

# Design review

## Principles and practice



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advise developers and architects, persuading  
them to put people's needs first. We show  
public sector clients how to commission  
buildings that meet the needs of their users.  
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more from their buildings and spaces. Advising,  
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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Working together on design review</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 1</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Supporting good design</b>	
Chapter 1 The case for good design	
Chapter 2 Ten principles of design review	
Chapter 3 The role of design review in the planning system	
Chapter 4 Design review panels at different spatial scales	
<b>Section 2</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Panels in practice</b>	
<b>Local design review panel</b>	
London Borough of Newham	
<b>Local design review panel</b>	
Sheffield Sustainable Development and Design Panel	
<b>Sub-regional design review panel</b>	
Urban Vision North Staffordshire	
<b>Regional design review panel</b>	
Places Matter! Northwest Design Review	
<b>Regional design review service</b>	
Yorkshire and Humber	
<b>Panel member</b>	
Charles Crawford	
<b>Scheme promoter</b>	
David Wilson Homes North West	
<b>Panel chair</b>	
Peter Carolin, Cambridge Design Review Panel	
<b>Local planning authority</b>	
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	
<b>Section 3</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>How to get the best out of design review</b>	
Chapter 5 How to set up a design review panel	
Chapter 6 How to appoint and train panel members	
Chapter 7 How to organise a panel meeting	
<b>Further information</b>	<b>48</b>

# Foreword

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Every year plans for thousands of new developments are submitted to local authorities. Design review panels – small multidisciplinary groups of leading professionals offering detailed design advice – provide an independent, expert assessment of significant architectural proposals and are now an essential part of the planning process. Design review is a tried and tested method of promoting good design and is a cost-effective and efficient way to improve quality. Panels operate across England at national, regional and local level and help councillors, planners, clients and designers to improve design quality and better meet the needs of their communities and customers.

CABE, the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Landscape Institute have come together to produce *Design review: principles and practice*. It is aimed at anyone who is engaged in setting up or managing design review panels and anyone who receives their advice. The publication provides authoritative advice for design review panels of all types to help them to operate in a consistent way, working to the 10 principles for good design review set out on page 9.

Good design has the power to transform people's quality of life. Good-quality places must not be seen as a luxury. Well-designed homes, streets, parks, workplaces, schools and hospitals can all have a positive impact on our lives and our communities. Harnessing the power of good design can create a built environment of inspiring places and space as well as buildings.

Design review can play a vital role in helping local authorities meet their statutory duty under the Planning Act 2008 'to have regard to the desirability of achieving good design'. Well-managed design review panels can help to achieve high standards. Design review enables planners to access high-quality, independent advice from a range of design professionals. It will help applicants and local authorities to both promote good design and filter out poor design.

**Richard Simmons**  
Chief executive, CABE

**Martin Willey**  
President, RTPI

**Neil Williamson**  
President, LI

**Ruth Reed**  
President, RIBA  
from September 2009

**Sunand Prasad**  
President, RIBA  
until September 2009

# Working together on design review

Design review can justifiably claim to be a success story. Three years ago, CABI published the *How to do design review*, which explained how to set up and run a design review panel. Since then, the number of design review panels has multiplied. They are now available at national level, in most regions and often at a local level too. As at November 2008, 81 panels were up and running in England, nearly three quarters of them set up over the previous five years.

Two important steps have been taken to broaden the advice on how to do design review. The first is joint working between CABI and the professional institutes whose members are most closely involved in design review panels at every level: the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA); and the Landscape Institute (LI). This publication is therefore the joint advice of CABI, as the government's statutory advisor on architecture, urban design and public space, and the professional bodies that set standards of practice for the majority of panel members and for the professionals who act on the recommendations of the panels.

The second is to draw on evidence from the first survey of design review panels in England commissioned by CABI in 2008. This has provided statistics not previously available. Interviews with 345 local planning authorities (96 per cent of the total), usually with the head of planning or head of development control, revealed that:

- 91 per cent of local planning authorities felt there were benefits in involving design panels within the development management process
- the main perceived benefits were the panels' objectivity, independence, knowledge and expertise
- 88 per cent had access to panel reviews at a local, sub-regional or regional level.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since this survey, two additional regional panels have been established: the North East in June 2009 and Yorkshire and the Humber in October 2009. This means that nearly 100 per cent of local authorities will have access to a panel.

Design review is a tried and tested method of promoting good design and is a cost-effective and efficient way to improve quality



© Steve Hall Photography



The research also included interviews with 56 managers of design review panels. They were mostly positive about the process but also revealed some operational issues. For example, only 32 per cent of panels have a set annual budget and many local planning authorities and their panels do not have clear terms of reference or processes to manage conflicts of interest.

*Design review: principles and practice* addresses shortcomings in existing design review panels but also seeks to increase the impact of design review and to ensure that panels are providing good-quality design advice. This publication is intended to be an authoritative presentation of good practice for those who manage the business of panels, those who participate in them and those who use their recommendations to guide decision-making.

*Design review: principles and practice* has three sections:

- **Section 1 Supporting good design** sets out the network of design review panels and how they can support good design through the planning process. This section is aimed at anyone, such as developers, architects and planners, who needs to understand how the network of design review panels fits together and how schemes are assigned to a panel.
- **Section 2 Panels in practice** has case studies of design review panels that will be useful to anyone wanting more information on the different types of panel operating or to anyone thinking of setting up a panel.
- **Section 3 How to get the best out of design review** is aimed at anyone thinking of setting up a new panel, whether as manager or member of an intended panel, or as a representative of an associated planning authority or other public agency. It can help them decide whether they have the capacity and funding to set up a panel and what the options might be to gain access to one. For anyone already involved, it offers clear principles on how to upgrade and reinvigorate the panel to ensure best practice.

This guidance relates specifically to design review in England. It promotes consistently high and principled standards for all panels at whatever level. Improving the quality of the design review process will help ensure that panels can objectively and effectively appraise the design aspects of schemes and so help improve their quality. CABE, the RTPI, the RIBA and the LI are all strongly committed to these aspirations.



# Section 1

## Supporting good design



This section looks at the role of design review in achieving good design through the planning system. It covers:

- why good design matters and how design review can help achieve it
- the 10 principles of design review
- the role of design review in the planning system
- how design review operates at different scales.

# Chapter 1

## The case for good design

Our surroundings set the framework for our lives – the homes we live in, schools we learn in, parks we play in, stations we travel through, hospitals we are referred to and routes we walk. The urban environment has an impact on millions of people on a daily basis. The places we build must therefore be sound, efficient, constructed to last, uplifting and inspiring. These qualities can be assessed during the development of a scheme through design review, particularly in the early stages before a planning application is made. Design review can help ensure that good design principles are embedded and the penalties of poor design are avoided.

By good design we mean:

- buildings and spaces that are fit for purpose and will last
- development that is in the right place and responds to its surroundings
- places that are designed for all to use and promote community inclusion and cohesion
- proposals that respond to environmental imperatives and minimise their carbon footprint
- schemes that create spaces and places that people will enjoy and be proud of.

In discussing good design we don't mean:

- buildings in any particular style – decision makers such as planning committees have to deal with proposals in a variety of styles and panels need to be able to advise on whether design is good whatever the style
- extravagant schemes – good design means smart thinking about efficient use of resources and direct response to needs
- inappropriate gestures – all development is encouraged to mesh with larger planning and local objectives.

Design review panels offer a well-proven way to discuss these often complex issues objectively. Since the Royal Fine Art Commission started reviewing schemes in 1929, design review has been increasingly recognised in the planning system as a powerful way of assessing major schemes. This role was transferred to CABI in 1999 and since then the process has become more transparent and its remit more extensive. At the other end of the scale, for over 30 years local authorities across the country have run architects' panels, often supported by the RIBA, who produced their own guidance document. Design review is now recognised as a well-tested way to bring experienced design advice into the planning process and contributes to the commitment set out in the government's strategy *World class places*<sup>2</sup> to strengthen advisory support on design quality for local authorities, the wider public sector and developers. We cannot afford the enduring cost of poor design, and design review is an effective way of avoiding mistakes before they are built.

<sup>2</sup> *World class places*: The Government's strategy for improving quality of place, HM Government, 12 May 2009; [www.tinyurl.com/nua67r](http://www.tinyurl.com/nua67r)







**Design review delivers public benefit by improving the quality of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design, including the design of streets and public spaces**

## How design review secures good design

Design review delivers public benefit by improving the quality of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design, including the design of streets and public spaces. The key features of the process are that it:

- is conducted by an independent panel of experts – practitioners with current experience in design and development, a track record of good design in their own projects and the skills to appraise schemes objectively
- advises and empowers decision makers on how to improve design quality so as to meet the needs of their communities and customers
- can support decision makers in resisting poorly designed schemes
- exists to offer comments on schemes that will lead to their improvement, not to redesign them.

Design review works because it:

- gives decision makers confidence that they have had the best possible independent advice on design quality
- offers support and encouragement for good design
- identifies weak and inappropriate schemes at an early stage, when radical design changes can be made with relatively little waste of time and effort
- can bring a breadth and depth of experience beyond that of the project team or planning authority
- offers expert views on complex issues such as sustainability
- puts schemes in perspective and sees the bigger picture
- can question the design brief or site assumptions
- offers opportunities to those observing design reviews for continued learning, particularly on how to assess schemes for good design.

**Six main groups involved in the development process can benefit directly from design review**



Six main groups involved in the development process can benefit directly from design review. They are:

**Local planning authorities** – when they consider schemes before or during the formal planning application process. Design review:

- enables local planning authorities to demand high-quality, inspiring buildings and public spaces from developers and their design teams
- supports them in approving high-quality and innovative design
- supports them in resisting weak or inappropriate designs and gives them a practical means of understanding where improvements need to be made
- develops and fosters confidence about design within planning services if they can be encouraged to participate fully in the process.

**Developers** – both public and private sector clients, when they consider how well their design team is doing and whether they need to improve the schemes they intend to develop. The process can:

- reduce the risk of an unexpected decision on design and avoid costly mistakes when developers seek a review before making a planning application
- increase satisfaction in the end-users of the completed scheme
- help developers assess whether there are costly design elements in a scheme that add little to the overall quality of the environment.

**Project design teams** – project architects, urban designers, landscape architects and other design professionals. The process can:

- help them with constructive, impartial advice from fellow professionals
- help them to examine the design of a project in the round
- support good design intentions
- pinpoint any weaknesses
- bring a fresh, external viewpoint that can spot design issues which the project designers may be too close to see.

**The Homes and Communities Agency** – the biggest regeneration and development agency in Europe with a statutory remit to contribute to good design in England. It is committed to using national and regional design review panels for its schemes.

**Regional development agencies** – funders of regional panels over the last five years that have supported the role of good design in achieving their aspirations to provide sustainable development.

**Local authority clients** – play an important role in driving up design quality. Design review can support them in delivering high-quality schools, libraries and other public buildings.

# Chapter 2

## Ten principles of design review

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For design review to benefit everyone involved in development and planning it has to offer consistently high standards in the management of the panel and, most importantly, the quality of the advice it offers. These high standards can be distilled into ten principles.

### Good design review is:

- 1 Independent** It is conducted by people who are separate from the scheme promoter and decision maker and it protects against conflicts of interest.
- 2 Accountable** It records and explains its advice and is transparent about potential conflicts of interest.
- 3 Expert** It is conducted by suitably trained people who are experienced in design and know how to criticise constructively. Review is usually most respected where it is carried out by professional peers of the project designers, as their standing and expertise will be acknowledged.
- 4 Advisory** It does not make decisions but acts as a source of impartial advice for decision makers.
- 5 Accessible** Its findings are clearly expressed in terms that decision makers can understand and use.
- 6 Proportionate** It is used on projects whose significance warrants public investment in providing design review at national, regional and local level, as appropriate. Other methods of appraising design quality should be used for less significant projects.
- 7 Timely** It takes place as early as possible in the life of a design because this saves the most time and it costs less to make changes. If a planning application has already been made, review happens within the timeframe for considering it. It is repeated when a further opinion is required.
- 8 Objective** It appraises schemes in the round according to reasoned, objective criteria rather than the stylistic tastes of individual panel members.
- 9 Focused on outcomes for people** It asks how this building or place can better meet the needs of the people using it and of everyone who is affected by it.
- 10 Focused on improving quality** It constructively seeks to improve the quality of architecture, urban design, landscape, highway design and town planning.

# Chapter 3

## The role of design review in the planning system

### Planning authorities and their responsibilities

Government planning guidance endorses design quality as an essential part of creating sustainable places. The planning system provides the means to insist on good design, not just in conservation areas and particularly attractive places, but everywhere. Securing good design is now central to good planning. *Planning policy statement 1: Delivering sustainable development* (PPS1) states that: 'High-quality and inclusive design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process.' It makes clear that local planning authorities should reject poor designs. This is reinforced in PPS3: Housing and the Planning Act 2008. The Planning Act states that regional spatial strategies and local development documents must have regard to the desirability of achieving good design.

The central players in the development management process are the local planning authorities set up for each county, borough, district or unitary authority in England – a total of 388 in 2008. When considering each new development proposal, local planning authorities cover wider planning matters, such as density, traffic planning, utility supply and pollution. These considerations are managed by professional staff and democratically decided on by elected council members at planning committee meetings.

Local development plans form the basis for the strategies and policies that will be considered when assessing planning applications and these should stress the importance of quality places and good design. Using the planning system effectively to create the conditions for better design requires positive management, meaningful collaboration and the right skills.

### Design review and planning

Design review panels can have a significant impact on the statutory process of development management. They can support and advise local authorities on design issues through the objective expertise provided by the panel members. Their official role in this process is as non-statutory consultees. This means that local planning authorities can seek their advice but are not legally required to consult them. CABE, though, has a specific statutory power to conduct design review.<sup>3</sup> All design review comments should be viewed as a material consideration by the local planning authority.

The role of design review in the planning process has been confirmed by CLG in two letters to local planning authorities. The first was a letter from the Chief Planner at CLG in December 2006<sup>4</sup> reminding local authorities of the circumstances under which significant schemes should be submitted to CABE for review. The letter also noted the establishment of regional design review, the need to maintain CABE's role to review schemes of national significance, the need to avoid duplication of review, and the referral of schemes from CABE to regional panels. A second letter from the Chief Planner in February 2009 encouraging planning authorities to achieve a high-quality built environment says: 'Local authorities are encouraged to

3 Set out in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005

4 [www.tinyurl.com/lnrg6a](http://www.tinyurl.com/lnrg6a)



consult CABE about significant schemes using the Design Review service, both at the masterplanning and application stages. Guidance can be obtained from the CABE website. The 2006 Chief Planner's letter is still current and we encourage local authorities to consult CABE and the regional design review panels at both the pre-application and application stages.'

Regional panels and CABE therefore have a recognised role in the planning process that sets them apart from local and other types of panel.

Building upon the government's requirement for a responsive and efficient planning system, the pre-application stage of the planning process is the best time to take advantage of design review. It can help applicants to identify the design aspects of schemes that should be improved and it can help the authority resolve design issues before the application is submitted. Applicants want a favourable decision quickly and the fastest approvals can be given when they bring forward high-quality proposals. This is more likely to happen if the applicant has discussed the proposal with local planning officers and has had the benefit of an independent assessment through the design review process.

Design review can underpin decision makers' support for well-designed proposals during the formal planning application process. The panel can also provide the backing required for attaching conditions to an approval to improve design, or to refuse a badly designed development proposal.

Looking to the future, the process gives planning officers the chance to hear expert advice on design and the opportunity to develop their skills and gain confidence. This will benefit the local authority through planners improving their design skills.

Panels often work in parallel with other sources of design advice available to local planning authorities. Advice may come from professional design advisors working in their planning teams, design champions or external design consultants. Other statutory organisations such as English Heritage, and non-statutory organisations such as conservation area consultation committees' amenity groups, will also feed their views about new schemes into the development management process. Design review does not replace the need for these. However, when measured against all these other design inputs, the strength of a panel's advice lies in its independence, objectivity and ability to understand a scheme within the context of wider good practice and exemplars from further afield.

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**The strength of a panel's advice lies in its independence, objectivity and ability to understand a scheme**





**Strengthening the quality and consistency of design review panels will help ensure that each planning authority receives the best advice appropriate to the scale and significance of the scheme**

# Chapter 4

## Design review panels at different spatial scales

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An increasing number of design review panels operate at different scales. This means that anyone interested in getting a scheme reviewed needs to understand which is the appropriate panel to use. This guidance aims to ensure that all local authorities have access to appropriate design review and to clarify the role of the different panels to support greater efficiency in the allocation of schemes between them.

### Who reviews schemes?

The last few years have seen a large increase in the number and type of panels in England. The 81 design review panels identified in the 2008 CABA research operate at different scales and across diverse development sectors, reviewing schemes with differing degrees of significance. Taken as a whole, they form a tiered national network of panels and support the local planning authorities that take the legally binding decisions on schemes.

Strengthening the quality and consistency of design review panels will help ensure that each planning authority receives the best advice appropriate to the scale and significance of the scheme. First and foremost, panels need to be clear about the types of scheme they want to see and which ones need to be referred to a different type of panel. Up to 20,000 major schemes pass through the development management system every year, which means there are plenty of schemes to review. However, only a fraction of them at present<sup>5</sup> will benefit from design review. CABA's national panel, for example, reviews about 350 schemes a year. It makes sense for all panels to offer clear guidance about their role in a national framework of panels.

### The different types of panel

This publication uses a definition of a design review panel that comes from the CABA research. A design review panel should be:

- non-commercial
- able to review any scheme within a local authority boundary
  - not just conservation areas
- multidisciplinary, with built environment professional expertise
  - not simply an architectural or planning panel
- staffed by independent panel members.

Other panels are operating, including commercially or project-driven ones, and the advice in this document may or may not be applicable to them.

Design review is working at the following levels:

**National** Design review is run by CABA, which is the only body with a specific statutory power to conduct design reviews of schemes whether or not it is requested to do so. This power is set out in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. CABA is directly funded by central government.

<sup>5</sup> At time of publication





CABE's design review remit was officially defined by the government's chief planning officer in a letter of December 2006 sent to all local planning authorities. He encouraged them 'to consult CABE as early as possible on schemes that are significant in some way'.

Local authorities should contact CABE with details of proposals that are significant because of:

- their size or use
- their location
- an importance greater than their size, use or location would suggest.

CABE sets out these criteria, and the types of scheme it does not review, on its website.

Setting up a local or regional panel does not change this national role. All significant schemes should continue to be submitted to CABE and anyone can submit one. CABE will then select schemes of national significance from all over England to review. It will deal directly with the relevant planning authority, regardless of who submits the scheme. As the chief planning officer's letter pointed out, CABE staff 'are happy to advise planning authorities on whether CABE considers a particular proposal to be significant and wishes to be consulted by it'.

All design review advice is a material consideration, which means that it must be considered by the appropriate local planning authority when deciding on a planning application. However, CABE's status in reviewing schemes means that greater weight is attached to its comments. The chief planning officer's letter also says that any local authority making a decision against CABE's advice should inform CABE of the recommendation and send it a copy of the report.

**Regional** Panels operate in all of the government regions of England except London.<sup>6</sup> Regional panels are for the most part administered either by the local architecture and built environment centres or by regional centres of excellence, and they are largely funded by the regional development agencies. The CABE research found that regional and sub-regional panels tend to have more rigorous and robust procedures such as open recruitment practices, a mix of skills and evaluation of panel activities.

Regional panels were recognised as having a role in the planning process in the 2006 letter from the chief planning officer. He requested that local planning authorities, when submitting schemes to a regional design panel, should inform CABE at the same time. This would allow CABE to choose and review schemes it deemed to be of national significance. However, he also permitted CABE to refer schemes to regional panels for review where appropriate and this has been done since 2007. He reiterated this arrangement in the February 2009 letter to all chief planners.

6 At time of publication

As of October 2009, CABE is affiliated with regional design review panels. Affiliation is an opportunity to strengthen best practice in design review and ensure that design review panels are providing consistent and high-quality design advice. It commits all panels to observe 10 key principles for design review (see page 9). A scheme allocation process has been developed to ensure that schemes are reviewed at the appropriate level and to avoid duplication of review. CABE and the regional panels provide information to each other on a weekly basis to ensure that applicants to design review are clear on what level of review is appropriate.

Regional panels have the potential to coordinate design review in their region by working with their local panels to agree scheme allocation, training and sharing of panel members. Protocols between regional panels and their local panels could help this process.

As independent bodies, regional panels receive schemes from both developers and local planning authorities. They are also likely to receive schemes from the Homes and Communities Agency and education and health authorities. They usually focus on regionally significant schemes or ones that cross local authority boundaries, and they may develop expertise in thematic issues that are affecting their region such as town centres or housing types. (See case studies on pages 21 and 22.)

**Sub-regional** These panels cover several local planning areas but operate independently of the planning authorities. Of the nine sub-regional panels identified in 2008, several were set up and run by local architecture and built environment centres, in some cases at a time when no comprehensive regional panel was in place. Both local planning authorities and the development community will refer schemes for review. (See case study on page 20.)

**Local** Panels are usually managed by a single planning authority and mostly review schemes within the boundary of that authority. In 2008, 63 local panels were identified. (See case studies on pages 18 and 19.) They are usually managed within a planning department and schemes are often allocated to the panel directly. However, this can reduce the panel's independence and it is preferable if support for the panel is led corporately and is not seen as part of the planning service.

At the local level, panels should review schemes of local but not regional or national significance. This is sometimes very clear, but there will be circumstances when liaison will have to take place between local, regional and national levels to clarify who should review a scheme. (See protocols for schemes on page 16.) The planning authority or local panel should contact CABE if they are uncertain about whether they should consider a scheme to be significant. If a local authority refers a scheme to a regional panel it should still notify CABE, as set out in the letter from the chief planner.

**Shared** Shared local panels cover two or three neighbouring local planning authorities that have banded together to share costs and resources.

**Panels need clear lines of communication to ensure schemes are reviewed at the most appropriate level. Schemes should not be seen by more than one panel**

**Specialist** These concentrate on specific development sectors and include CABE's schools design panel and panels covering London 2012, Crossrail, the NHS and the Home Office. Funding often comes from the relevant government departments or agencies such as Partnerships for Schools and NHS Estates.

### How CABE works with regional panels

An affiliation between CABE and regional panels came into effect in October 2009 based on the 10 principles outlined on page 9. Terms of agreement set out the detailed arrangements. Regional panels remain independently managed but are able to use the CABE logo in relation to their design review service. This will strengthen the relationship between the national and regional panels and provide consistency of standards, efficiency in process and a clearer offer to local planning authorities and the development community. Affiliation replaces the protocol in use since 2007 and sets out how schemes will be referred between the national and regional levels.

### Protocols for schemes

Panels need clear lines of communication to ensure schemes are reviewed at the most appropriate level. The principle that all panels should abide by is that schemes should not be seen by more than one panel. This avoids duplication of time and effort and the possibility of contradictory advice that would undermine the design review process.

While CABE and regional panels have reached agreement through protocols and affiliation on scheme allocation, this has not been developed between other levels of panel. To help clarify which panel should review a scheme, procedures should be agreed for each region and set out in one or more written protocols. Regional panels could take the lead in managing this process. Formal and informal procedures need to be in place to bring in schemes and allocate them to the most suitable level. Issues to be discussed could include:

- criteria for the size and type of schemes to be referred to different levels of panels
- who decides which schemes go to which panel and how the panels will be consulted in this selection process
- the stage in the design process when schemes might be most amenable to design improvement
- how suitable expertise and procedures can be established within each local planning authority to act on panels' design advice on a scheme they have reviewed
- priorities for review, such as housing or town centres – a regional panel might develop a themed panel that can support local authorities' particular needs.

For more on allocation of schemes see *Selecting schemes for review*, page 39.



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## Section 2

# Panels in practice

This section features nine contrasting case studies of design review around the country. It offers a range of viewpoints to illustrate the issues that panels, their members, funders and users are facing. The panels featured are at different scales and different stages of development.



## Local design review panel London Borough of Newham

**Barrier Park East:** this regeneration scheme on the Thames near the Royal Docks is bringing 780 homes, 1,000m<sup>2</sup> of commercial space and 250m<sup>2</sup> of community and leisure facilities to Newham



© Allies and Morrison

**‘The design of four major schemes has been drastically improved as a result of this process’**

Newham in east London is a regeneration zone writ large. The borough is ringed by at least 25 major regeneration schemes along the Royal Docks to the south, Thames Gateway to the east and the 2012 Olympics to the west.

In November 2007, the borough council met the challenge head on by setting up a local design review panel to cover all projects over 50 homes or 1,000m<sup>2</sup> in floor area. However, it left all Olympics projects to be reviewed by a special ad hoc panel set up by CABE. As panel coordinator, it appointed an in-house project manager from its regeneration team, Jennifer Currier. ‘From the start we had political and financial support from the council,’ she says. ‘So we are able to offer our 30 panel members an honorarium and the borough planning officer, John Fannon, attends all panel meetings, though not as a panel member.’

One of the coordinator’s tasks is to seek out suitable projects for review from fellow case workers within the planning departments. As a result, most schemes are reviewed before planning application stage and, out of the 27 schemes already reviewed by the panel, as many as 12 have been seen twice. ‘The planning department follows up each scheme with a design workshop based on the report of the panel’s review,’ says Currier. ‘All the larger schemes have a design officer as well as case officer appointed to them. And four schemes have been drastically improved in design as a result of this process.’

‘It is important for all panel members to visit the sites concerned,’ says Currier. ‘On one or two sites we visited, panel members talked about the vitality of regeneration they saw around them and how this changed their minds about the schemes under review.’

## Local design review panel

### Sheffield Sustainable Development and Design Panel

**The panel attempts to review schemes at pre-application stage, when their views can have the most impact, but it does review applications too. Written comments are circulated to the attending panel members for comment and finalised by the chair before being sent out as an independent report**

The Sheffield urban design review panel was set up to reflect the central role of design quality in the city's regeneration and the importance of achieving quality places through raising the standard of urban design and the built environment.

The panel has recently undergone a review after almost three years and Sheffield city council has approved the establishment of a sustainable development and design panel from September 2009.

The panel meets 10 times a year and reviews around 30 schemes. It considers proposals of any size that may have a significant impact on the city, or establish precedent or demonstrate best practice. It is independent, composed of expert advisors from the fields of urban design, architecture, planning and economic development.

Councillor Colin Ross, cabinet member for employment, enterprise and development, explains: 'The panel will continue the very good work done over the last few years, but enhance the sustainable credentials to assist in the delivery of a key commitment of the city through promoting sustainable development, reducing carbon footprint and protecting Sheffield's unique character.'

Meetings currently take place every five weeks and about four panel

members attend each session, picked on a rotation basis from a pool of around 30 members, to ensure a cross section of expertise at each panel session. The panel is also supported by representation from English Heritage and Sheffield Conservation Advisory Group, and the council's design champion also attends as an observer.

The panel is not funded. Apart from the chair, members only receive expenses and the panel's operation depends on their immense commitment and goodwill. Council director of development services Les Sturch says: 'The panel members have all demonstrated a clear passion for Sheffield as well as committing considerable expertise and time to making the panel the success that it is, and setting the benchmark for the next few years. We are extremely grateful for their efforts.'

Site visits are seen as essential. They take place on the morning of the panel and involve members and council officers, who assist with the briefing. This has also been welcomed by applicants, who appreciate the efforts taken by the panel to understand the sites involved.

Planning staff involved in the individual projects are encouraged to attend, both to listen to the discussion and to clarify matters of fact. This has been a very valuable opportunity for planning officers to listen to an in-depth critique of projects that can succinctly outline for them the important issues.

The panel attempts to review schemes at pre-application stage, when their views can have the most impact, but it does review applications too. Written comments are circulated to the attending panel members for comment and finalised by the chair before being sent out as an independent report.

**Under scrutiny:** Sheffield's urban design review panel reviews around 30 schemes each year



© Robert Thompson, Sheffield City Council



## Sub-regional design review panel Urban Vision North Staffordshire

Urban Vision North Staffordshire is one of the longest-running design review panels in England outside CABE

Urban Vision North Staffordshire is one of the longest-running design review panels in England outside CABE. It was set up in 2004 as part of an architecture and built environment centre of the same name and it covers three local planning authorities in the Potteries area of North Staffordshire.

Three years later the regional design review service was set up by MADE, the regional architecture centre in the West Midlands. Urban Vision North Staffordshire's design review panel is a joint delivery partner of the West Midlands regional design review service and provides expert impartial advice and guidance on significant development proposals to local authorities and other key partners in the North Staffordshire sub-region. The two panels share a marketing brochure and a number of panel members as well as various protocols and procedures.

The difference between Urban Vision North Staffordshire's sub-regional panel and a shared local panel, manager Dr Darren Price maintains, is its independence from the local planning authorities. 'Our ability to focus on a relatively small "city region" means that we can help to ensure that

all of the various large and complex regeneration projects currently underway in the sub-region – including the £300 million University Quarter proposals and the extensive remodelling of the City Waterside – are considered at design review at key stages and that high-quality design is at the forefront in every stage of the process.'

The panel is largely funded by the West Midlands regional development agency. However, it also has a number of service level agreements with local authorities, receives some funding from the housing market renewal pathfinder (RENEW) and also charges developers £250 for design review before they submit planning applications. Even so, two thirds of the schemes reviewed are at pre-application stage, claims Price.

On its website, the panel has managed to pack in its terms of reference, criteria for design review, and a 42-page annual report with five case studies and a full evaluation. The evaluation includes the 10 actions most often recommended by the panel. Its two top recommendations are: 'Further investigate sustainable energy solutions' and 'Local materials, local context.'

**Big difference:** Urban Vision North Staffordshire maintains its independence from local planning authorities



© Urban Vision North Staffordshire

## Regional design review panel

### Places Matter! North West Design Review

**Regional focus:** the North West design review panel covers 42 local authorities, two county councils and the Lake District National Park Authority



© Catherine Clements and Karen Wright Photography Ltd

**The panel has been running since 2007 and has seen nearly 150 schemes from 37 local authorities, few of which have their own local panels**

The North West design review panel is part of Places Matter!, funded by the North West Development Agency with additional support from RIBA. It covers 42 local authorities in the North West including two county councils and the Lake District National Park Authority. The panel has been running since 2007 and has seen nearly 150 schemes from 37 local authorities, few of which have their own local panels.

Design review manager Charlotte Myhrum is pleased that the panel has seen schemes from 88 per cent of the authorities and is confident that it will reach the rest soon. 'Some local planning authorities use our services on a regular basis but we have much to do to reach those that haven't taken advantage of this free service,' she says.

Meetings move around the region, taking place in a different town or city each month. The shifting venues allow the panel to visit the sites of local schemes that they are reviewing, build up their knowledge and relationships within the region and provide a responsive service.

Places Matter! holds standard monthly design review panel meetings as well as one-off meetings when several schemes are submitted from one local authority or developer. It also offers design expertise to help

with the development of design briefs and on competition judging panels, intermediate assistance with scheme development and consultation services on key documents.

The panel consists of a pool of more than 40 members, made up of experts from a range of built environment related fields. Design review forms part of the Places Matter! architecture and built environment centre. It is based in central Liverpool but works across the region and is delivered with partner organisations including RIBA North West, North West Regional Development Agency, CABE and English Heritage.

Most schemes are referred by local authorities. This is the result of a consistent and proactive approach in raising awareness of the process and regularly communicating with chief executives and chief planning officers to raise the profile of regional design review with decision makers. As the reputation of the service grows, more and more schemes are being referred by architects, planning consultants and clients themselves.

'Our work is paying off as more and more people call simply to ask for advice about schemes,' says Charlotte Myhrum. 'There is definitely a growing awareness of the importance of good design.'



## Regional design review service Yorkshire and Humber

Planning staff involved in the individual projects are encouraged to attend, both to listen to the discussion and to clarify matters of fact

**Walk this way:** Castleford's footbridge has become the focus for regeneration of the West Yorkshire town



© McDowell+Benedetti

The regional design review service emerged from research in 2008 considering the existing design review panels in the Yorkshire and the Humber region. Commissioned by Integreat Yorkshire, the regional centre of excellence for regeneration and design, and Yorkshire Forward, the regional development agency, the research identified seven district panels, one sub-regional panel and two emerging or internal panels operating within the region.

The regional design review service is managed by Integreat Yorkshire and features a regional design review hub. The creation of a regional design review service is seen as a critical part of the delivery of the region's renaissance programme to transform its towns and cities. The service will:

- cover the geographical gaps in current provision
- strengthen the existing capacity for schemes from bodies using local services and satisfy latent demand
- offer a service for schemes that are significant and sensitive in terms of their regional impact.

The regional design review hub works to protect and enhance the existing design review services in the region and comprises 10 design review panel meetings a year, although more may be planned depending on demand and funding availability. It supports local panels in marketing and promoting design review as well as the development of best practice, dissemination of lessons learnt, tracking of impact and development of the expertise of existing and potential panel members in the region.

Richard Motley from Integreat Yorkshire says the regional design review service will offer 'impartial, clear advice in a proactive and non-confrontational manner, aimed at influencing and persuading submitting organisations to adopt high design standards'. This does not mean that the panel will avoid direct criticism of a scheme where it is due, but it will do so in a way that builds capacity and offers alternative ways to achieve better solutions.

## Panel member Charles Crawford



**'It increases my skills and experience. I see how others tackle design, and I enjoy it'**

A building's context, rather than the building itself, is what concerns Charles Crawford. This knowledge is drawn from experience of reviewing schemes as a member of the MADE design review panel covering the West Midlands.

'Many architects presenting schemes focus straight on the building design,' he says. 'I drag the discussion back to the broader context. By context, I mean the character and structure of the surrounding area, how people travel to and through it, visual characteristics and also economic and social factors which will affect how people use the place. It adds another dimension to the review.'

Crawford's preoccupation with context and surroundings stems from his profession as a landscape architect. As a director in the Peterborough office of LDA Design, one of the UK's largest landscape-led consultancies, he has led projects ranging from public parks to major urban extensions.

'When I joined the panel I felt fairly comfortable about reviewing schemes,' he continues. 'It's no different from reviewing design work in the office. I try to keep my comments as polite and friendly as possible. When I identify a weakness in the design, I often frame my criticism as a question. Occasionally, there's a firm exchange of views, but it's always pretty friendly.'

On other occasions, the panel is not beyond defending the architect. 'Sometimes the architect is trying to do the right thing but has a reluctant client, so design review will help the client see that accepting our comments will help achieve planning permission without delays.'

Crawford attends about three panel meetings a year, each one involving a whole day out of the office and up to four hours' travel to and from the venue. As a director of his firm, how does he justify this time out commercially? 'It increases my skills and experience, I see how others tackle design and I enjoy it.'

## Scheme promoter David Wilson Homes North West

**Positive impact:** David Wilson Homes was confident that its 300-home Silverdale Colliery scheme was good – but following design review it says it is ‘very, very good’



© David Wilson Homes

**‘We were confident that we had designed a good scheme, but with the panel’s assistance it is now a very, very good scheme’**

Perhaps unusually for a major national house builder, David Wilson Homes praises design review. In December 2008, Andrew Taylor, planning director of the company’s North West division, presented a redevelopment scheme of 300 homes for Silverdale Colliery near Newcastle-under-Lyme to Urban Vision North Staffordshire’s panel. ‘My fear was the panel could be made up of academics who would rigidly adhere to design theory rather than practicality and commercial reality. I was pleasantly surprised by the relaxed approach of the design panel, and the positive way in which they provided advice and encouragement for the scheme,’ he says.

The housebuilder approached the panel with IDP Architects and the landowner, the Homes and Communities Agency, before planning application stage at the suggestion of local authority planners.

‘We wanted something informal and hands on. The panel obliged and we all sat round the table and talked, with the make up of the panel allowing for

a free flowing discussion. The panel wanted us to create a sense of place and link the scheme into features of the landscape. Amongst other things, they suggested a visual link from an existing church spire to the elevated section of the site.

‘The panel were keen to offer advice on placemaking and legibility, together with integrating the scheme into the existing community. Various requests were made with a view to improving the scheme,’ Taylor continues. He was very happy to take on board their suggestions and amended the layout accordingly.

‘We were confident that we had designed a good scheme, but with the panel’s assistance it is now a very, very good scheme,’ concludes Taylor.

The revised scheme has recently been presented back to the design panel for their comments and it was very well received. The involvement of the design panel has had a positive impact while not delaying the submission of a planning application.

## Panel Chair

### Peter Carolin, Cambridge design review panel



**Carolin maintains the panel's independence of thought by not asking the officers' conclusions on the project under discussion**

'The biggest challenge is not running the panel meetings – it's editing the reports afterwards.' So says Peter Carolin, former professor of architecture at Cambridge University and now chair of the city's design review panel. 'Discussion is at a fast pace during the meeting, and afterwards I try to make sense of it and produce something that is fair and useful.'

A member of Cambridge's planning department manages the meeting and draws up the first draft of the reports. 'I more or less totally rewrite the summary of the points made in our discussion in what I hope is a more helpful, coherent manner, under specific headings unique to each project,' he explains. He then compresses this summary into conclusions that are printed in bold for the attention of planning committee members.

The reports are rounded off with the voting tally of panel members. The panel adopts a self-explanatory informal voting system based on traffic lights – green, amber and red.

As it operates at the local level, Cambridge design review panel is run by the city planning department and reviews projects submitted by its officers. Case officers are present throughout the review and answer occasional factual questions, but Carolin maintains the panel's independence of thought by not asking the officers' conclusions on the project under discussion.

Panel members do not receive payment, so Carolin strives not to waste their time. He aims to review each scheme in an hour, divided roughly equally between presentation, questions, and private summing up and vote. Panel reviews are attended by up to 11 members. In addition to architects, they typically include one or more planners, surveyors, landscape architects, conservationists and even historians.

'It's an extremely good balance,' he concludes. 'And I make sure every single panel member has the opportunity to speak.'



## Local planning authority Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council

**Under one roof:** Bolton One, the new £30.6 million swimming pool, health and academic centre, was design reviewed by the town's local panel



© Arc Media

**‘By bringing in architects from wide afield who can engage with the regional panel, we are pushing for better quality schemes in Bolton’**

If Jackie Whelan is proud to be the only urban design expert in Bolton Council’s planning department, she has no ambition to set up a local design review panel.

‘A local design review panel for Bolton just wouldn’t work,’ she says. ‘It would be lost in Greater Manchester. Most local professionals don’t have a broad understanding of the built environment. So a panel made up of locals would take a provincial approach to locally based issues.’

Instead, Jackie Whelan is more than happy to refer major schemes to Places Matter!, the panel that covers the whole of the North West. ‘Major buildings can last a century, so it’s important that decisions are based on the views of a group of professional people. The regional design review panel is independent of the council, so its views are taken more seriously. And from my personal point of view it gives me an opportunity to bounce ideas off other urban design professionals. This helps me keep my concepts fresh.’

In the four or five local schemes reviewed by the regional panel over the last year and a half, Jackie Whelan can claim a few successes. One scheme for an independent school was blighted by cars, which occupied ground level and pushed the new buildings up on stilts. The panel recommended that car access be curbed so that the ground level could serve as a garden for pupils and, at the same time, a better relationship could be created between new and existing buildings.

So, rather than create Bolton’s own design review panel, Jackie Whelan has a wider and more overarching ambition. ‘By bringing in architects from wide afield who can engage with the regional panel, we are pushing for better quality schemes in Bolton,’ she says.



# Section 3

## How to get the best out of design review

This section covers the process of design review and how to improve it. It covers:

- how to set up a design review panel
- how to appoint and train panel members
- how to organise a panel meeting.



# Chapter 5

## How to set up a design review panel



Design review panels will be scrutinising schemes in the public interest so they should be prepared to be public, open and transparent about the way they work

Anyone planning to set up a new design review panel or upgrade an existing one has to address several fundamental issues from the outset. What level of panel is it? How many schemes will it see in a year and how many panel meetings will that mean? What resources does it need and where can funding be found?

Getting these things right will mean that a panel can deliver reviews that will be respected by developers and design teams and recognised and used by planning authorities. This guidance is applicable to all types of panel, except where stated.

### Setting clear terms of reference

A panel's role is to give design advice. Panels are not there to be an alternative to the democratic process of development management by planning authorities and their elected committee members. It is important to be clear early on about who the advice is for and how it is provided. The panel's terms of reference should make this clear.

### Establishing a governance structure

One fundamental question is whether or not the panel should be set up as separate body from its funding agency or authority. A panel set up as a part of its funding body faces the dilemma of maintaining its independence, particularly if the funding body is also a planning authority or if it also provides capital funds for developments. Different arrangements can be set up to provide independent governance and to avoid conflicts of interest. Independent governance, through a board or steering group with powers to manage the panel, is an effective way of ensuring it is autonomous.

### Preparing for public scrutiny

Design review panels will be scrutinising schemes in the public interest so they should be prepared to be public, open and transparent about the way they work. The key principle of accountability should be addressed right from the outset. The terms of reference, governance arrangements and key principles could be laid out in its brochure or website. Existing panels should ensure that this information is readily available on request.

### Drawing up a business plan

All panels should draw up a business plan and programme of work. This is important regardless of what type of panel it is or how it is set up. Experienced review panels can offer information and advice on this, and architecture and built environment centres and local planning authorities may also be helpful. As part of the preparation, the managers of new panels should attend meetings of other panels and familiarise themselves with other parts of the design review process, such as site visits and preparatory meetings. Managers of existing panels, perhaps from a particular region or area, could meet together regularly to discuss issues and to ensure that best practice is shared.

## Funding the panel

It is important that panels understand how much funding they will need from the outset – adequate resources are essential to provide a robust process. People often underestimate the resources that will be required. In particular, local panels operating within local authority planning services and using planning staff are less likely to identify full costs. Before approaching funding agencies or local authorities, panels need to map out the resources they will need to deliver design review to the standard set out in this publication. Costs to consider are:

- skilled and properly trained staff
- premises and presentation facilities
- any payment to panel members plus travel expenses
- induction and training for panel members as part of continuing professional development.

Funding may come from various sources for different tiers of panels. For regional and sub-regional panels, possible sources include regional development agencies and regional centres for excellence. Local panels usually look to the local planning authority. In areas where few significant planning applications are made, or where resources are not available for a local panel, it might make sense to set up a panel that is shared by a few local planning authorities. It is worth thinking about other public and voluntary sector organisations too – but not at the expense of the panel's independence.





Some panels charge a nominal fee (see case study of the Urban Vision panel on page 20). However, this raises questions about a panel's independence and the quality of its advice, and the implications need to be considered carefully. If circumstances force the panel to consider charging for design review then think about mechanisms to ensure that contributions are managed through an independently administered fund. This will separate funders from the process of design review.

### **Deciding on staffing and facilities**

The number of staff and the type of facilities the panel needs will depend on the target number of projects to be reviewed. Most regional panels have two members of staff, an administrator and a panel manager. Local panels are often managed by existing local authority staff within the planning or urban design team. The panel may need to decide whether they will be contractually employed directly by the panel, by a planning authority or by some other body. It may be helpful to see what other panels do about time, costs and contractual matters by looking at their websites and then seeking advice from them directly.

Staff will face an involved programme of work that calls for a good understanding of both the design process and the planning system. This includes:

- identifying projects for review
- liaising with the scheme promoters or applicants
- gaining an understanding of the scheme through briefings, drawings and site visits
- briefing the panel
- writing up the panel's comments and advice and following it through
- managing the panel meeting process.

That means staff must have qualifications and practical experience in these or related fields. They should also have the communication skills to liaise with scheme promoters, planners and other design review panels to be able to interact with the panel itself.

In terms of facilities, the panel will need a room large enough to hold well-attended meetings and equipped with pinboards, tables and audio-visual equipment to allow schemes to be presented. Given the volume of architectural drawings and other materials submitted, a design review service may need sufficient storage space for its records and filing systems. The degree to which panels retain records will vary, depending on their needs, but as schemes may return for review it is a good idea to have a record of what was seen before.



**An approach that welcomes applications for review from across the public and the private sectors can make the process more transparent**



## **Establishing criteria for scheme selection**

The next step is to set the criteria for the size and type of schemes to be reviewed. The panel will need to have regard to the type of panel being set up and should also note the types of scheme that will not be reviewed or should be referred to a different type of panel. It should define an appropriate target for the number of schemes to be reviewed in a year.

Existing panels that do not have terms of reference set out or criteria for the size and type of schemes to be reviewed should put these in place. All panels should consider making them openly available to ensure good practice and robust procedures. Useful reference material is provided online at [www.cabe.org.uk/publications/design-review-principles-and-practice](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications/design-review-principles-and-practice)

## **Being transparent**

Panels need to be clear about who can submit a scheme for review. An approach that welcomes applications for review from across the public and the private sectors can make the process more transparent.

It's a good idea to take a proactive approach by promoting the panel's design review service widely and targeting the people and organisations the panel wants to use the service. This should be the approach at all levels of panel. Organisations to approach could include local associations of developers, project managers and architects, and architecture and built environment centres, if they are not already involved in running the design review panel. It is important to review both public and private sector projects and to remember that local authorities themselves act as clients for development, for example in education, sport and libraries. Encouraging them to use design review will help to raise awareness of good design throughout the local authority.

It is worth making the effort to set up and maintain an open dialogue with the planning authority at the highest level. Local panels should hold regular face-to-face meetings with the chief planning officer and councillors.

Perhaps the most direct way of promoting and publicising design review is to publish brochures and set up a website. The site could include all the information needed by project promoters, such as the panel contact name and address, profiles of panel members, criteria for selecting schemes for review and application pro formas. Local panels are encouraged to follow this example to foster a transparent approach to the service they offer.

The manager and chair of a panel should be prepared to publicise the panel, actively seek out suitable projects for review and answer enquiries from scheme promoters and the public. Wider publicity could also be sought through local media. CABE and the regional and sub-regional panels all use their websites.



## Evaluating and improving

Once the panel is up and running, it should regularly monitor and evaluate its performance, output and impact on schemes. The key measures of success are the extent to which schemes are improved on the basis of the panel's advice and whether the local planning authority has used its advice to approve or refuse an application. It is worth bearing in mind that a panel review may result in advice that a scheme is well designed and not in need of any significant changes. A thorough process that results in positive advice is still worthwhile.

Evaluations of the panel's work should be undertaken every year and if possible submitted in an annual report that is presented and discussed at an annual meeting of a steering group or board. Rigorous evaluation is not only good practice but also vital in supporting the case for design review and demonstrating that it provides value for money. It also carries credibility which could help to procure more funding. It is also good to get feedback from scheme promoters, the local planning authority and other participants in the design review process on the impact of the panel and whether it has assisted them. CABE sends out a questionnaire to all participants in its review sessions asking for their opinion of the process.

Any weaknesses shown up through monitoring and evaluation should be acted on to improve the panel's performance. Evaluation can also be used as the basis for case studies for disseminating information on the panel's work.



# Chapter 6

## How to appoint and train panel members



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It's crucial to have the right mix of members on the panel. That means getting the recruitment process right

It's crucial to have the right mix of members on the panel. That means getting the recruitment process right, getting the right blend of skills, appointing a good chair and identifying training needs.

### Recruiting the panel

Appointing a diverse panel and a good chair calls for a robust recruitment process. Unfortunately, the CABE research showed that many existing panels were not recruited in an open way. Factors to consider are:

**Open recruitment** It is best to recruit suitable candidates through adverts in professional and/or local press and draw attention to under-represented groups. Direct invitation or nomination should be used as a back-up only if the calibre of applicants falls short of the required standard. Keep in mind that recruitment is an area where the panel can expect to be carefully scrutinised for fairness and diversity. Applicants should be sent an information pack or directed to a webpage that sets out the selection criteria along with the panel's terms of reference.

It is necessary to consider whether a particular process is required in the recruitment of a chair. Issues to consider include: merit, independent scrutiny, equal opportunities, probity, openness and transparency, and proportionality.<sup>7</sup>

**Who does the recruiting?** Those responsible for recruiting should represent a spectrum of professionals and include at least one external person who is nominated by the panel's commissioning body or steering group. They could be a representative of the regional development agency, Architecture Centre Network, the regional panel (in the case of recruitment for a local panel) or one of the four organisations who have produced this guidance document: RIBA, RTPI, LI and CABE.

**Payment** Panels should consider offering a fee to panel members and chairs attending design review meetings. At the regional and national level all panel members receive a fee for their services. Recent research by CABE indicates that offering payment does little to boost attendance at meetings, but it may encourage a broader range of applicants for panel membership and this may well result in a more professional service. Experience also suggests that many professionals are happy to serve on a panel in return for a nominal fee well below their commercial rate. Travel expenses should always be paid.

**Attendance** Most panels operate a pool system, so that members do not need to attend all meetings. This often makes practical sense, as members are very likely to be busy professionals with several commitments. On the other hand, it is best not to have too large a membership, as panels operate more effectively if members have the chance to get to know each other and develop mutual understanding. With this in mind, members should attend at least two design review meetings a year.

<sup>7</sup> Detailed guidance can be found in the Code of Practice document on the Commissioner for Public Appointments website. [www.tinyurl.com/nekgl9](http://www.tinyurl.com/nekgl9)

**Size of panel** The number in the pool should reflect the anticipated number of schemes reviewed in a year. Typically, a panel for a meeting might consist of four to six members. It is hard to have a coherent panel discussion that involves the active participation of more than eight people.

**Term of office** Members should be appointed for fixed terms, usually three years, and for a maximum of two terms. For a start-up panel, it might be wise to appoint members for different periods, as this will ensure that old and new members overlap later on when some stand down and are replaced. As for chairs, it is best to train the next one on the job before the current one stands down.

**Sharing members** With regional and local panels it may be helpful to share panel members who have particular skills and expertise. For example, a transport engineer or sustainability expert might help significantly on some schemes but not be necessary for all of them. Regional panels could maintain a list of all panel members in the region to assist that process.

## Meeting the Nolan principles

A panel is normally publicly funded and should invariably act in the public interest. Panel members and chairs should therefore abide by the seven Nolan principles of public life:<sup>8</sup>

- selflessness
- integrity
- objectivity
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- leadership.

## Getting the blend right

One of the core principles of design review is that it offers the advice of an expert panel. A panel needs to be made up of a diverse range of individuals with an equally diverse range of professional skills and opinions if it is going to review schemes in the round. Factors to consider include:

**A mix of skills** As well as architects, it is essential to recruit members from related fields such as planning, landscape architecture, urban design, the historic environment, sustainability and environmental services, inclusive environments, civil and structural engineering, transport, public art and property development.

**Specialist experience** Some schemes may need to be reviewed by specialist panel members, such as people with a detailed understanding of hospital design. Various members of the panel should have experience in both private and public sectors and an understanding of the planning system, commercial development and up-to-date procurement methods. Knowledge of government policy is also helpful as a backdrop to much public sector development.



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<sup>8</sup> The Nolan principles are set out in full at: [www.tinyurl.com/lek5lm](http://www.tinyurl.com/lek5lm)

A panel needs to be made up of a diverse range of individuals with an equally diverse range of professional skills and opinions if it is going to review schemes in the round

**Communication skills** Panel members should be experts with a track record of achievement in one or more professional fields and be articulate in discussing design issues. Critical ability is also important, so experience in teaching in a professional context may be valuable.

**Diversity** It is vital to have panel members that mirror the diversity of the communities they serve. In advertising for panel members it should be made clear that applications are welcomed from particular groups, such as women or minority ethnic groups. Having diverse ages can also be beneficial.

**Local knowledge** Regional and local panels will want to recruit some members who offer a good appreciation of the local context. However, it is also advisable to appoint panel members who are not from the local area or region to bring a non-local perspective and ensure that a balance of views is on offer.

**Embracing different opinions** In selecting panel members, it is better to have a range of people reflecting different views and backgrounds. Members should be able to act as part of a group, but a panel where all the members agree with each other all the time is unlikely to be effective.

Elected members of associated planning authorities should not stand as panel members. They would compromise the panel's principle of independence of thought and would also lay the panel open to charges of conflict of interest.

### **Appointing a good chair**

It is important to have an exceptional chairperson – a respected professional who has the personal qualities to gain the respect of the other panel members, along with the intellect to be able to assimilate a range of views into a coherent conclusion during each presentation.

Things to look for are:

- a track record of achievement in a relevant field, so that they have the respect of both scheme promoters and fellow panel members
- strong critical and analytical abilities
- people skills to chair a meeting politely yet authoritatively, so that people feel they are being listened to and understood but are not allowed to dominate a review session
- the ability to cope with panel members or guests who express strong – and sometime differing – opinions
- the ability to synthesise and summarise what at times may be disparate or conflicting views, and reach a consensus
- the ability to contribute to and ensure clarity of the panel's written outputs.



**Chairing design review panels is an important and varied role, requiring careful consideration of a number of issues including encouraging effective debate between presenters, panel members and other attendees**

It is not essential to have just one chairperson. The panel could also be chaired by several panel members taking turns or it could use the chair and deputy chair structure that many existing panels operate. This also offers cover for holidays and other absences and gives a way for ensuring that there is a succession plan in place.

Chairing design review panels is an important and varied role, requiring careful consideration of a number of issues including encouraging effective debate between presenters, panel members and other attendees, and the importance of clarifying the message of the meeting and providing clear direction in the drafting of the written report. CABE has produced a DVD to explain its approach to chairing design review at: [www.tinyurl.com/nkprnh](http://www.tinyurl.com/nkprnh)

### **Providing training and guidance**

An induction is recommended for new panel members to discuss procedures and probity. They should get the chance to observe a review meeting before they start participating themselves. This will allow new panel members to get to know the design review process and to understand their role at the review meeting itself. The panel manager should consider running panel member training sessions to address specific topics of relevance, such as sustainability.

For the panel's professional staff, training is advisable. Ideally this should be by an expert, nationally recognised agency. Several regional and local panels could join together for training sessions and this could be something that the regional panel could coordinate.

Both members and professional staff will need an understanding of local or regional or sub-regional conditions in their area and the priorities of the planning authorities.



**For the panel's professional staff, training is advisable. Ideally this should be by an expert, nationally recognised agency. Several regional and local panels could join together for training sessions**



# Chapter 7

## How to organise a panel meeting

Review meetings are where the constitution and management of the panel and the critical ability of its members all come together. Organising an effective meeting involves selecting and preparing schemes in advance, providing the right facilities and making constructive comments. The result will be conclusions that could improve the design of schemes as built and help the local planning authority in reaching a decision.

### Preparing for meetings

The dates of panel meetings should be planned well in advance before busy panel members fill up their diaries. CABE's national panel, for example, fixes dates and books its panel members a year in advance. Panels should ensure that enough members will be present to cover all projects under review – even when one or two members stand down on grounds of conflict of interest – and try to get a mix of professional skills at each meeting.

Agenda papers should be sent to panel members a week in advance to help them prepare for the meeting. These should include useful background information about the projects they are to see, which will give them the opportunity to declare any conflicts of interest. However, it is not essential to reveal scheme designs before the meeting – project design teams may well be working on their project up to the last minute before a review meeting.

### Organising a meeting

Meetings could be held regularly in the same place or in a different one by rotation. Holding meetings in the same place allows the panel to get all the accommodation and facilities for presentation right and not have to think them through each time. However, the venue might tie in with a site visit, requiring a new nearby location. For a regional panel, a shifting venue allows the panel to focus the review meeting in changing areas of their region. This may also be relevant within a large local authority area.

Other factors to consider are:

**Facilities** The room will need enough pin-up or magnetic boards to display drawings where they can be seen easily and enough table tops to present models and audio-visual equipment for three-dimensional fly-throughs if required. Visitors who want to conceal confidential plans or models should be reminded to bring their own black-out materials. In most cases, the panel will wish to stand and walk around presentation boards and models, but they may need to sit down for lengthy meetings.

**Media** Projects are mainly presented through three-dimensional models and drawings. Other media should be treated as secondary. If a team wants a projector to display images, it is essential that they should also make hard-copy printouts available at A3 size for close examination by the group in their own time.

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**Accessibility** Will the venue be able to cater to everyone attending? As well as making the venue physically accessible, the panel may need to lay on means to include everyone in the meeting, such as an induction loop.

### Selecting schemes for review

Schemes should be selected for review according to general criteria drawn up by the panel. Other questions to consider include:

- Is the local planning authority confronting a difficult decision where design is a central issue?
- Does the scheme, even though not of great significance in itself, typify design issues that recur frequently?
- Will the scheme set a standard for a whole area of redevelopment?
- Is this an opportunity for lessons learned to be disseminated?

Other factors to consider are:

**Appropriate level of review** Selection for review should also include consideration of whether the scheme is appropriate for national, regional or local review. Just because a scheme has been offered to a panel it does not mean that it is the appropriate level. If protocols are in place they will help give clarity to this selection process. A scheme that is locally controversial may benefit from review at a regional or national level.

**Strategies** CABE has found that design panels work most effectively when they are reviewing design and building proposals, rather than strategies. Urban design frameworks, local planning documents and strategies are increasingly being considered as subjects for review. However, it is CABE's experience that these documents may need a different approach. CABE has been holding workshops to review core strategies with a specialist panel of expert planning professionals rather than using its design review panel. The process is based on design review but with changes to reflect the need to assess a text document with a planning remit. This is explained on its website at [www.cabe.org.uk/planning/strategy-workshops](http://www.cabe.org.uk/planning/strategy-workshops)

**Masterplans** The panel may also need to adapt the usual process to reflect the scale of the issues involved in masterplans. CABE has developed a process with specific questions that should be addressed at a masterplan review, as well as allowing more time for some proposals. Panels also hand-pick from their pool of members to ensure there are panel members with experience of dealing with this scale of development and the planning process it requires.



## Deciding what type of review

Some regional panels, as well as CABE, offer different types of review. Most reviews are done as presentation panels, where the design team and client present the scheme to the panel. Preparation for panels with presentations takes time because of the number of people who must be present. However, they are always preferable because of the opportunity they give the design team to engage in discussion and hear the panel's comments directly.

Another type is what CABE has called desktop review. This is held more frequently (at CABE it is every week) with the chair of the panel and a panel member meeting with staff to assess a scheme. This is a way to manage returning schemes that are at the planning application stage and need a more speedy response to fit in with the application deadline.

The panel will certainly review fewer schemes if all involve presentations. When deciding which approach to use a balance needs to be struck between the need for a speedy response to a planning application and the desire for all schemes to be presented at least once by the scheme promoters.

## Briefing scheme promoters

Design review usually gives scheme promoters (client and design team) the chance to be present at the panel discussion. This is normal practice at CABE and at regional and sub-regional panels and is of great benefit to the process. Scheme promoters will be more likely to understand the panel's views if they are at the review when they are expressed. They will also get the chance to respond to questions and feel that the panel's comments are made with an understanding of their approach. They are also more likely to accept and support the process if they are part of it.

For this to work well, scheme promoters need to be briefed in advance on how to present their schemes clearly and succinctly. A standard-issue guidance document or webpage is the best way to do this. Panel staff should offer advice to scheme presenters where necessary.

The guidance should:

- spell out the panel's criteria for selecting and reviewing schemes
- suggest how the promoter can present the scheme fully but succinctly using diagrams, architectural drawings, visualisations, words and audio visuals in the time available
- explain who the panel's advice is aimed at, how soon after the review it will be issued, and what action is then expected in response
- refer to established criteria or design standards adopted by the panel for reviewing schemes, such as CABE's *Design review: how CABE evaluates quality in architecture and urban design*, *By design* and *Building for Life*.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>9</sup> *Delivering great places to live*, Building for Life, November 2008: [www.tinyurl.com/ykalnpw](http://www.tinyurl.com/ykalnpw)

**All conflicts of interest – whether real or perceived – should be formally and rigorously dealt with and recorded well in advance of each meeting**

CABE has produced a DVD to help presenters understand the process, which is available at [www.tinyurl.com/ng7rux](http://www.tinyurl.com/ng7rux)

### **Timing schemes for review**

Bringing schemes forward for review at the most appropriate stage in the design process calls for careful preparation. The best time to review a scheme is early on at the pre-application stage, when the design is just emerging and when change can be most easily accommodated. However, schemes should not be reviewed before a building or masterplan has taken physical shape in design.

Leaving review until planning application stage may make it more difficult for the design team to modify it and harder for the planning authority to meet its deadlines. For the design team and its client, presenting a scheme before submitting a planning application offers a better chance of winning planning permission. For the planning authority, an early review offers the chance to negotiate a better scheme before the application is made.

### **Managing conflicts of interest**

All conflicts of interest – whether real or perceived – should be formally and rigorously dealt with and recorded well in advance of each meeting. A conflict could arise out of any suggestion that a panel member, either as an individual or a member of a group or organisation, might have a financial, commercial or professional interest in a project, its client and or/its site.

The panel should draw up a standard policy for dealing with conflicts of interest, perhaps with the advice of CABE, associated planning authorities and/or other panels. It should set out clearly how interests are identified, recorded and managed and should be publicly available, ideally online.

Conflicts of interest can be a particularly sensitive issue in local panels, where many panel members will operate in the same area as the projects under review. In cases where the panel's associated planning authority has a direct financial interest in a scheme or has declared support for it at councillor level, it may be advisable to refer it to a higher tier of panel outside the immediate locality.



## Site visits

Ideally, the site of each scheme should be visited by the panel members who will review it. At the local and regional level this is easier, but in many instances, at all types of panel, site visits may not be feasible. The critical issue is that panel members need to be fully briefed about the important characteristics of the site, context and key issues. This can be communicated to the panel through briefing papers, aerial photos and photos around the site, and a briefing by panel staff who have visited the site. In addition, the local planning background should be researched before the meeting so that the panel can be made aware of any key elements that apply in the case of a scheme to be reviewed.

## Structuring the meeting

Panel meetings will work better if they follow a clear structure. Here are some factors to consider plus an idea of timescales for different parts of the meeting:

**Briefing** Before panel members review a scheme they need a briefing from the professional staff to identify key concerns or brief panel members about the site as they may have not been there.

**Welcoming** When a presentation panel session starts the chair must ensure that those presenting schemes and the local authority and observers are greeted on arrival. A warm welcome will set the tone for the review.

**Timing** In CABA's experience, most projects can be effectively reviewed in an hour, although occasionally larger and more complex projects might take longer. At the other end of the scale, some local panels have been known to fit six or seven smaller schemes into an afternoon session, which limits the time for panel discussion, but may be appropriate in some cases.

**Introducing the scheme** If the scheme is being introduced by the client they could be invited to explain the brief, aims and objectives as succinctly as possible, perhaps taking two or three minutes. The architect or designer could then talk through the main design issues – 15 to 20 minutes is usually adequate for this stage.

**Commenting** The chair should invite panel members to make comments and ask for any clarification or further explanation as necessary. Presenters may then be given the chance to respond to any criticisms but the chair should not allow the project team to dominate the discussion. To assist the flow of discussion, the chair should structure the meeting so that it proceeds from the general to the particular and from the project's overall strategy to more detailed aspects of design. Chairs and panel members need to be aware that the first review of a scheme is the most significant – all major issues should be raised then and subsequent revisions reviewed in the light of these initial comments.

**Open discussion** Before the presenters leave the room, panel members should take care to express any fundamental points or reservations about the project. It is important that the panel express their views openly to the presenting team. If there are major differences of opinion between panel members, they should discuss them and reach a resolution. The chair must be prepared to state a consensual view at the end of the meeting so that, by the time they leave, presenters should have a good idea of the panel's views. Only where panel remains clearly divided will it be necessary to reach a conclusion in private.

**Concluding in private** Once the chair has summarised the discussion, it is usually best for those presenting to leave the room. The chair and panel can then confirm their views in private, and the professional staff member can check that all the points made will be covered in the written report. It is not good practice for new points to be raised in this closed discussion.

### **Maintaining an independent view**

It is vital that the panel should feel free to say what it thinks about any scheme. It is offering objective advice based on professional judgement and an understanding of the principles of good design. The panel should not feel obliged to modify its views to suit any of the other agencies involved, as maintaining an independent view boosts its credibility and effectiveness.

Panels that are sponsored or closely linked to a local planning authority or other agency must deal with the crucial but sensitive issue of maintaining independence from it. Elected members and professional staff from planning authorities should only attend reviews as observers and recipients of advice, not as panel members.



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## Being constructive and frank

A panel should not forget that it is there to advise, not to decide, design or instruct. It should therefore encourage others to act on its advice by being positive about the good aspects of a scheme as well as critical of its flaws. Questioning the client's side of the scheme is a perfectly legitimate role for a panel. For example, if the panel thinks the client has asked the architect to put too much accommodation on the site, it should say so.

Fundamental criticism is sometimes necessary, even though it will occasionally be unwelcome to those who have committed time, effort and money to a project. Some panels prefer to have more of the discussion in private. However, this is not recommended as there is considerable benefit in having everyone hear the discussion. Hearing the reasoning behind the panel's views will help all parties understand the major issues with a scheme. For design reviews to be effective, panel members must have the confidence to voice criticism in front of the scheme's presenters.

## Writing the report

Design advice from the panel to the planning authority and scheme's promoters is only as good as the written report that conveys it. The professional staff member charged with writing the report should take comprehensive notes of the meeting. However, the written report is not a set of minutes. It should be addressed primarily to the local planning authority but also to the scheme's client and design team. If the scheme is a planning application then the report needs to give a clear steer on whether it should be supported or whether refusal should be considered because the panel thinks there are fundamental flaws with the design.

Writing the report involves turning the panel's comments into a coherent narrative to provide advice which can be acted on. It should:

- be clear and succinct and written in plain English
- offer a summary whenever possible setting out in detail the panel's conclusions on a scheme
- point out where the strengths and weaknesses lie – in the brief, the aims and objectives of the client, or in the design
- contain a proper grasp of design issues
- be frank about the design quality and constructive in the concluding advice
- be objective and robust enough to be defended if the scheme is the subject of an appeal – comments need to be clearly based on the design principles that have been established in legislation and guidance
- not attribute comments to individual members of the panel.



As panels act in the public interest, they should be clear and open about their constitution, procedures and deliberations. The reputation of the panel depends on this

The chair has a critical role in assuring the quality of the written report by providing a clear summing up of the advice that emerges from the review, and in scrutinising, moderating and approving the draft.

It is essential that the report should be issued promptly according to schedules declared in advance.

### **Balancing confidentiality and public scrutiny**

Local residents, groups and the media will take a keen interest in new development proposals. As panels act in the public interest, they should be clear and open about their constitution, procedures and deliberations. The reputation of the panel depends on this.

When considering schemes that have already been submitted for planning approval, the panel should make its advice report publicly available as soon as it is sent to the planning authority, client and project team. The report can be made available either on request or through the panel's website or public media.

When schemes are reviewed at pre-application stage, the scheme promoter often requests a confidential review. This particularly applies to a scheme that is not yet in the public domain where the developer feels that publicity may damage its commercial interests. The panel should consider conducting reviews in confidence at this stage, as this encourages developers to seek design guidance early when their plans can respond to design advice.

Advice should be given in confidence only where the applicant requests and only on the condition that the panel is kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of the planning application. A confidential review should not mean that the planning authority is excluded, as it is very important that it has the chance to understand the scheme's design. If the promoter has publicised the panel's confidential written report, the panel should consider whether to release its views publicly.



**Observing a review can support skills development for local planning officers and can provide them with new ideas on how to assess schemes for good design**

## **Dealing with freedom of information**

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 provides a general right of access to information held by public bodies and aims to make them more transparent. Panel staff should be prepared for requests for information under the Act, which could come in from the public at any time, particularly in connection with schemes that might at some date arouse public controversy. Design review panels may be obliged to disclose information even if the panel's advice was initially given on a confidential basis. However, panel staff should be aware that there are exemptions under the Act which may be relevant to requests for information related to design review. Each case will need to be considered individually and is subject to challenge so panels are advised to adopt or draw up a legally sound policy of dealing with freedom of information requests, including requests about schemes reviewed on a confidential basis. It is important not to underestimate the need to keep well-documented records of all projects, procedures and comment.

## **Following up after review**

No design review panel will be able to offer continuous involvement with a scheme, but it is important to be able to offer some feedback or further reviews, particularly if the scheme is one that the panel could not support. A meeting to explain the panel's advice report should not be required, but panel staff or the panel chair should be prepared to offer clarification if it is needed.

In cases where the panel suggests radical design changes, it will want to see that design quality is improved and maintained through the development process and offer some consistency of advice. This can be largely achieved by offering to review the scheme again after it has been revised. If a scheme comes in for a follow-up review, the panel will need to be well briefed by the panel staff and to take care not to contradict its initial comments. Wherever possible, some of the same panel members should try to attend both reviews.

When a scheme reaches the planning application stage another review should take place so that the planning authority has a formal response from the panel that can be used in its assessment.

## **Observing the review**

Design review offers a unique learning opportunity to hear experts discuss design. Observing a review can support skills development for local planning officers and can provide them with new ideas on how to assess schemes for good design. Those who are not directly engaged in design review but may be responsible for continued funding or support should be encouraged to attend a review in order that the effectiveness of design review can be demonstrated as widely as possible. CABE has offered the opportunity of observing their reviews to a wide range of people, from government ministers to school students interested in design.

Attending design review meetings is also considered an appropriate source of continuing professional development (CPD) for panel members and facilitators.

As long as confidentiality is not compromised, observing a panel can be used to support training for council officers and members. This can also be an effective way to make the panel more inclusive, while not compromising the principles of objectivity. Design review panels occasionally run a public design review, and, as long as the scheme being reviewed is the subject of a planning application and permission sought from the applicants, this can be an appropriate way to involve the community in the planning system.

A number of steps should be taken to ensure that observers are aware of the issue around confidentiality relating to schemes being reviewed and appropriate conduct at the review meeting. The chair should ensure that scheme presenters are made aware that observers will be present before the review. In the introduction to the review session, the chair should also make clear to observers that they are not part of the panel. It will be for the chair to decide if observers should be given the opportunity to comment.





# Further information

Further copies of this publication are available from:

[www.cabe.org.uk/publications/design-review-principles-and-practice](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications/design-review-principles-and-practice)

Dedicated web pages offer further detailed information to accompany this guide. They include information on:

- dealing with confidentiality
- creating the terms of reference
- requesting material for reviews
- writing good design review reports
- budgeting for a design review panel
- evaluating and monitoring a panel
- referring and reviewing schemes
- recruiting panel members effectively.

## Websites

CABE [www.cabe.org.uk](http://www.cabe.org.uk)

RIBA [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com)

RTPI [www.rtpi.org.uk](http://www.rtpi.org.uk)

Landscape Institute [www.landscapeinstitute.org](http://www.landscapeinstitute.org)



Design review is a tried and tested method of promoting good design and a cost-effective way of improving quality. *Design review: principles and practice* explains how design review can support good design through the planning process and how to set up and run a design review panel. Case studies illustrate the breadth of panels now operating and share learning from their experiences. The publication will help anyone running or wanting to establish a panel, including local authorities and other public bodies. It will also interest architects, planners and clients.

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