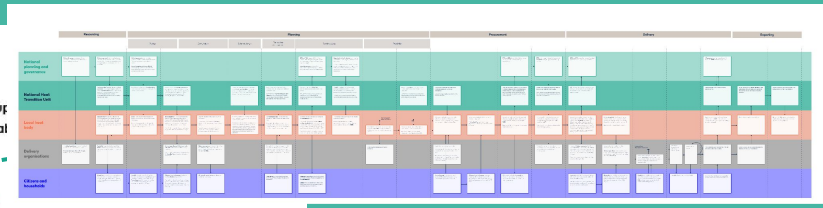
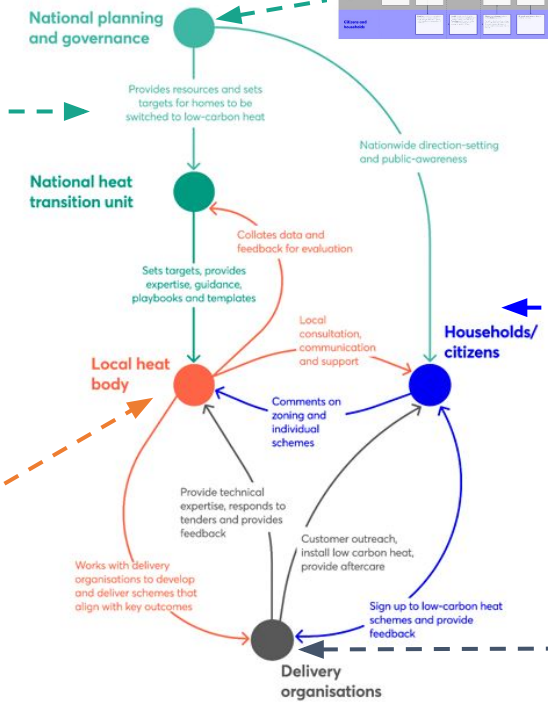




This diagram shows how these five different group
responsibilities to each other and how they collal



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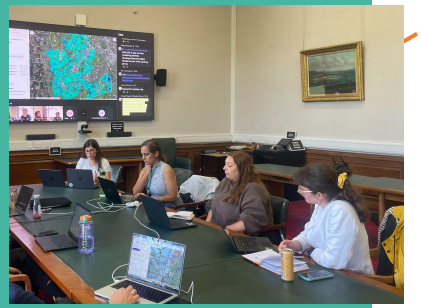



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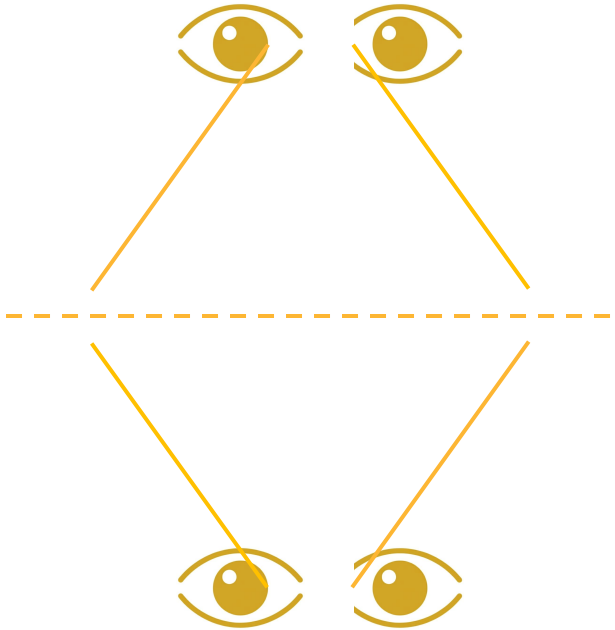
translator

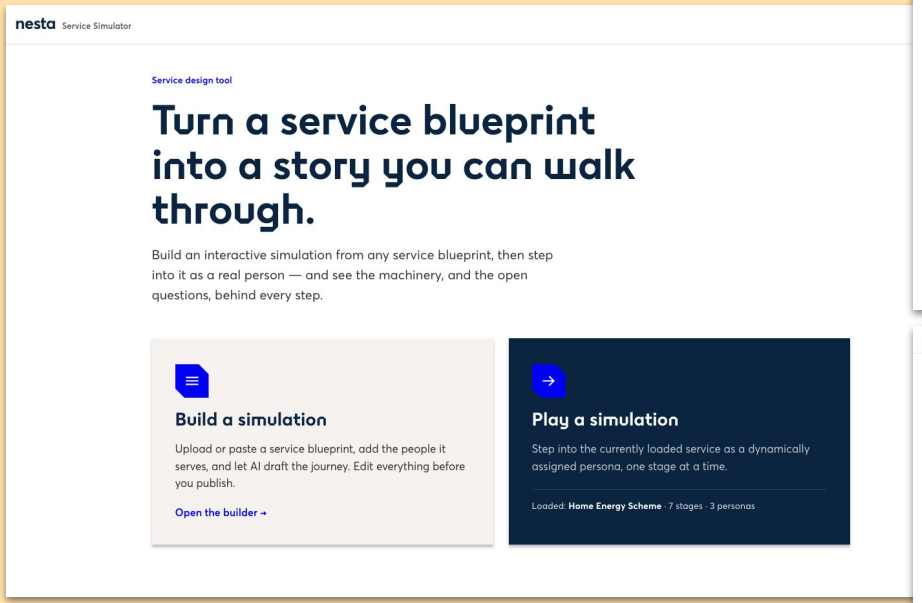
our toolkit is uniquely suited to communicating from communication design, through to prototyping.

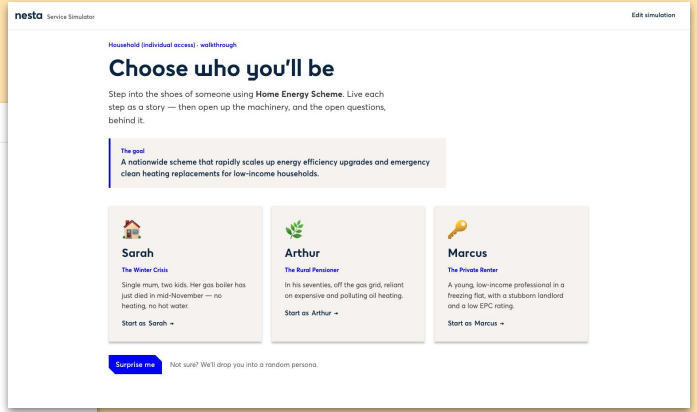
as public design matures we must apply these methods across scales.

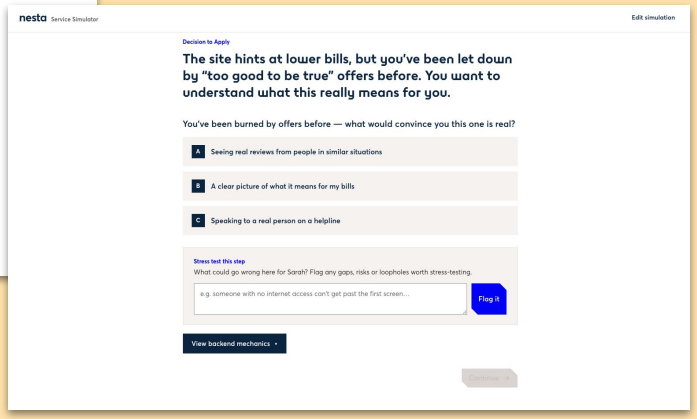
for example, translating in depth user research, to high level policy asks and political framing embedding empathy.



translator







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democratising design isn't giving it away

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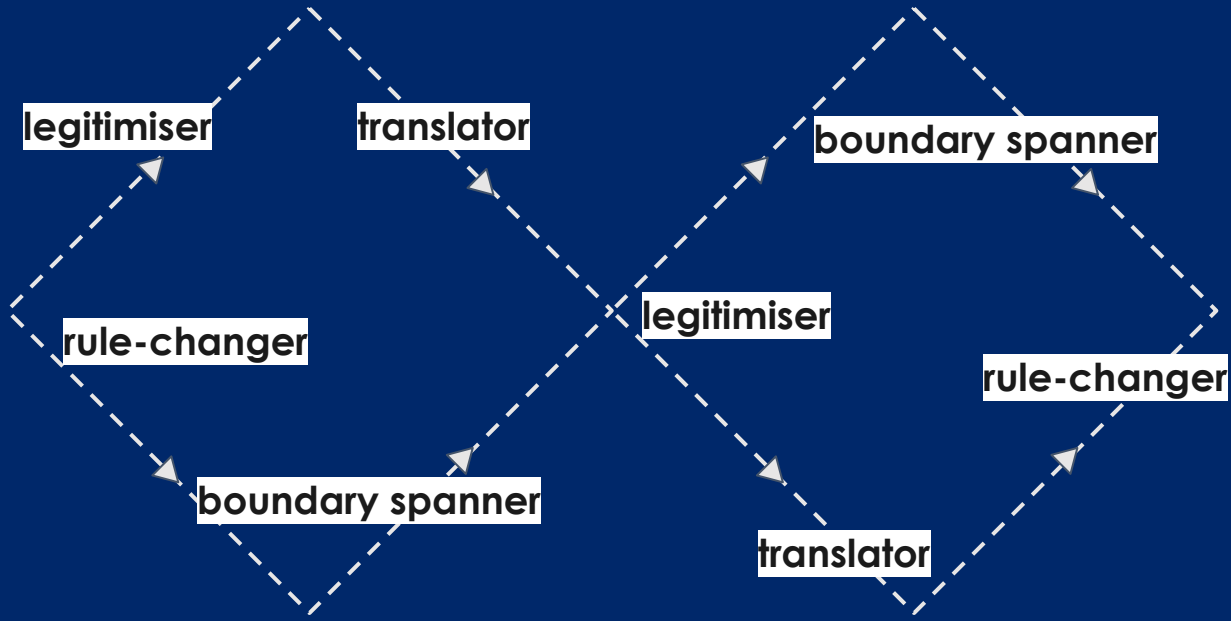
using our expertise to figure out what role we should play, when, and why?



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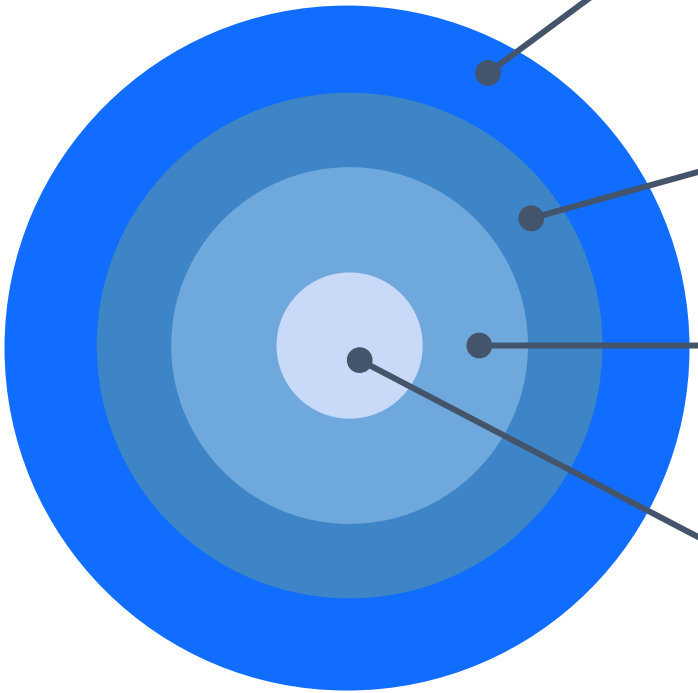
what can we do to make this happen?



system / ask for forgiveness, and exemplify system level design wherever possible.

organisational / create the guardrails (design systems, workflows) for others to build confidence in design

practice / consider how we reward designers as stewards, what do we expect to see in portfolios?

individual / feel comfortable releasing control, introducing design process by stealth

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how much do you relate to these roles?

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thank you

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