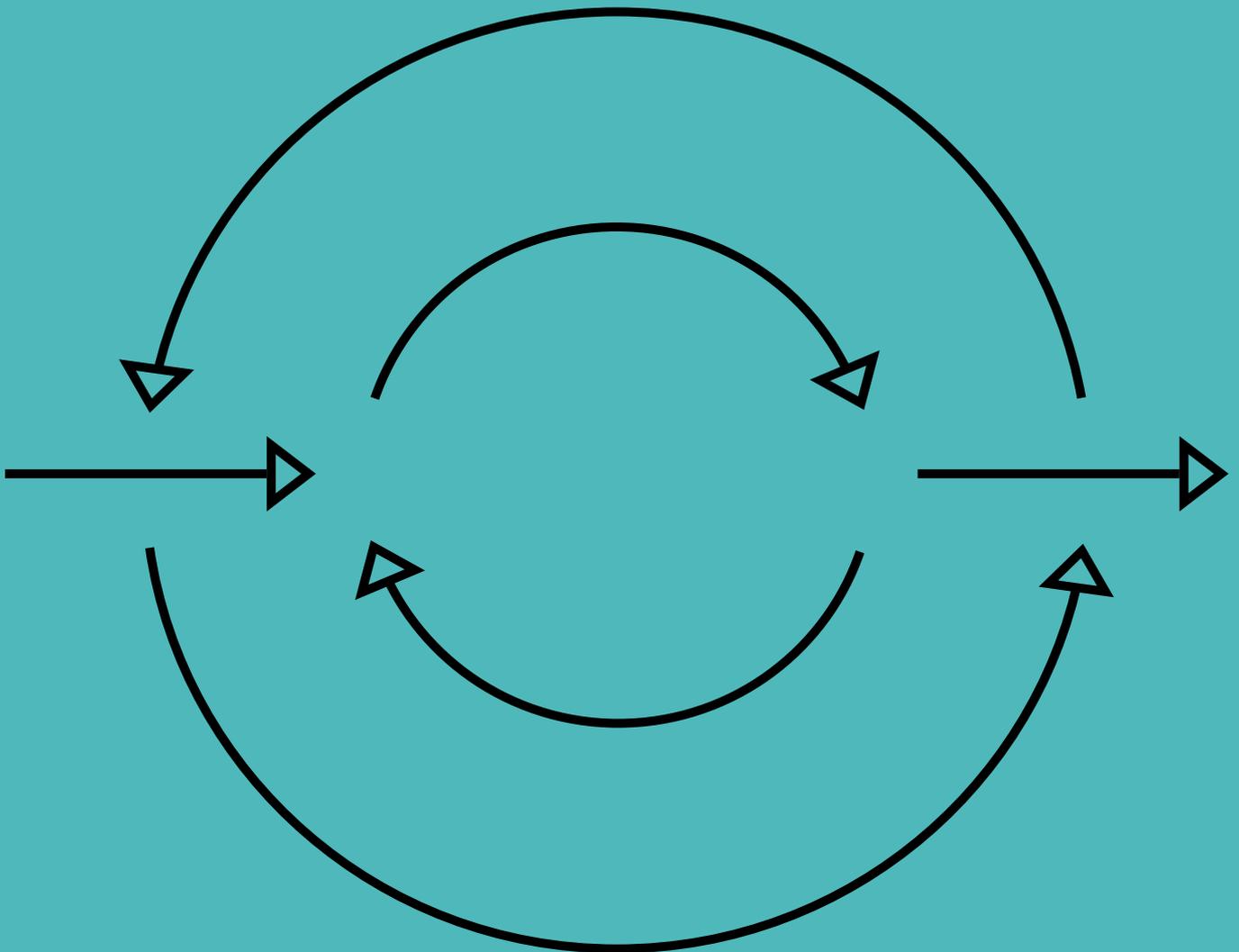# Running Reviews: How can Authorities manage efficient in-house Design Review services?

Michael Kennedy

Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality and equality of everyday places by building the public sector's capacity for proactive planning.

10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.

RUNNING REVIEWS
How can Authorities manage efficient in-house Design Review services?

This Practice Note is based on research carried out as part of a year-long placement in the London Borough of Enfield. The research took place from April 2019 to March 2020 and takes the running of an in-house Design Review Panel as a case-study. The research was completed before the Covid-19 public health emergency forced Authorities to work remotely, at least temporarily, including delivery of remote Design Review services.[1]

Whilst the research draws on the experience in-practice at Enfield, this Practice Note sets out findings and recommendations that may be useful to other Authorities when setting up or managing in-house panels, whether carried out 'in situ' or remotely. Authorities are invited to help test, develop and improve the findings and recommendations put forward in this Practice Note.

CONTEXT
Across London, local planning authorities (Authorities) have faced a decline in place-shaping capacity, presenting a significant challenge to ensuring good quality development.[2] At the same time, the use of design review to support the delivery of high-quality developments has increased. Design Review is widely regarded as having a positive impact on design quality and place-making.[3]

A 2018 study showed that 86% of London Authorities were operating, or were in the process of setting up, design review panels (DRPs).[4] Of those London Authorities who used Design Review to support good quality outcomes, two thirds had panels managed in-house by officers, with the remaining third subcontracted to external partners to administrate and manage. Overall, 76% of Design Review services, whether in-house or external, charged fees to users (applicants), reflecting

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[1] Across Authorities in the UK, Design Review services are known by various names (e.g. Design Review Panel, Quality Review Panel, Conservation and Design Advisory Panel, Place Review). For the purposes of this Practice Note, 'Design Review', and 'Design Review Panel' will be used to cover these different terms.
[2] GLA, Placeshaping Capacity Survey (2018)
[3] Place Alliance, A Housing Design Audit for England (2020)
[4] GLA, Design Review Survey (2018), in which OPDC, LLDC and City of London Corporation are included as local planning authorities.

the commercialisation of Design Review and the creation of a market representing a potentially substantial source of income for local authority planning departments.[5]

Since Authorities are more often than not required to generate income to fund this service, Design Review can often be regarded as a means of funding design officer posts to increase in-house design skills and capacity. Given this context, the systems and processes for running in-house panels must be efficient and streamlined in order to bring maximum value, both financially and in terms of achieving improved design outcomes.

[5] GLA / Place Alliance, Reviewing Design Review in London (2019)

APPROACH

The findings and recommendations of this Practice Note have been developed through a number of approaches:

1. Desktop research was carried out into the provision of Design Review services across London, both in-house and externally managed, to understand how they are managed and costed.

2. Desktop research was carried out to establish the types of resources already existing in the public domain to support the management and administration of in-house DRPs.

3. A consultation exercise was carried out with panel members, chairs, service users and LB Enfield officers, using the templates provided in the Practice Note 'Measuring Design Review'.[6]

4. The administration and management of the Enfield DRP 'in-placement' enabled the testing of a set of developing tools to increase efficiencies and streamline processes.

5. A workshop with in-house officers / panel managers was held, organised in collaboration with Urban Design London (UDL), to understand current practices and to share concerns of panel managers from across London Authorities.[7] The workshop was attended by eight in-house panel managers, representing 47% of the total of London Authority-managed panels. The workshop offered an opportunity to discuss the tools developed at Enfield as shared resources to support the administration and management of other in-house DRPs.

UDL workshop, 'Running an effective panel': discussion with Kathy MacEwen and panel managers.

6 publicpractice.org.uk/resources/measuring-design-review
7 UDL Event, 29.01.19, Running an effective panel

FINDINGS

The research revealed significant variation in the way that in-house DRPs and managed, but this exposed a number of consistent findings:

1. INEFFICIENCIES ARE UNDERMINING THE VIABILITY OF IN-HOUSE PANELS

As in-house panels are based on an income generation model, panel managers reported a pressure to generate income to fund design capacity, either their own post or the wider service. In Enfield, a lack of capacity to run the panel was resulting in a deteriorating situation where the administrative support structure was not able to track and keep up with demand. The initial cost projections and assumptions of the project demonstrated that the service was not viable. This revealed a need for tools and capacity that could manage the pipeline of projects and associated expenditure in an efficient way to make the panel financially viable or, ideally, to generate income.

2. PANEL MANAGERS NEED A FORUM FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING TO ENSURE BEST PRACTICE

Panel managers were typically situated in an Authority's urban design or heritage team, undertaking management of the panel as part of a wider role which often involved other responsibilities including a heavy case load of applications. Most managers felt isolated, with little peer-to-peer discussion of best practice and many officers expressing the desire for a forum for cross-collaboration and knowledge exchange.
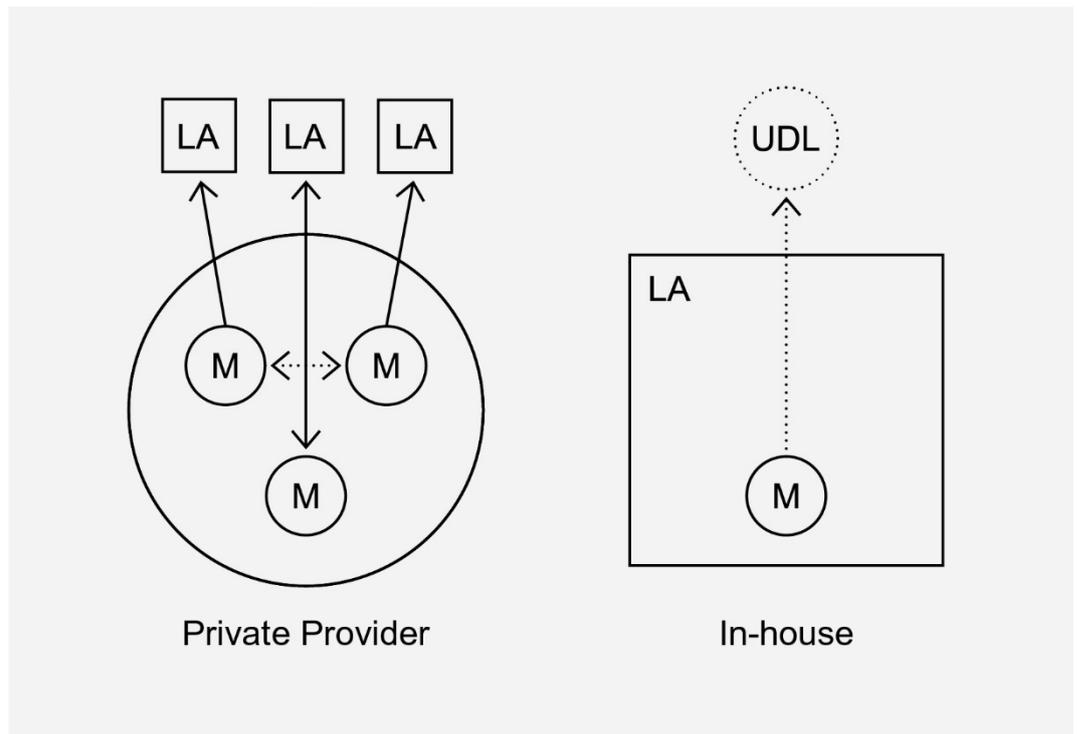

Diagram illustrating the relative isolation of an in-house panel manager operating within a local authority and seeking shared learning from outside workshops, versus a panel manager working as part of a team of managers for an external provider.

M = panel manager; LA = local authority; UDL = Urban Design London

3. RUNNING IN-HOUSE DRPs CAN BE EXCESSIVELY TIME CONSUMING WHEN INEFFICIENTLY MANAGED

Universally, panel managers found the administrative element of room bookings, diary management, event management, financial management and extensive email correspondence a burden to manage that interfered with their ability to do their job well. Many participants felt that their time to focus on quality report writing or on other duties, such as planning case work, was restricted, reporting that they felt compromised by this fact. This was particularly problematic where panel managers worked part-time but were expected to undertake other duties.

4. A LACK OF TOOLS AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE INHIBITS EFFICIENT IN-HOUSE PANEL MANAGEMENT

There was a lack of available tools and poor understanding of how to manage project finances, panel member attendance and payment, with little guidance available on 'best practice' management and administration of a DRP. This caused frustrations and inefficiencies, resulting in a reduced capacity to deliver a quality review service. There was a widespread desire to share notes on financial management, spreadsheets and templates.

5. A LACK OF FINANCIAL TRACKING PUTS VIABILITY OF IN-HOUSE PANELS AT RISK

In all cases, in-house Design Review providers charged less than private providers, with the highest Authority fee charged £4,340, compared to the most expensive private provider charing £4,500 for a similar type of review in a different Authority (though there is a wide variation in type, format and charging structure between Authorities). Officers and panel managers reported that it was not always easy to keep track of finances in order to make the case for their departments and teams. Some reported being restricted from managing the accounts of the panel, effectively being kept 'in the dark' about how their actions were making an impact on the viability of the panel. This situation posed a risk to the existence of the panel as a mechanism for increasing in-house capacity.

6. A TREND TOWARDS OUTSOURCING SUGGESTS A NEED FOR IMPROVED EFFICIENCIES

Desktop research revealed that, where in 2018 two thirds of panels were managed in-house,[8] now only half (49%) of London boroughs manage their own design review panels, with 34% being outsourced and 17% either not reporting or having no panel. This suggests that outsourcing has become more prevalent and highlights the need for a rigorous and efficient 'back end' infrastructure to allow the panel to deliver an efficient and quality Design Review service at the same time as meeting the council's aspirations to build design capacity.

- ● 17 = In-house
- ● 12 = Outsourced
- ● 6 = No panel
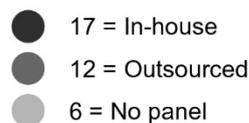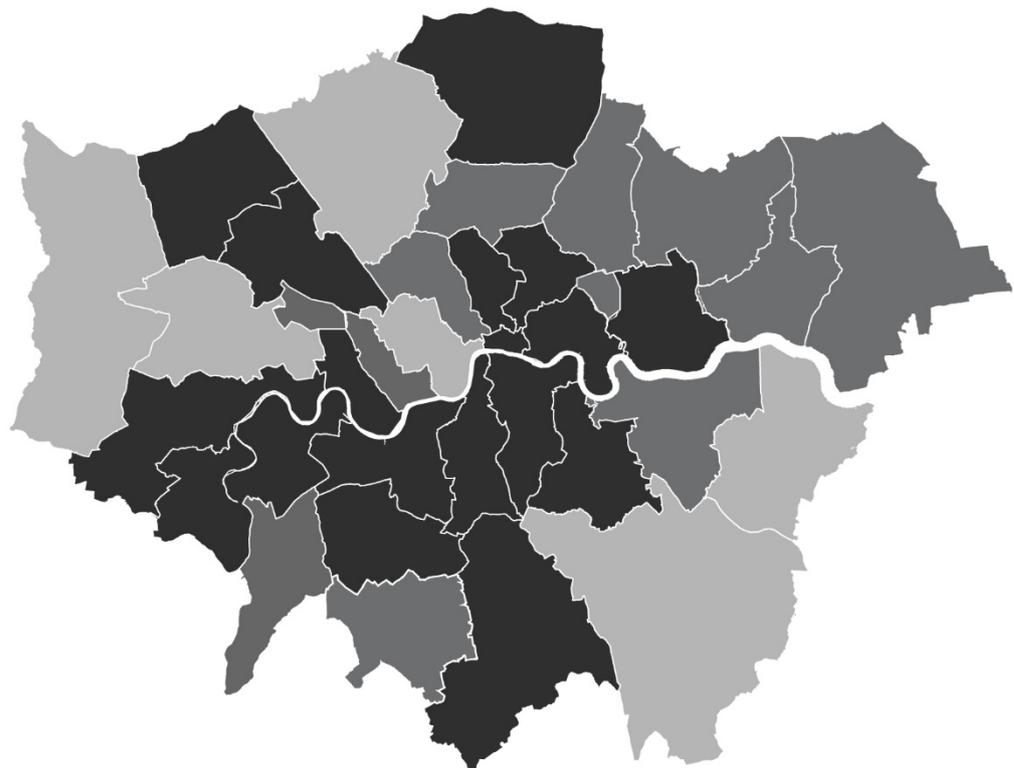
Design Review in London: In-house and outsourced panel management.

[8] GLA, Design Review Survey (2018)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In Enfield, through implementation of the findings of the research and testing of the tools designed to improve the infrastructure of running an in-house Design Review service 'in practice' across the duration of the placement, a number of positive outcomes were achieved:

— The number and quality of reviews increased.
— Panel members were reimbursed on time.
— The service became income-generating to the equivalent of a full-time urban design officer post.

These findings suggest three key recommendations:

1. A TOOLKIT FOR IN-HOUSE PANEL MANAGERS IS ESSENTIAL FOR STREAMLINING ADMINISTRATION

Timetables, spreadsheets and templates are necessary for streamlining processes, for delivering the quality and quantity of design reviews needed for Authorities to raise design standards and to achieve client satisfaction. This is important to enable in-house panels to become cost-neutral or income-generating, thereby increasing in-house design capacity for the Authority.

2. A PANEL MANAGERS NETWORK IS NEEDED TO PROMOTE BEST PRACTICE

Enabling individual officers from different Authorities to share knowledge can help to develop best practice processes and systems to increase efficiencies. Existing organisations such as UDL already offer networking opportunities but could offer sessions tailored for in-house panel managers to support collaborative working and cross-Authority knowledge sharing.

3. A STANDARD LEVEL OF QUALITY IS REQUIRED TO SUPPORT IN-HOUSE DESIGN REVIEW PROVIDERS

Since Design Review has become a market with competing providers and varying costs, setting out expected levels of quality of communication and a rigorous understanding of costing and purpose of charging is important to make the case for in-house provision in order to build in-house capacity and resources.

RESOURCES

The tools associated with this Practice Note form a downloadable resource – a 'dashboard' template – developed to streamline the process of setting up and running an in-house DRP, including recording income, outgoings, payment of members, financial projections and pipeline of projects. This set of resources can be adapted to suit the users' Authority. The resources offer a starting point for collectively creating a 'best practice' process to administrate and manage panels efficiently and effectively. By making the job of running an in-house DRP easier, more efficient and more streamlined, this will give officers capacity to focus on good quality output of Design Review, rather than on the administration of the service.

The resources can be downloaded from publicpractice.org.uk/resources. Public Practice welcome feedback on the findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note to help update current resources and inform future research. Please contact us at info@publicpractice.org.uk.

NEXT STEPS

This Practice Note has investigated the processes of running an in-house DRP and has suggested a series of guidelines for how Authorities can streamline administration of the panel to create efficiencies and cost savings. To take these findings further, there are a number of areas of research that would benefit from further development:

— Invite panel managers from other Authorities to join the group of panel managers from LB Hounslow, Croydon, Enfield, Hackney and Islington that has been established to become a sounding board for the testing and development of the templates and resources.
— Continue to work with UDL to provide networking and peer support sessions for panel managers across London and beyond.
— Contribute to the UDL resource bank that is being created for Design Review.
— As Authorities adapt to the 'new normal' enforced by Covid-19, design review has moved online. Remote reviews have successfully been carried out on many projects, but the tools and templates associated with this Practice Note could be reviewed to ensure that they assist with achieving the best outcomes from online Design Review.
— Consider how the dashboard could be updated to incorporate monitoring and evaluation of panels, in particular integrating the

monitoring framework produced for Practice Note 'Measuring Design Review'.

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Design Review is widely recognised as having a positive impact on design quality and placemaking, and the provision of Design Review Panels is encouraged in national policy in relation to achieving well-designed places.

With the majority of Design Review services charging fees to applicants, this market represents a potentially substantial source of income for local authority planning departments. Many Authorities are using this income as a means of funding design officer posts to increase in-house design skills and capacity.

Given this context, the systems and processes for running in-house panels must be efficient and streamlined in order to bring maximum value, both financially and in terms of achieving improved design outcomes.

This Practice Note draws on research carried out during a year-long placement in the London Borough of Enfield. It explores the management and administration of in-house Design Review Panels and is accompanied by a set of resources designed to support the efficient and rigorous management of the procedures required to deliver a high-quality, cost-effective Design Review service in-house.

#CapacityBuilding #Design #DesignReview #Impact #DesignGovernance #PlanningProcess #PreApplication

Practice Notes and other resources are available
to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources