

How to develop a design brief

Always start a new project with a clear brief.

A good design brief provides the wider project team – consultants, client, and collaborators – with a common touchstone and clear direction for a project. A poor brief can inhibit useful investigations, provide unclear direction, waste time and money, and limit the overall quality of a project.

Investing time and expertise to develop a good brief will pay dividends in the longer term.

A design brief communicates your intention for a project: why you are undertaking the project, your objectives, priorities, requirements in detail and your time frame.

As a client, getting the project design brief right is one of your main responsibilities. Your brief will become an essential guide for the whole project team and will substantially influence the design process and the quality of the design outcomes.

This advice assumes you are writing a design brief for a multidisciplinary project team, but it also applies to writing a brief for a particular consultant or contractor. Identify who you are writing the brief for, and tailor it accordingly. It is vital the person or organisation responding to your brief understands the project and its context, as well as your objectives and requirements.

As you are developing your brief, focus on describing your requirements without pre-empting a design solution. You will get better value if the brief is open to others' approaches and solutions – these may not be apparent when a project is conceived.

A good brief will cover the following aspects:

Project scope and definition

- Define the problem by outlining the case for change. Focus on the central issues as well as the opportunities and challenges the project team will be expected to address.

- Include and clearly articulate initial objectives, which are framed to address the problem.
- Clearly articulate the scope of the project – what it does and doesn't include, as well as any assumptions that need to be considered.
- Describe the project context – identify all the considerations which will affect the project.
- Focus on desired outcomes, but don't prescribe a solution.
- Require a "return brief". Once they have been engaged, ask the design team to communicate their understanding of the project. This could identify new opportunities or challenges within the project scope.
- Balance specific deliverables with opportunities for innovation.
- Provide guidance on options, if they are required.

Other parties

- Develop your brief through collaboration and tailored engagement with key stakeholders.
- Align the brief with the higher-order policies or strategies of stakeholders and authorities.
- Allow the project team to develop a method for undertaking the project.
- Clearly identify the lead discipline, as well as other specialist disciplines that will provide input into the project.
- Indicate the level of design expertise and experience suitable for the complexity of the project.

GANSW ADVISORY NOTE

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Background information

- Identify other important projects and policies that form the background and context for the project, as well as any previous studies and their status, and how this project relates to them.
- Where applicable, suggest a review of the background studies to identify if there are any gaps, or where further investigations may be required.

Program

- Identify the key milestones which will influence the program, and their purpose.
- Structure the project into clear stages.
- Establish realistic time frames for completion of each stage of work, including hold points for engagement and review by stakeholders and the client.
- Specify the deliverables required to respond to your brief, and when they are required.

Fees and tendering

- Provide details on upper fee limits.
- Include contract conditions, including details about payment of fees.
- If the brief is for a competitive tender, include the conditions of tendering, as well as the criteria for tender assessment.

Diagrams, maps and images

Consider the use of concept diagrams to explain aspects of the project such as governance structure, process or staging of

work, relationships to other projects or any other aspects that will help explain the project context and intentions.

Always include a map or aerial photograph identifying the study area.

Procurement

The procurement of consultants should be considered as part of the project scope definition and the brief development. These will influence the requirements for competitive tendering. For further information, refer to GANSW advisory note: How to select consultants

How can GANSW help?

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW (GANSW 2017) includes clear objectives relating to good design outcomes and design processes. These articulate NSW Government policy for good design of the built environment, and provide a strong foundation for project-specific briefs.

GANSW can work with you to:

- understand your specific requirements and tailor your project brief to meet these needs
- align your brief with the objectives and principles set out in Better Placed
- arrange peer review to help you fine tune your brief.

We can also provide ongoing guidance throughout your project to ensure your processes and outcomes meet the requirements set out in your brief.

Further information

For more information see Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW (GANSW 2017) available on the GANSW website: ga.nsw.gov.au

Government Architect NSW

GANSW provides design leadership in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. In this role, GANSW works across government, the private sector and the community to establish policy and practice guides for achieving good design. GANSW provides strategic advice across design, planning and development to support good policy, programs, projects and places.

Contact GANSW

GANSW makes every effort to keep its advice up to date. From time to time we will release new versions of these advisory notes. For further advice, or if you think there is information missing, please contact GANSW.

Ben Hewett
Deputy Government Architect

Jane Threlfall
Principal Urban Designer

02 9860 1464

government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au

Department of Planning and Environment
320 Pitt St Sydney NSW 2000