

Design Review

Principles and Practice



Edited in 2019. Originally published in 2013 by Design Council.

Cover photo: Granary Square at King's Cross,
© John Sturrock

All photos by Design Council unless otherwise stated.

Although every care has been taken in preparing this report, no responsibility or liability will be accepted by Design Council, its employees, agents or advisors for its accuracy or completeness.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, copied or transmitted without the prior written consent of the publisher except that the material may be photocopied for non-commercial purposes without permission from the publisher.

Contents

Foreword	3
The purpose of this guidance document	4
Part One: Principles of Design Review	
Chapter 1: The essentials of Design Review	6
What is Design Review?	6
Ten principles of Design Review	7
Chapter 2: The role of Design Review in the planning system	8
Design Review and national planning policy	8
How Design Review adds value	9
Chapter 3: Who benefits from Design Review?	10
Local authorities	10
Developers	10
Project design teams	11
Community groups	11
Chapter 4: Local and National Design Review	12
Local Design Review arrangements	12
National Design Review	12
Who reviews what?	12
Part Two: Design Review in practice	
Chapter 5: Delivering the principles	14
Chapter 6: A robust Design Review process	23
Preparation	23
Review	25
Observers	26
Advice	27
Other practical matters	28
Useful contacts	29

The purpose of this guidance document

Design Review is a well-established way of improving the quality of design outcomes in the built environment, and it is now recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework. This document provides practical advice to people who are running design review panels or are thinking of doing so. It will be of use to anyone who might wish to use the service, or just wants to know more about it, particularly people in local authorities, design teams and their clients, or community groups. Drawing on many years' experience of delivering Design Review, it sets out the standards of advice and service that panels should adopt, and that their users can expect.

“*Design Review is a well-established way of improving the quality of design outcomes in the built environment*”



Part One: Principles of Design Review

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive overview of the principles of design review. It is intended for students, practitioners, and anyone interested in the field.

Chapter 1: The Role of Design Review

Design review is a critical component of the design process, ensuring that projects meet the highest standards of quality and safety. It involves a systematic evaluation of design proposals against established criteria.

Chapter 2: The Design Review Process

The design review process typically involves several stages, including proposal submission, initial review, public consultation, and final approval. Each stage is designed to ensure transparency and accountability.

Chapter 3: Key Principles of Design Review

Key principles of design review include: clarity of objectives, consistency of criteria, transparency of process, and inclusivity of stakeholders. These principles are essential for ensuring the effectiveness of the review process.

Chapter 4: Case Studies

This chapter provides detailed case studies of successful design review processes, highlighting the challenges faced and the solutions implemented. It serves as a valuable resource for practitioners.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes the key findings of the book and offers recommendations for future research and practice. It emphasizes the importance of ongoing learning and improvement in the field of design review.



Chapter 1:

The essentials of Design Review

What is Design Review?

Design Review is an independent and impartial evaluation process in which a panel of experts on the built environment assess the design of a proposal. The projects that Design Review deals with are usually of public significance, and the process is designed to improve the quality of buildings and places for the benefit of the public.

Design Review

- is conducted by expert practitioners with current experience in design and development, a record of good design in their own projects and the skills to appraise schemes objectively.
- offers feedback and observations that will lead to the improvement of schemes, but does not redesign them.
- gives decision makers the confidence and information to support innovative, high quality designs that meet the needs of their communities and customers, and to resist poorly designed schemes.

“

Design Review is an independent and impartial evaluation process”



© Ben Blossom

Ten principles of Design Review

All Design Review is focused on outcomes for people. It explores how a building or place can better meet the needs of the people who will use it and of everyone who will be affected by it. It does this by constructively endeavouring to improve the quality of architecture, urban design, landscape and highway design.

For Design Review to succeed, it must be carried out using a robust and defensible process. It must also offer consistently high standards in the quality of its advice. These standards can be summarised in the following ten principles.

Design Review is:

Independent

It is conducted by people who are unconnected with the scheme's promoters and decision makers, and it ensures that conflicts of interest do not arise.

Expert

It is carried out 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, because their standing and expertise will be acknowledged.

Multidisciplinary

It combines the different perspectives of architects, urban designers, urban and rural planners, landscape architects, engineers and other specialist experts to provide a complete, rounded assessment.

Accountable

The Review Panel and its advice must be clearly seen to work for the benefit of the public. This should be ingrained within the panel's terms of reference.

Transparent

The panel's remit, membership, governance processes and funding should always be in the public domain.

Proportionate

It is used on projects whose significance, either at local or national level, warrants the investment needed to provide the service.

Timely

It takes place as early as possible in the design process, because this can avoid a great deal of wasted time. It also costs less to make changes at an early stage.

Advisory

A design review panel does not make decisions, but it offers impartial advice for the people who do.

Objective

It appraises schemes according to reasoned, objective criteria rather than the stylistic tastes of individual panel members.

Accessible

Its findings and advice are clearly expressed in terms that design teams, decision makers and clients can all understand and make use of.

Chapter 2

The role of Design Review in the planning system

Design Review and national planning policy

In March 2012 the Government published its National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This emphasises the importance of sustainable development, and sets out 12 planning principles that should underpin both plan-making and decision-making.

The fourth of these principles is that planning should:

“always seek to secure high quality design and a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings”¹

The NPPF stresses the importance that the Government puts on the design of the built environment. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.² It is important to plan positively for the achievement of high quality and inclusive design of all development.³

In determining applications, local planning authorities should give great weight to outstanding or innovative designs that help to raise the standard of design more generally in the area. Equally, they should refuse planning permission for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions.⁴

To help them to make these judgements, local authorities are expected to use Design Review.

*“Local planning authorities should have local design review arrangements in place to provide assessment and support to ensure high standards of design. They should also where appropriate refer major projects for a national Design Review*⁵. In general, early engagement on design produces the greatest benefits. In assessing applications, local planning authorities should have regard to the recommendations from the design review panel”⁵*

*Currently provided by Design Council

1. National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) March 2012 para 17. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>
2. NPPF para 56
3. NPPF para 57
4. NPPF paras 63-64
5. NPPF para 62

How Design Review adds value

When it is done well, Design Review is highly efficient, and it often saves time and money. The cost of the service is never more than a small proportion of the total development budget, and is massively outweighed by the value it adds. The process adds a layer of expertise that builds on the skills of the design team and the pre-application advice provided by the local authority.

Design Review

- can bring a greater breadth and depth of experience than is available within the project team or planning authority.
- offers expert views that take account of a wide range of complex issues, and so helps to achieve sustainable development.
- looks at schemes in context, and can challenge the design brief or the assumptions that lie behind the project.
- gives planners, developers and their design teams confidence that they have had the best possible independent advice on design quality.
- supports and encourages good design and innovative proposals.
- identifies weak and inappropriate schemes at an early stage, when radical changes can be made with a minimum of wasted time and effort.
- offers opportunities for continued learning, particularly about how to assess design quality, to the people observing the review process.

History of Design Review in England

Since the Royal Fine Art Commission started reviewing building proposals in 1924, Design Review has been increasingly recognised in the planning system as a powerful way of assessing major developments. Responsibility for Design Review was transferred to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe) in 1999, a move that improved the quality of the advice offered and also made the process more transparent.

There are several other, smaller, local design review panels in England, often run by local planning authorities. Some of them go back many years and many were set up on the basis of guidance from the Royal Institute of British Architects or the Royal Town Planning Institute.

In 2002 the first regional design review panel was established in the south east, sponsored by the regional development agency. By 2009, all English regions except London had panels. These panels entered into a memorandum of understanding with Cabe to form the national network of Design Review in England.

In 2011, Cabe merged with the Design Council and in 2012, in direct response to the Bishop Review,⁶ set up London Design Review, completing a national network of design review panels. Design Council continues to provide Design Review for nationally significant projects and its role is recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework.

Chapter 3

Who benefits from Design Review?

Design teams and local planning authorities routinely seek advice from advisory bodies and statutory consultees such as English Heritage, Natural England and amenity societies. Design Review does not replace the insights and expertise of these bodies. Rather, it offers additional breadth of vision and support on issues of design to aid decision making in the planning system. The strength of a design review panel's advice lies in its independence, objectivity and ability to analyse a scheme within the context of wider good practice and knowledge of exemplars from further afield.

Local authorities

Whether it is carried out at the pre-application stage or after an application has been lodged, Design Review enables local planning authorities to ensure that developers and design teams produce high-quality, inspiring buildings and public spaces. It helps them to recognise outstanding and innovative design, supports them in resisting poor design and gives them a practical means of understanding where improvements need to be made.

When a planning authority is fully engaged in the review programme, its confidence in assessing and dealing with design issues grows substantially.

As well as helping local authorities to assess projects submitted to them, Design Review can support them in their role as clients, helping them to secure high-quality design in public buildings such as schools, libraries and sports facilities, and in the streets and open spaces for which they are responsible.

Developers

Professionals from both the public and private sector will usually welcome timely and constructive analysis of their designs and the direction of their projects. The value of Design Review has been acknowledged by organisations ranging from Government departments and national agencies responsible for advising on or commissioning large capital programmes to speculative developers creating commercial, residential and mixed use projects.

The review process helps developers by reducing the risks and costs of delays in the planning process that can result from inadequate design quality. It draws attention to opportunities for design changes that could significantly raise the overall quality of the proposals in very cost effective ways, and make the completed scheme more satisfactory for its users.

“
The strength of a design review panel's advice lies in its independence, objectivity and ability to analyse a scheme”

7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-communities-more-power-in-planning-local-development>

8. NPPF para 66

Project design teams

Design Review gives constructive, impartial, advice to architects, urban designers, landscape architects and other design practitioners from fellow professionals who are able to examine the project design from a variety of perspectives and at sufficient distance so as to offer a fresh viewpoint that can identify design issues which the project designers may be too close to see. The process supports good design intentions and pinpoints any opportunities and weaknesses that may have been missed.

Community groups

Large or high profile projects often generate considerable public interest. A design review panel meeting held in public is not an alternative to a programme of community engagement, but it can be a useful part of it. It can help to show the virtues of well thought out planning, and demonstrate how design can reconcile the aspirations of different interest groups.

The Localism Act 2011 introduced important new powers for communities. It gave them the right to propose small-scale, site specific, community-led developments and shape new development by coming together to prepare neighbourhood plans.⁷ Design Review provides a valuable means of exploring neighbourhood plans and advising on how fully they will meet community aspirations.

The National Planning Policy Framework expects that those applying for planning permission should work closely with the people who will be affected by their proposals, and bring forward designs that take account of the views of the community. Proposals that can demonstrate they have done this should be looked on more favourably.⁸ Independent advice from a design review panel can not only provide useful guidance on community consultation, it can provide insights into how designs might impact on community life.



Chapter 4

Local and national Design Review

The National Planning Policy Framework advocates that all local authorities and developers have access to appropriate design review arrangements and use this to ensure high standards of design. The last few years have seen a large increase in the number and type of panels operating in England. Anyone who wants to have a scheme reviewed therefore needs to know the appropriate panel to use.

Local design review arrangements

Local design review arrangements across England vary in availability and organisation. Sometimes panels are managed and funded by a local authority or a group of local authorities, and sometimes they are run independently.

Independent Design Review is currently offered by nine organisations working to cover all of England.⁹ These panels usually focus on schemes of regional significance or those that raise more than local considerations. Obligations include adherence to best practice in Design Review to deliver consistent and high quality advice. These panels may provide a secretariat for a local authority funded local panel, in addition to training and sharing of panel members. This enables an arms-length relationship to be maintained between the design review panel, the planning department and decision makers.

There are several parts of England where more than one design review panel operates. Generally the type and size of scheme reviewed by each different panel is very clear, but there will be circumstances when co-ordination is needed between them to decide who should review a scheme.

“*The NPPF advocates that all local authorities and developers have access to appropriate design review arrangements*”

National Design Review

National Design Review is currently provided by Design Council. Design Council's remit includes projects that are either of national significance or will have a profound impact on their regional and local environment. Such schemes may range from urban extensions to town centre mixed-used developments. Frequent communication between Design Council and other panels ensure that schemes are reviewed at the appropriate level.

From time to time, specialist panels can be set up to cover particular areas of activity. To date, these have included the London 2012 panel, the London Crossrail panel, the Eco-towns panel and the Building Schools for the Future panel.

Who reviews what?

Panels need clear lines of communication to ensure that schemes are reviewed by the most appropriate panel. The review of a scheme by more than one panel should be avoided. This would duplicate time and effort, and introduce the risk of confusion from potentially conflicting advice.

It is essential for panels to be aware of others operating in the same area. Sometimes, it will be helpful to agree a protocol between panels operating in their locality, to provide clear criteria on which sizes and types of schemes should be referred to each panel. The protocol would set out the procedure for making these decisions, and state how the panels will be consulted. It could also set priorities for review, such as housing or town centres. Where appropriate, a subsidiary themed panel might be set up to deal with specific or recurring needs.

9. The Design Network comprises Creating Excellence (South West), Kent Architecture Centre (South East), Integreat Plus (Yorkshire and the Humber), MADE (West Midlands), North East Design Review & Enabling Service (North East), OPUN (East Midlands), Places Matter (North West) and Shape East (East of England). Design Council delivers Design Review for London. Contact details for these organisations can be found on page 29.

Part Two: Design Review in practice



Chapter 5

Delivering the principles

There are ten fundamental principles of Design Review, and each one has practical implications for the appointment of panel members and the management of the review process.

Independent

The panel must be free to say what it thinks about any scheme, and its independence should be evident to all.

Conflicts of interest

If the panel's advice is to be respected, its members must be demonstrably impartial. All conflicts of interest, real or perceived, should be formally and rigorously dealt with and recorded well in advance of each meeting. A conflict arises if there is 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 or its site.

The panel should draw up a standard policy for dealing with conflicts of interest. Design Council, local planning authorities and other panels can all be asked for advice on writing the policy. It should set out clearly how interests will be identified, recorded and managed, and it should be publicly accessible, ideally online. Conflicts of interest can be a particularly sensitive issue in local panels, where many panel members will work in the same area as the projects under review. In cases where panel members are associated with a planning authority, have a financial interest in a scheme, or have declared support for it at councillor level, it may be advisable to refer the project to an independent panel that operates with a wider remit outside the immediate locality.

Funding

Design review panels can have more than one source of funding. Initially they were maintained by public money, but now this is increasingly being topped up or even replaced by other income. For example, fees paid by the developers and promoters of schemes, or a proportion of the charge for pre-application advice or via a Planning

Performance Agreement. To safeguard the reputation of the panel and the weight that should be given to its advice, it is crucial that the funding arrangements are clear and open. In some cases it may be a good idea to establish an independently administered fund. Provided that a panel's governance arrangements adhere to the principles set out here, there should be no risk of the panel's integrity or advice being compromised by the funding stream. The funders, especially when they are also the developers, must be aware that the panel's independence is unconditional.

It is important that panels do not underestimate how much funding they will need. Even if members are giving their time free or for a modest fee, adequate resources are required to provide a professional service. If core costs are to be met from a single source, panel operators should map out the resources they will need in order to deliver Design Review to the standards set out in this publication.

Costs to consider include

- the salaries of skilled and properly trained staff.
- payments to panel members. As a minimum, travel expenses should be covered.
- hire of venues and purchase of presentation facilities.
- induction and training expenses for staff and panel members.

Staffing

Where panels are run directly by local authorities, it is preferable for the panel to be managed corporately, detached from the council's development management function. Panels that are sponsored by, or closely linked to, a local planning authority or other agency must deal with the crucial but sensitive issue of maintaining independence from it.

Expert

Selecting the panel

A panel is only as good as its panel members, and if it is to provide clear, objective advice it is imperative that the right mix of skills and experience is found. As well as getting the right blend of skills, it is essential to appoint a good chair and identify any training needs.

Appointing the right panel and chair demands an open and robust recruitment process. To review schemes effectively, in the round, a panel needs a diverse range of personalities and an equally diverse range of professional skills and opinions.

Note, however, that if elected members of associated planning authorities stand as panel members there is a danger that this could blur the lines of democratic accountability and lay the panel open to charges of conflict of interest.

Recruiting the panel

It is best to recruit suitable candidates through advertisements in the professional and local press. Focus on achieving a balanced representation of skills, experience and background. Direct invitations or nomination should only be used as a back-up if the calibre of applicants falls short of the required standard.

The group whose task it is to select the panel members should themselves represent a wide spectrum of professionals. It should also include at least one person from outside the immediate panel organisation, nominated by the panel's commissioning body or steering group. This might be a representative of another panel (such as one of the Design Network panels) or someone from RIBA, RTPI, the Landscape Institute or Design Council, the four organisations who have between them produced this guidance document.

Applicants should be sent an information pack or directed to a web page that sets out the selection criteria and the panel's terms of reference. Particular care should be given to selecting a panel chair. The factors which must always be considered when appointing panel members include merit, independent scrutiny, equal opportunities, probity, openness and transparency, and proportionality.

The size of the panel

Most panels operate a pool system, so that members are not expected to attend every meeting. The number of members should reflect the expected workload of panel meetings, with four to six members at each. It is hard to have a focused discussion with the active participation of eight or more people. However, panels operate more effectively if members can get to know each other and develop mutual understanding, so the pool should not be too large. Try to ensure that each member attends at least two design review meetings a year.

The term of office

Members should be appointed for fixed terms, usually three years, and for a maximum of two terms. When starting up a panel, it might be wise to appoint members for different periods so that not everyone stands down and is replaced at once, and new members have the chance to work alongside more experienced ones. A new chair should be given on the job training, working alongside the current chair, before taking over.

Sharing members

Local panels may find it helpful to share members who have particular skills and expertise in areas like transport planning or sustainability. To organise that efficiently, it would be useful for local panels to maintain a directory of members for all the panels in their areas.

Providing training and guidance

A well-planned induction procedure will allow new panel members to discuss procedures and probity, and give them a chance to observe a review meeting before they participate themselves. This will help them to understand the design review process and their role in it. Additional training sessions, addressing specific topics such as sustainability, can be organised where necessary.

Training for the panel's professional staff should be provided by an expert, nationally recognised agency. Joint training sessions for a number of local panels may be the most efficient way of organising this. All panel members and professional staff will need a clear understanding of the regional, sub-regional and local issues, and the priorities of the planning authorities, in their area.



Appointing a good chair

It is important for all meetings to have an effective chair who is a highly regarded professional. The chair must be able to win the respect of the other panel members, and should have the ability to integrate a range of views and draw a coherent conclusion for each presentation.

A good chair will have

- a record of achievement that commands the respect of design review clients and fellow panel members.
- strong critical and analytical abilities.
- the people skills required to chair a meeting politely yet authoritatively, so that participants feel they are being listened to and understood without being allowed to dominate the discussion.
- the ability to deal with panel members or clients who express strong – and sometime differing – opinions.
- the skill to synthesise and summarise disparate or conflicting views, and reach a consensus.
- the ability to write clear, understandable reports summarising the meetings' conclusions.

A panel may have more than one chair. Several members may take turns of chairing meetings, and many panels use a chair and deputy chair structure that offers cover for holidays and other absences. It also ensures that there is a successor ready when the chair stands down.

Multidisciplinary

Getting the blend right

One core principle of Design Review is that it offers advice from a diverse range of experts with a broad spectrum of professional skills and experience. This is an essential feature of the rounded, big-picture assessment it provides. There are several factors that should be considered in organising a panel.

The mix of skills

As well as recruiting architects, it is essential to bring in members from related fields such as planning, landscape architecture, urban design, the historic environment, sustainability and environmental services, accessibility, civil and structural engineering, transport, public art and property development.

Specialist experience

Some schemes may have to be reviewed by specialist panel members. Hospital developments, for example, will need people with a detailed understanding of hospital design. Between them, members of the panel should have specialist experience across both private and public sectors, with an understanding of how their specialist area is affected by the planning system, commercial considerations and up-to-date procurement methods. Knowledge of government policy is also helpful as a backdrop to much public sector development.

Communication skills

As well as having expertise and a record of achievement in one or more professional fields, panel members must have good critical abilities and be articulate in discussing design issues. Teaching experience in a professional context may be valuable.

Diversity

It is vital that the make-up of a panel reflects the diversity of the community that it serves. In advertising for panel members, it should be made clear that applications are welcomed from all sections of society regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexuality. A diverse range of ages can also be beneficial to the panel's deliberations.

Local knowledge

Local panels will want to recruit some members with good knowledge of the local context. However, it is also advisable to appoint some panel members from outside the local area or region, to bring a wider perspective and ensure that a balance of views is on offer. Sometimes, there may be opportunities to co-opt members from other panels to draw in special knowledge of a locality.

Embracing difference

It is healthy for panels to reflect a range of different views and backgrounds. The members should be able to function as a group, but a panel where all the members agree with each other all the time is unlikely to be effective.





© Charlotte Myhrum

Accountable

Public scrutiny

Design review panels scrutinise schemes on behalf of the public. They should therefore be public, open and transparent about the work they do.

Establishing a governance structure

A design review panel must be seen to be independent from both the local planning authority and the developer, free to give impartial advice to all parties. A panel set up as a part of its funding body may find it difficult to maintain its autonomy, particularly if the funding body is also a planning authority or investor. If this is unavoidable, robust arrangements should be set up to safeguard the panel's independence and to avoid conflicts of interest. Governance by an advisory board or steering group representing key stakeholders and acting solely in the public interest is one effective way of ensuring accountability.

Transparent

Setting clear terms of reference

A design review panel should give advice to all parties involved in a project. It is not an alternative to the democratic planning process, nor an adjunct to a developer's design team. It should be made clear, at the start of each review, who will be given advice and how that advice will be provided.

The terms of reference, funding arrangements, governance and key principles should be laid out in the panel's brochure or website. The terms of reference may include any or all of the following.

- The overall aims of the panel.
- The geographical area covered.
- How the panel is managed.
- The membership of the panel.
- Who may attend meetings, including the policy on observers and other interested parties.
- How conflicts of interest are dealt with.
- What the panel's output from the meeting will be.
- Confidentiality statements.



Balancing confidentiality and public scrutiny

Design review panels act in the public interest, and must be clear and open about their constitution, procedures and deliberations. Their reputation 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 has been sent to the planning authority, client and project team. The report can be made available either on request or published via the panel's website or other media.

When schemes are reviewed before the planning application stage, the promoter often requests a confidential review. This is particularly likely where a scheme is not yet public and the developer feels that publicity may damage commercial interests. The panel should offer Design Review in confidence at this stage. Knowing that the proposals will be treated as confidential will encourage developers to seek advice early in the process, when it will be most valuable. However, a confidential review should certainly not exclude the planning authority as it is very important that it participates in the process. If, after a confidential review, the promoter makes any part of the panel's confidential written report public, the panel should immediately release the entire report.

Local residents, heritage and other concerned groups and the media will always take a keen interest in new development proposals. Design Review should always operate effectively for the general public good, rather than in the interests of particular individuals or groups. The panel should seek the best design outcome for the whole community, and confidentiality often has an important part to play in allowing this to happen.

Dealing with freedom of information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 provides a general right of access to information held by public bodies, with the aim of making their activities more transparent. Requests for information may come from the public at any time and panel staff should be prepared for them, particularly when dealing with schemes that might arouse controversy.

Design review panels should be clear from the outset whether or not they are subject to requests for information under the Act. They may be obliged to disclose information even if the panel's advice was initially given on a confidential basis, so it is important to keep full records of all projects, procedures and comment.

There are, however, exemptions under the Act which may be relevant to requests for design review information. Staff should familiarise themselves with the relevant parts of the legislation and adopt a legally sound policy of dealing with requests, including those about confidential reviews. Each case will have to be considered individually and any decision to withhold information may be challenged.

Proportionate

Establishing criteria for scheme selection

Each panel should set criteria for the size and type of schemes it reviews that match the scope and level of service that it can offer. However, it may sometimes be appropriate to move outside these criteria for schemes that are particularly significant or unique.

These might include

- situations where the local planning authority is confronting a difficult decision in which design is a central issue.
- a scheme that, even though not of great significance in itself, typifies design issues that recur frequently.
- a scheme that sets a standard for a larger area of redevelopment.

It can also be worth reviewing good schemes with no major design flaws to add support to a project that might be controversial locally.

Panels work most effectively when they are reviewing specific design and building proposals, rather than strategies. Urban design frameworks, planning policy documents and strategies are increasingly being considered as subjects for review but they need a different approach, usually involving a specialist panel of expert design and planning professionals. The process is based on Design Review but adapted to reflect the different process of assessing a text document concerned with planning.

Timely

Review at an early stage of design development

Design Review should be a conversation about work in progress, not a verdict on an outcome.

The pre-application stage of the planning process, while the design is still fluid, is the best time for a review. It will help the scheme's proposers to identify aspects of design that should be improved and support the planning authority in resolving design issues before the application is submitted. Planning applicants want a favourable decision quickly, and the better the quality of the proposal the less delay there is likely to be. If the applicant has discussed the project with the local planning authority and arranged an independent assessment through the design review process, the decision-making process is likely to be faster. The review may occasionally take place before the pre-application meeting with the planners, but it is more likely to follow it, once the wider policy matters have been aired.

In the formal planning application process, a positive design review report can underpin approval for a well-designed proposal. The report can also provide critical analysis required for attaching conditions to an approval, or turning down a low-quality proposal.

Leaving Design Review until the planning application stage will almost certainly make it more difficult for the design team to make any suggested changes, and harder for the planning authority to meet the proposer's preferred schedule.



© Ben Blossom

Advisory

A critical friend

A panel's job is to offer impartial advice, not to decide, design or instruct. It can encourage clients to act on its advice by reporting positively on the good aspects of a scheme as well as being objectively critical of its perceived flaws. It is also perfectly legitimate for the panel to question the client's original brief. For example, if the panel thinks the brief has specified too much accommodation on a site, it should say so. Fundamental criticism is sometimes necessary, even though it may be unwelcome to the people who have committed time, effort and money to a project.

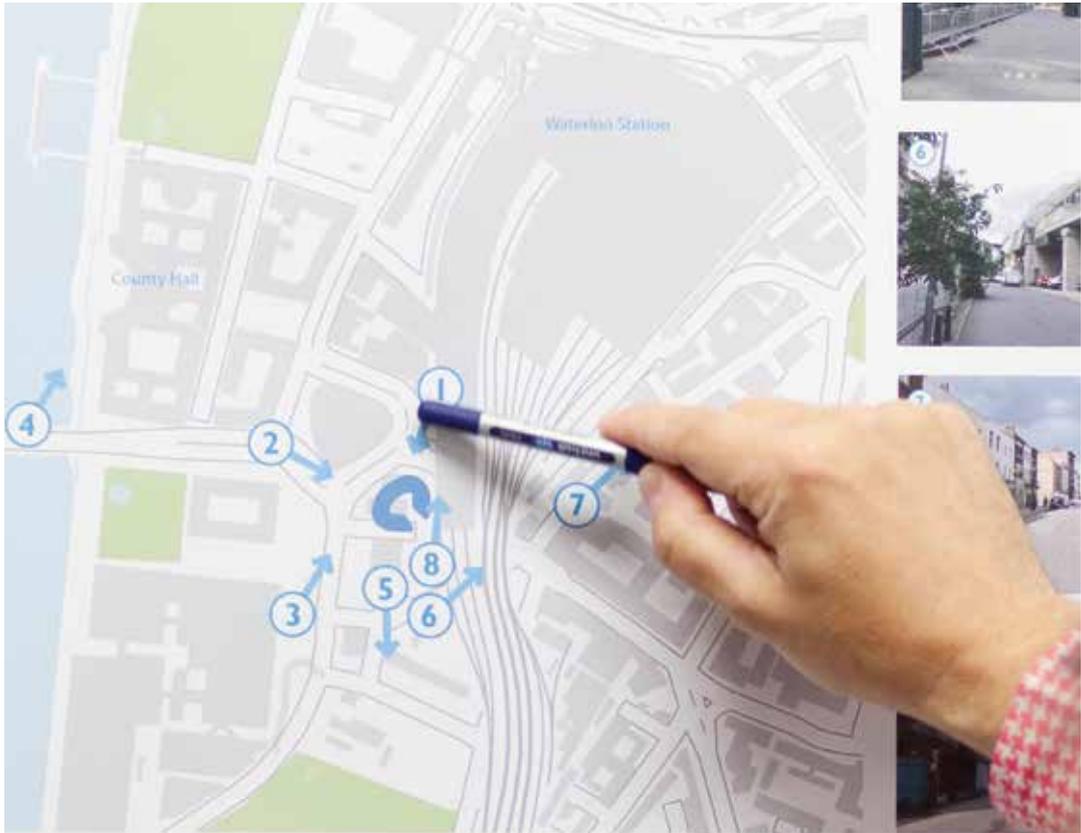
Some panels prefer to have part of their discussions in private to avoid confrontation or offence, but this is not recommended. There is considerable benefit in allowing everyone involved to hear the whole discussion. Listening to the reasons for the panel's views will help people understand them so panel members must have the confidence to voice their criticism in front of the scheme's presenters.

Objective

Avoiding prejudices of style, taste or fashion

The design review panel offers objective advice based on professional judgement and an understanding of the principles of good design. Each project is considered in the round, in light of the impact it will have on its surroundings. This is interpreted as widely as possible. The effect it will have on the surrounding landscape and its distinctive historic and cultural context, has to be evaluated, but so do the implications for the areas circulation patterns, neighbouring activities, and property uses. The views and sensitivities of the surrounding community should also be given weight. Aesthetic considerations are naturally relevant, but panel members should avoid straying into areas of personal preference unless they are supported by reasoned argument.





© Ben Blossom

Accessible

Clear advice

The design advice that the panel provides is only as valuable as the written report that conveys it. The report should turn the panel's deliberations into a coherent summary, with advice that can be acted on.

- The report should be clear and succinct, written in plain English without acronyms and jargon.
- It should explain the purpose of the panel's advice, who the advice is for and what action they are expected to take.
- It should summarise the main issues and the panel's conclusions.
- It should identify the strengths and weaknesses the panel has found in the brief, the aims and objectives of the client, or the design proposal.
- It should demonstrate a proper grasp of design issues and avoid straying into prescriptive detail.
- It should be frank but constructive.

- It should be objective and robust enough to be defended confidently if the scheme is the subject of an appeal.
- It should never attribute comments to individual members of the panel.

It should be clear in the first paragraph of the report whether the panel thinks:

- this is a good project that they support as it stands,
- this is a project that they could support provided improvements are made, or
- a fundamental re-think is required.

The chair has a critical role in assuring the quality of the written report by summing up, clearly and precisely, the advice that emerges from the review and then scrutinising, amending and approving the draft. The report is the definitive record of the panel's conclusions and should be an accurate reflection of the views given at the meeting. Once it is written, it supersedes any remarks made by individual members at the meeting.

It is essential that the report should be issued promptly, in accord with the schedules stated in advance.

Chapter 6

A robust Design Review process

Preparation

Resources

The number of staff and the facilities the panel needs will depend on the number of projects they expect to review. Most local panels have two members of staff, an administrator and a panel manager. Cabe's Design Review team consists of the Head of Design Review supported by case advisors who deliver reviews and officers who manage the delivery process. Some local panels are managed by local authority staff from the planning or urban design team. It may be useful to look at other panels' websites to find out what arrangements they have in place concerning time, costs and contractual matters. It should also be possible contact them directly to ask for their advice.

Design review staff need a thorough understanding of both the design development process and the planning system. Their duties include:

- identifying projects for review.
- liaising with the scheme promoters or applicants.
- forming an understanding of the scheme through briefings, drawings and site visits.
- briefing the panel.
- managing the panel meeting process.
- writing up the panel's comments and advice, and carrying out any follow-up work required.

It is essential that design review staff have qualifications and practical experience in these fields. They should also have the communication skills required to liaise with scheme promoters, planners, panel members and other design review panels.

Arranging panel meetings

The dates for design review meetings should be planned well in advance to ensure that members with the right mix of professional skills will be able to attend, even if one or two have to stand down because of conflicts of interest. Other expert bodies with specialist interests such as heritage or the natural environment should be invited where appropriate.

Agenda papers should be sent out a week in advance to help members prepare for the meeting. The papers should include enough background information about the projects scheduled for review to allow members to declare any conflicts of interest. However, scheme designs should not be circulated before the meeting. Experience suggests that if panel members come to the meeting with their minds already made up about the quality of the scheme it will compromise the objectivity of the review. In any case, design teams may well be working on their project up to the last minute before the review meeting.

Choosing the type of review

Most reviews are carried out as presentation sessions, where the design team and client present the scheme to the panel. This has many advantages. It gives the design team the opportunity to make a personal case for their ideas, engage in discussion and hear the panel's comments directly.

An alternative format, desktop review, involves a much smaller meeting between the chair, a second panel member and panel staff. This is an efficient way to assess returning schemes and those at the planning application stage.

When deciding which approach to use, a balance needs to be struck between the need for a fast response and the desirability of having each scheme being presented by its promoters.

Venues and facilities

Meetings may be held in one regular venue or in a different places depending on convenience and availability. Using a single venue allows the panel to make the arrangements for the presentation without having to start from scratch each time. However, a venue close to the location of the scheme might be chosen to tie in with a site visit.

There are several factors to consider when choosing a venue. It should be fully accessible, with enough room for everyone to sit and circulate comfortably. Boards to display drawings and space for models will be required. Audio-visual equipment may be needed for three dimensional fly-throughs or other on-screen presentations. Visitors who want to conceal confidential plans or models should be asked to bring their own black-out materials.

It should be stressed to those attending that drawings and three-dimensional models are the main form of presentation required by the panel. Other media should be treated as secondary, and if a team wants to display images on screen they should also provide printouts at A3 size for later study.

Briefing scheme promoters

Design review panels usually allow the scheme's promoters and design team to be present at the panel discussion. For this to work well, they should be briefed on how to present their proposals clearly and succinctly. A standard guidance document or webpage is the best way to do this.

The guidance information should

- outline the review process and present a typical agenda with indicative timings.
- suggest how the promoter can use the time available to present the scheme fully but succinctly using diagrams, architectural drawings, visualisations, words and audio visual media.
- explain who the panel's advice will be aimed at, how soon after the review it will be issued, and what action will then be expected.

Design review staff should be available to offer any further advice about panel meetings and presentations that the promoters or design team may ask for.

Site visits

Wherever possible, each development site should be visited by all the panel members before the review meeting. At the local level this can usually be arranged, but sometimes it may simply not be possible. Nevertheless, it is very important that panel members are fully aware of the characteristics of the site, context and key issues. These details may be communicated to panel members, where necessary, through briefing papers, aerial and other photos of the site and its surroundings, and a briefing by panel staff who have visited the site.

Masterplans

Where masterplans are being discussed, the panel may have to adapt their usual procedures to reflect the scale of the issues involved. There will be specific questions to be addressed at a masterplan review, and more time will usually be needed. Members should be carefully selected to ensure that the panel includes professionals with experience of development on a larger scale and its particular complexities.



Review

Structuring the meeting

Panel meetings will run more smoothly if they follow a clear structure. The following suggestions and timings will be a useful starting point. Straightforward projects can be reviewed in up to 90 minutes, although larger and more complex projects will take longer. Some local panels may fit six or seven small schemes into a half day session, and while this limits the time for discussion it may be appropriate where matters are straightforward.

1. Closed briefing for panel members

Staff should brief panel members in private before a review, introducing the significant aspects of the site and its planning history, and identifying any key issues known about the proposal. The design and client team, local authority representatives and other observers are invited into the room after this closed briefing.

2. Welcome

At the start of the sessions the chair will greet the presenters, local authority representative and any observers. If observers are present, the chair should ensure they understand they are not part of the panel and should conduct themselves accordingly. They should not try to contribute unless invited to do so by the chair.

3. Presentation

The client can be asked to introduce the presentation with a two or three minute overview of the brief, aims and objectives of the scheme. The architect or designer could then be invited to talk through the main design issues. Fifteen to 30 minutes, depending on the complexity of the scheme, is usually enough time for the presentation.

4. The local authority view

At some point during the review, the chair might invite the local authority to outline their views of the project and talk about the policy context. This can either be done immediately after the presentation or as part of the general discussion.

5. Comment and discussion

The chair should invite panel members to make their initial observations and ask for any clarifications or further information they need. Presenters should be allowed to respond to criticisms, but they must not be allowed to dominate the meeting. The chair should structure the discussion so that it flows from the general, such as the project's overall strategy, to the more detailed aspects of the design.

Chairs and panel members should remember that the first review of a scheme is the most important. It is the stage at which any major issues should be raised. Subsequent revisions will be reviewed in the light of the comments made at the previous review meeting.

Panel members must make sure that any fundamental opinions or reservations they have about the project are made clear before the client and project team leave the room. It is important that the panel's views are expressed 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 ensure that the presenting team go away with an accurate understanding of the panel's views.

Only where the panel remains clearly divided will it be necessary to reach a consensus in private, and this should be a rare occurrence.

6. Concluding in private

Once the chair has summarised the discussion, the presenting team should be thanked and asked to leave. The chair and panel can then confirm their views in private, and the staff member can summarise the points that will be covered in the written report. It is inappropriate for new observations to be introduced during this closed discussion.

Observers

Attendance at design review meetings can be a valuable source of Continuing Professional Development for panel members and facilitators. As long as confidentiality is not compromised, it can also offer a unique learning opportunity for other practitioners by allowing them to listen to experts discussing design. Being present at a review meeting will help local planning officers and council members to develop their skills, and provide them with new ideas on how to assess good design. People who are not directly engaged in the specific Design Review but who may have related or parallel responsibilities should be encouraged to attend a review meeting from time to time.

Design Council offers a wide range of people, from government ministers to interested school students, opportunities to attend their design review meetings. As well as benefitting the observers themselves, this is a useful way of demonstrating the effectiveness of Design Review as widely as possible, and making the panel more inclusive without compromising the principles of objectivity.

Design review panels may occasionally hold a design review meeting in public. As long as agreement is obtained from the promoters and the local authority, this can be an appropriate way to involve the community in the planning system.

If observers are to be present the chair should ensure that the presenting team know this before the meeting, and all observers must be made aware of the confidentiality required, particularly with pre-application schemes.

Meeting the Nolan principles

Design review panels are set up to act in the public interest. All members and chairs must therefore abide by the seven Nolan Principles of Public Life – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.



© John Beattie

10. NPPF para 64 'Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving character and quality of an area and the way it functions.'



Advice

Advice and follow-up

The formal Design Review advice report is not a minute of the panel discussion, but it should be based on comprehensive notes taken at the meeting by the panel manager or case adviser charged with writing the report. At pre-application stage the advice should be addressed to the client/design team and copied to the local planning authority for their information. If the scheme is a planning application the advice should be addressed to the local planning authority and copied to the client/design team for their information. The advice should make clear whether the panel supports the proposal or finds fundamental flaws in the design that provides a robust case for refusal in line with paragraph 64 of the NPPF¹⁰. The report should contain appropriate praise as well as criticism, and point out the strengths of a proposal alongside any flaws.

A formal report should include the names of the chair and panel members, either in the main text or as a footnote. If a report is later found to contain an error and has to be withdrawn, the date on the corrected report should be the same as on the original but the document must be clearly marked with a note explaining the reason for its reissue.

Following up after review

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 the panel staff or chair should be prepared to offer clarification if it is sought. In cases where radical design changes have been suggested, the panel will want to see that design quality has been improved and maintained through the development process, and offer some consistency of advice. This can usually be achieved by offering to review the scheme again after the revisions have been carried out

If a scheme comes in for a follow-up review, the panel must be well briefed by the staff to avoid contradicting the first review's comments. Wherever possible, some of the same panel members from the first review meeting should attend follow-up reviews. When a scheme is submitted as a planning application, a second review should take place so that the planning authority has a formal response from the panel to the designs submitted in the planning application.

Other practical matters

The business plan and preparatory work

All review panels should draw up a business plan and programme of work. This is important for any type of panel, no matter how it is set up. Experienced panels can advise on this. As part of their preparation, managers of new panels should attend meetings of other panels and familiarise themselves with all parts of the design review process, including site visits and preparatory meetings. Managers of existing panels in the area could meet to discuss the issues and ensure that best practice is shared.

Promoting the panel

Whatever level the panel is working at, the design review service will need to be promoted widely targeting the people and organisations who might use it, such as local associations of developers, project managers, architects and landscape architects. Panels must make it clear who can submit a scheme to them for review. The best approach is to state openly and transparently that submissions from throughout the public and the private sectors are welcomed.

It is important to establish and maintain a dialogue with the planning authority at the highest level. This could be achieved by regular meetings with heads of planning and councillors.

Perhaps the most direct way of promoting and publicising Design Review is to publish brochures and set up a website containing all the information needed by project promoters. In addition to a contact name and address, it should provide profiles of panel members, criteria for selecting schemes for review and application forms.

The manager, panels chair and members of the advisory board or steering group should be available to publicise the panel, and active in seeking out suitable projects for review and answering enquiries from scheme promoters and the public.



Kentish Town Health Centre © Tim Soar / Allford Hall Monaghan Morris

Useful contacts

Design Council

Angel Building
407 St John Street
London EC1V 4AB
Tel: 020 7420 5200
www.designcouncil.org.uk

Royal Institute of British Architects

66 Portland Place
London W1B 1AD
Tel: 020 7580 5533
www.architecture.com

Landscape Institute

Charles Darwin House
12 Roger Street
London WC1N 2JU
Tel: 020 7685 2640
www.landscapeinstitute.org

The Royal Town Planning Institute

41 Botolph Lane
London EC3R 8DL
Tel: 020 7929 9494
www.rtpi.org.uk

