



Design Review

What is it for and what does it achieve?



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Introduction

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) devotes a whole section to the importance of good design. Paragraph 56 states:

“The Government attaches great importance to the design of the built environment. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, is indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.”

Good design as part of sustainable development is a recurring theme throughout the NPPF and confirmed the need for design review panels in planning. Paragraph 62 states that:

“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 when appropriate refer major projects for a national design review. In general, early engagement on design produces the greatest benefits. In assessing applications, local planning authorities should add weight to the process.”

This case study looks at how Cambridge¹ has used three Design Reviews, which have a remit to raise the bar on design quality of new development.

Heather Topel, Deputy Project Director, University of Cambridge, commented that: *“There is so much development in the Cambridge area that there was a need for consistency in quality and planning criteria.”*

These Design Reviews have now become embedded (positively) in planning in Cambridge. As Chris Lamb, Chief Executive of the Kent Architecture Centre and Director Architecture Centre Network commented: *“Design Review is here to stay.”*

Various factors predispose a local authority to consider setting up a design review – their attitude to working with an independent panel, their commitment to design quality and the pace of development.

What is Design Review?

Design Review works within the context of local plan policies but is an independent and impartial evaluation process in which a panel assesses the design of a proposal. The projects that go to Design Review are usually of public significance. Design in this sense is broader than architecture and encompasses all aspects of urban design and planning. Design review is essentially about place-making and making the built-environment of our towns and cities work better.¹ The process is designed to improve the quality of buildings and places for the benefit of the public and to try to ensure that proposals deliver the quality of life outcomes.^{2 3} Panels act as a ‘critical friend’ to both planners and developers, and *“Provide a forum for constructive assistance,”* said Chris Lamb. They supplement the local authorities’ assessment of a proposal.

¹ References to Cambridge refer to the sub-region of Cambridge, a circular area within 10 miles radius of the city centre. Four local authorities administer this area: Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire DC, East Cambridgeshire DC and Cambridgeshire County Council.

CABE at Design Council argued that 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 early on, enabling design changes to 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 low carbon design and sustainable transport options
- 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.⁴

Design review first appeared as Royal Fine Art panels in 1929. The role was undertaken by CABE in 1999 and broadened.⁵ The remit was passed to regional panels when CABE merged with the Design Council in 2010. Since then many new panels have sprung up. But the CABE principles of design review, especially those of seeing proposals as early as possible, and the broad spectrum of relevant expertise on a panel, have largely been followed.⁶

Design Review is not confined to the UK. It has also fairly recently been introduced in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA.⁷

CABE Ten Principles of Design Review

Expert: the review is undertaken by leading designers who have an acknowledged standing and expertise.

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

Accountable: the panel and its advice must be clearly seen to work for the benefit of the public. The panel reports will be published and publicly available where the scheme is the subject of a planning application.

Transparent: the panel's remit, membership, governance processes and funding are in the public domain.

Proportionate: Design Review will be used for major projects and projects whose significance warrants the investment needed to provide the service.

Timely: it should take place as early as possible in the design process, because this can avoid wasted time. It also costs less to make changes at an early stage.

Advisory: the panel does not take planning decisions, but it offers impartial advice for the Local Planning Authority, who does.

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

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

How many are there?

There isn't a national register of review panels but a national survey in 2009 found that 88% of local authorities had access to some kind of design review.⁸ Take-up is not universal but there has been increasing interest in the last twelve months. Most big cities have access to a panel and there are many in East and South-East, reflecting the intense growth pressures.

Some panels are scheme specific and have a finite life. Some cover regions.⁹ Others cover counties or unitary areas, eg Berkshire, Devon & Somerset¹⁰ and Cornwall.¹¹ Some cover a single local authority, as in East Devon¹² or a city eg Bristol, Oxford and Edinburgh.^{13 14 15} Most of the London Boroughs panels were set up between 2005-2007, for example Hackney, Islington, Lewisham and Newham.^{16 17 18 19}

Some have been single project based, for example Thames gateway, Eco-towns, (now disbanded) and the London [Olympic] Legacy Development Corporation.^{20 21 22} The University of Cambridge has set up a panel for its North West Cambridge site.²³ There has also been a cultural change amongst house builders in welcoming design review and some have their own in-house panels, for example Barratt Homes London.

Design Review in Cambridge

There are three design review panels in Cambridge.

The Cambridgeshire Quality Panel (CQP) (formed 2010) is administered by the County Council and provides quality review for applications in the major growth sites. It gives impartial advice to the local planning authorities to help to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved and assists them in reinforcing the high quality aspirations set out in the *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*.²⁴ Heather Topel said:

“The CQP provides the guidance CABE would have provided plus an understanding of Cambridge issues and context. It concerns itself with wider issues of transport, sustainability and community beyond design quality. The CQP has been useful, not least because we see the same people each time. They know the site and understand the constraints and are able to make relevant comments.”

City Council Design and Conservation Panel supports Cambridge City Council in delivering its design and conservation objectives.²⁵ Its purpose is to help secure the highest possible design quality of buildings and spaces, and to preserve and enhance the historic environment.

South Cambridgeshire District Council Design Enabling Panel was set up in 2015 to review development proposals and provide constructive advice to developers and their design teams that will enable them to enhance the design quality of significant projects in order to promote sustainable communities.²⁶

The Shape East Design Review panel, chaired by Bob Allies of Allies & Morrison Architects, is also available to review schemes for the East of England.

The panels cover different geographical areas and report to different authorities. The panel members of the City and South Cambs panels are

Cambridge based while the members the CQP Quality panel are from further afield. The CQP looks at large strategic developments that go to the Joint Planning Committee for approval. The other two panels look at smaller schemes and the quality of individual buildings.

Cambridge Quality Charter for Growth

The Four Cs



Community – Building a sense of community by providing a greater choice of housing along with community facilities which assist active participation of people in their neighbourhood (including encouraging developers to set up proper systems of governance for their developments early in the process).

Connectivity – Locating new developments where they can benefit from high connectivity to jobs and services and provision of sustainable infrastructure to match the pace of the development.

Climate – Tackling climate change through good design, site layout and imaginative landscaping, including innovative approaches to energy, transport, waste and water (water treated as a friend not an enemy).

Character - Creating places of character with distinctive neighborhoods' and public realm that encouraged people to walk and cycle.

Who are the members?

“Panels include master planners, urban designers, as well as architects, supplemented by engineering consultants in transport and sustainability. Being informed about the locality is important as well as having panel members with a national or international perspective.” Chris Lamb.

The CQP has a pool of 12 members, shortly to expand to 17. Members are appointed by a Steering Group and are in the main, architects and urban designers with expertise in housing, transport, sustainability and the environment. Typically 5 members conduct a particular review.

Similarly the City Council Design and Conservation Panel meetings have 6-8 people, with skills in architecture, planning, urban design, landscape design and the historic environment. Membership is by nomination by bodies such as the RIBA, RICS, RTPI, although members are all locally based.

How are they funded?

Essex Design Review and the South East Design Review panel were the first to introduce charging.²⁷ Administered by Kent Architecture Centre, their charges were £3,600 for a single half-day review up to £7,500 for a full-day of up to 4 reviews. *“Many were initially opposed to the idea but the development sector saw the value and were prepared to pay,”* said Chris Lamb.

Tim Watkins, Development Control Officer, Cambridgeshire County Council:
“Charges need to be clear and transparent and design review needs to be seen as an automatic part of process like consulting Environment Agency.”

In Cambridge the County Council and South Cambridgeshire levy charges on the applicant for taking schemes to the panel remunerate panel members for their attendance. However the City Council makes no charge for its design review and members of the City Panel are not remunerated, although its Chairman receives an honorarium.

How do design review panels operate?

Taking schemes to design review is voluntary but there is an expectation that all significant schemes will be reviewed. Planners may suggest, at outline planning stage that it is in the developer's interest to take proposals to a panel. Robert Offord, Programme Manager Design South East, mentioned that South East Design Review has been working with local authorities to embed design review in the planning process: *"If design review becomes the default for larger, more complex or sensitive schemes then developers will feel less aggrieved and planners more confident in sign-posting design review."*

The role of the local planning officer in highlighting the issues the panel needs to focus on, in the briefing notes sent out before the meeting and in the pre-meeting, is crucial to the effectiveness of the panel.

Although the arrangements for open and closed meetings can vary Design Review typically entails the following steps:

1) Pre-Meeting

Planning officers highlight the key planning issues for the panel to focus on and there is a discussion of the issues that need to be explored and addressed as part of the meeting. The developers and their professional team are not present during this pre-meeting. The panel sometimes visit the site of a major development before the design review.

2) Presentation

The developer and the professional team provide an overview of the scheme, describing the aspiration and concept for the project and the brief, and the design proposals.

3) Open Discussions

The panel chair invites the panel members to comment and ask questions. In the case of the CQP this follows the Four Cs Quality Charter format.

4) Closed Discussions

The planning officer/s and panel members discuss the proposal; the Chair sums up the main points that will be addressed in the report to the developer.

5) After the meeting

A report of the meeting is drafted by the Panel Secretary and agreed with the Chair.

These are not public meetings and attendance is by invitation only. Councillors from relevant authorities are informed of meeting dates and agenda items; they may attend the open section of the meetings as observers but should notify the Panel Secretary in advance.

A steering group typically oversees the panel and conducts an annual review of their role with the local authority planning team and key members.

Timing

Timing is important. *“Proposals need to be taken to review early enough that comments might have an influence on the design yet late enough that there is something to show the panel,”* said Heather Topel. Chris Lamb commented that their advice was: *“To see proposals early at outline stage and then again as often as appropriate at reserved matters. It’s a judgment call exactly when to take schemes to a panel. But it is the local authority’s call.”*

The panel needs to see schemes at the right moment when there is still time to influence decisions. In commenting on proposals for the new Cambridge Science Park Station the case officer, Tim Watkins, commented that: *“If the panel had seen the proposals earlier they would definitely have had an influence. But the application came too late to improve quality.”*

“Panels can comment on parameter plans and design codes if they get to review them, but once they are agreed and the process has moved to reserved matters the panel should not go backwards,” said Peter Studdert.

There also needs to be an opportunity for the panel to revise and renew its

opinion as the project develops and the detailed design is presented at reserved matters stage.

Graham Tweed, Education Capital Strategy Manager, Cambridgeshire County Council, talking about the massive schools programme he is managing said that exactly when to take schemes to the panel is a big challenge. His team try and take schemes when there is still room for manoeuvre and the design team can take the suggestions on board.

Do they make a difference and improve quality?

It is difficult to be specific about how design review improves design quality or speeds the process. *“But there are numerous examples of where design review has improved schemes, some beyond recognition. In some cases design review has turned around a scheme. But it is probably impossible to measure the benefit of having a panel, but if the local authority does not think they are valuable they will scrap it,”* said Chris Lamb.

The panel’s views are taken seriously by planning committees and aid decision-making about particular schemes. The panel may also have an indirect influence on the quality of applications. *“The fact that a panel exists sends a signal to the development community. This is at least an important role as a review of the detail of a scheme,”* said Barry Shaw, Director of the Essex Design Initiative.

There is some research on design review in the UK. In 2009 CABE conducted a survey of panels that suggested 91% of local planning authorities felt there were benefits in design review and that 70% of schemes were improved.

Research by Elaine Paterson (2011) at the School of the Built Environment, Northumbria University aimed to assess the usefulness of Design Review by interviewing representatives from 13 panels, planners and developers. She found that all 33 respondents (except one developer) thought the Design Review panels were useful, although for different reasons. Planners felt that the panel’s comments could help support a refusal while developers felt that comments helped them negotiate with planners. Some panel members felt they filled a skills gap in planning authorities. However, most respondents considered that the panel’s role was not as clear as it could be to the key players and the public. Most also felt that better communication was needed between planners and panel. All thought formal monitoring of Design Review impact was needed, perhaps done through planning officer case reports or annual reviews of sample cases.²⁸

In Cambridge Glen Richardson, Urban Design and Conservation Manager definitely felt it made a difference: *“But it clearly varies, especially on how good the architects are or how much the officers are able to influence the developers.”*

In South Cambs Paul Mumford, Team Leader New Communities, said: *“If you get design review right it’s really helpful. Now part of planning process that gives decision-makers confidence that design proposals have been properly tested. The Quality Panel’s advice has led to significant improvements in some schemes.”*

Barry Shaw : *“The planning system is weighted in favour of development. That is why the influential role of the panel is so important. A panel has limited*

powers and is successful to the extent that it is able to articulate clearly what needs to be done. Don't win all the things they look at by any means and on some schemes they only have a limited influence. But they don't often get things wrong or give wrong advice. Panels help both planners and developers take a longer perspective, especially if the panel is properly embedded in the system, as it is in Cambridge."

Do they smooth or speed up the process?

Design review can speed up the process and can help to unlock things when relations between developer and planners have reached an impasse. *"They can make for more informal and positive conversations at an early stage if planners know they can rely on expert opinion for support. The panel can also suggest planners cut developers more slack or the obverse, they can tell developers to think again,"* said Robert Offord

Chris Lamb: *A good panel develops over time and begins to feel worthwhile. An effective panel speeds up the planning process by giving confidence to officers and members,* Peter Studdert. *"Design review certainly doesn't slow the process down."*

In commenting on the University's North West Cambridge development, Heather Topel suggested that design review: *"May smooth the path and we have got determination on all our proposals in 13 weeks which accords with the planning performance agreement."*

How do they help the planning authority?

More than anything an independent expert panel provides confidence. They give planners and Councillors confidence at decision stage, can give planners the confidence to negotiate with developers, and provide a useful testing ground for the emerging views of planning officers. Glen Richardson: *"It provides them with a heads up, a verification and confirmation, and sometimes even criticism."* John Worthington, Chair Cambridgeshire Quality Panel: *"With a panel backing them up, planners can demand more from developers."*

Robert Offord: *"As well as giving confidence to planners to approve good schemes, design review also gives planners the confidence to decide schemes are not good enough to approve."* Glen Richardson gave an example of this support: *"The Bovis scheme at Clay farm was a poor scheme. The architects were struggling and the panel gave them a hard time. This led to the appointment of new architects and a much better scheme."*

Robert Offord: *"Panels are good at anticipating the future and imagining what might go wrong at detailed design if the outline or concept is flawed. They may be able to spot things that officers are unable to see."*

Barry Shaw: *"Planning departments have lost experienced staff and this has reduced their ability to take design decisions. But it is wrong to try to use design review as a sticking plaster for under resourced planning departments."* As Chris Lamb commented: *"The closer you get to effective partnering with the local authority the better."*

Conversations continue after the panel when the substance of the panel's letter is discussed between applicants and officers. Often both parties agree

with the panel findings but whether they agree to change the scheme in response varies from scheme to scheme. Ian Howes, Principal Urban Designer, South Cambs suggested that when Councillors are skeptical of officer's views they appreciate and respect the panel's comments and give them a lot of weight. Design review gives Councillors a cross-check on officer recommendations. It has moved from it being a nice idea to being a normal part of the planning process.

Graham Tweed reflected: *"It was a steep learning curve but I believe that over the last two-three years we have developed a very positive clear approach. The key was agreeing that design review should be a mutually valuable experience and not about ticking a box."*

How do they help the developer and design team?

Barry Shaw commented that: *"It needs a good developer and a confident design team to open a scheme to review and possible criticism. The weakest teams and the weakest designs are the least likely to come to a review panel."*

Cambridge is good on design *"but to deliver quality need a really good developer with long-term interest like the University in NW Cambridge. Most developers have very short-term interests,"* said Jonathan Gimblett, Associate Director (Development), Countryside Properties. For the NW Cambridge scheme, Heather Topel commented that design review: *"had a positive influence on the tone of pre-application meetings with planning officers."*

Countryside Properties employ strong design teams. As Jonathan Gimblett, commented in relation to their flagship scheme, Abode in Great Kneighton, SW Cambridge: *"We had a strong concept and our designers did a good job. It was reassuring for them to get positive feedback. It was a useful check to know what we were doing was supported. They found it useful to have their peers say it was good."* But even a good developer can forget that it was not always thus and can get complacent about the value of the design review process. *"It was useful in the early days to bounce ideas off, but latterly it has seemed to have been a bit of a waste of time,"* said Jonathan Gimblett.

When does design review fail?

Panels don't run themselves; they need to be keyed-into the issues by the planning team. *"Officers need to attend panels, present their views and take part in subsequent discussion,"* said Barry Shaw. *"In some cases panels can get too cosy and need revitalising with new people and a turn-over of members."*

Some things are fixed or outside the remit of the panel to influence. *"Panel members need to understand the constraints under which the design teams are working, for example the transport constraints from the highway authority,"* said Heather Topel.

Robin Nicholson, Chair, Cambridgeshire Quality Panel: *"Darwin Green in north west Cambridge is example of this where a major change from the original proposal – the insertion of a supermarket and attendant car park into the centre of the scheme – meant that the master plan should have been revised. But the panel were unable to revisit the master plan because of Section 106 parameter agreements."*

Glen Richardson said that the planning officer may have to remind panel that some things are fixed. Parameter plans may have been agreed and cannot be changed. He felt there might need of a refresher course on certain aspects of planning process. In contrast, Ian Howes thought the criticism that panels home in on issues that cannot be changed may not be entirely fair. It may have been a failure by the officer to brief the panel or a failure in the applicant's presentation, but it is also valid for the panel to challenge things they see as wrong, even if these things seem inflexible.

How can they be improved?

The key issue is getting the developers to have a longer-term perspective. *"This needs long-term organisational learning. Barratt London are good, but others much less so,"* said John Worthington.

It is important that the Chair's summing up and the report that goes to the applicant accurately and succinctly reflects the discussion and recommendations of the panel meeting. *"The feedback process and the notes of the panel's comments sometimes don't accurately reflect the discussion and opinion on the day,"* said Heather Topel.

Positive case officer involvement is crucial. The panel needs to be fully briefed on the site, the design issues and any concerns before the review. The panel needs to be appraised of the constraints under which the design team is operating. Officers need to attend panel meetings, hear the discussion and clarify the panel's comments.

Emma Fletcher, Property Director, Marshall Cambridge suggested that it would be helpful if either the developer or the local authority could request a review. She would also like to empower the panel more so that their recommendations were crisper and more definite. Ian Howes, also felt that, in an effort to avoid offence, the panel's recommendations are worded too delicately and that emphasis and clarity may be lost. But as well as highlighting things that need improvement, the report should be balanced with things that are working well, to give a more balanced view of schemes.

Graham Tweed would like to see design reviews across the country and be part of the process so there is greater consistency. As well as in Cambridge, he also works in Peterborough, which doesn't have a design review panel and adopts different design quality standards.

Not the whole story

Design review is not the only way good design can be supported. For example, South East Design Review also offer monthly design surgeries with case officers and provide desk-side support on the more trying schemes.

For further information on the principles of design reviews, and details on how to present to a panel or set one up, see [CABE at Design Council](#).

Abode



Abode, Great Kneighton, Countryside Properties. Proctor & Matthews Architects. Civic Trust National Panel Special Award 2015.

Skanska



Seven Acres, Great Kneighton, Skanska. Formation Architects, Ideal Home of the Year Award at the Blue Ribbon Awards 2013



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Tim Watkins, Development Control Officer, Cambridgeshire County Council

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