

DESIGN REVIEW

An Introduction for Planning Committee Members

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RELATED RESOURCES	<p>PN011_Engaging Members_V1 PN011_Checklist for Officers_V1</p>
ABOUT	<p>This resource was produced as part of the Public Practice Research and Development programme and should be read alongside the Practice Note: PN011_Engaging Members_V1. Guidance for using the resource can be found within the Practice Note.</p> <p>Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources</p> <p>Public Practice welcomes feedback to help update current resources and inform future research. If you are interested in contributing to our research please contact us at info@publicpractice.org.uk</p>

DESIGN REVIEW

An Introduction for Planning Committee Members

WHAT IS DESIGN REVIEW AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Design Review is a process to support planning authorities, providing independent, multi-disciplinary, specialist advice. Design Review Panels (DRP) are made up of industry professionals, including architects, landscape architects, urban designers and engineers, often including specialisms such as heritage and sustainability.

Typically, Design Reviews are used for larger-scale schemes at an early stage in the Pre-App process and are often followed up with further reviews at later stages.¹ Formats for design review meetings vary, but generally involve around 5 panel members, representatives from the local planning authority (Authority) including planning officers, and the applicant team. Panel members provide feedback on presented schemes, highlighting strengths, weaknesses and any opportunities for improvement. Following the meeting, a report is issued to summarise feedback, providing a succinct insight into issues facing the scheme and how these have been dealt with. Information from reports can be helpful to Members when analysing and determining applications.

WHY IS IT BENEFICIAL FOR PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS TO ENGAGE WITH DESIGN REVIEW?

Extreme housing demand means the GLA has set targets to construct over 500,000 new homes in London in the next 10 years, with much of the South East under similar pressure. In many areas, this has led to proposals of unprecedented scale and density.² The role of Planning Committee Members has therefore never been so pressured or complex.

To analyse and determine schemes of such complexity in such short time periods is an enormous challenge. Feedback from Design Review can help to give Members more confidence, for example highlighting where a scheme of exceptional quality can help to justify an uplift in scale. Alternatively, it may help to highlight where problems may lie, and if applicants have failed to act on advice. Design Review can offer additional support for Members in a number of ways, from attending meetings to

¹ An approximate measure of schemes eligible for Design Review used by some panels is those over 10,000m² or 50 residential units, though this can vary significantly depending on location and panel setup.

² Draft London Plan, Dec 2019, Policy H1 Increasing housing supply

gaining a greater insight into the design process, to provision of additional training.

HOW CAN DESIGN REVIEW HELP TO SUPPORT PLANNING AUTHORITIES?

Demanding development briefs, often incorporating high densities and constrained budgets, mean planning officers often face challenging negotiations during the Pre-App process. Examples of how Design Review can support them in this are set out below:

- **PROVIDING SPECIFIC INDEPENDENT EXPERTISE**
Panel members are experts in their fields, and often have more in depth knowledge in specialist areas than would otherwise be available to planning authorities. For example, a panel member specialising in education design could be used to review an application for a new school. The independence and objectivity that this brings can be helpful in negotiating with applicants.
- **IMPROVING QUALITY OF INDIVIDUAL SCHEMES**
Suggestions from panel members that come up during Design Review help to improve the quality of proposals. This can allow schemes that were already in good shape to become excellent, though often the most impact can be made in bringing poorer quality proposals up to acceptable levels.
- **ADDING WEIGHT TO PLANNING / URBAN DESIGN ADVICE OF CASE OFFICER**
The panel provide independent advice, and much of the value of the review process lies in the fresh ideas and approaches they bring. There is typically strong alignment between panel advice and Officer advice and where Applicants have previously been reluctant to take on board Officer advice, this can help prompt action.
- **HELPING REFUSE PROBLEM SCHEMES ON DESIGN GROUNDS**
It is always the first aim to work constructively with applicants to improve quality, but occasionally where applicants are not willing to cooperate, feedback from the DRP can help Members identify, articulate and justify reasons to refuse low quality design.
- **PROVIDING TRAINING SESSIONS FOR PLANNING OFFICERS AND MEMBERS**
In many Local Authorities, the Panel can be asked to deliver training sessions to help Officers and Elected Members understand what constitutes good design practice. This can range from study visits to completed schemes, to workshops

premises based around the specific skills and expertise of the Panel.

WHAT CAN PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS DO TO ENGAGE?

- **REFER TO DESIGN REVIEW AT PLANNING COMMITTEE**
If Design Review has taken place, feedback should be provided at Planning Committee. Depending on the stage of the scheme and the varying processes of different Boroughs, this will range from the full report being issued, to an interpretation given from the planning officer. Feedback from the Design Review report should set out key themes that questions in Planning Committee can be based around to gain an understanding of how successfully the applicant has responded.
- **OBSERVE DESIGN REVIEW MEETINGS**
Attendance by Planning Committee Members of DRP meetings can be highly valuable in offering an insight in the design process and an understanding of key issues. A practical way of organising this is often to send a representative (sometimes referred to as a 'design champion') to feedback to the rest of the Planning Committee. (NB the complexity of the process and potential confidentiality issues can mean that Councillor attendance is not always possible).
- **ATTEND TRAINING SESSIONS AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON SKILLS YOU WOULD LIKE DEVELOP**
In many local authorities, panel members can be asked to deliver training sessions to councillors and officers.
- **ATTEND ANNUAL REVIEWS OF DRP PROGRESS**
It is good practice for organisers of DRPs to update Planning Committees on progress annually and may be worth requesting an Annual Review if not already taking place. This can offer an overview of schemes seen over the period and how panel advice has been taken on board.

HOW IS DESIGN REVIEW SUPPORTED BY POLICY?

Design review is increasingly integral to the planning process, with panels set up for 26 of London's Boroughs³ and many more nationally. This mirrors increasing emphasis on design quality in local and national planning policy. The use of DRPs is set out in Local Plans for many authorities. It is also referred

³ urbandedesignlondon.com/advice-support/design-review-london/

to in national and regional policies, including the NPPF in 'Achieving Well-Designed Places':⁴

- “Local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for Life... In assessing applications, local planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panel.”

The GLA have produced the London Quality Review Charter setting out standards for Design Review.⁵ The London Plan states:

- “Boroughs and applicants should use Design Review to assess and inform design options early in the planning process. Design Review should be in addition to the borough’s planning and urban design officers’ assessment and pre-application advice. Development proposals referable to the Mayor must have undergone at least one Design Review early on in their preparation, before a planning application is made.”⁶

WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS?

Councillor Companion to Design in Planning, UDL 2018

This concise booklet provides an introduction to design issues for Planning Committee Members and other Councillors. It refers closely to the NPPF and sets out helpful themes to analyse schemes and question Applicants

- <https://www.urbandesignlondon.com/library/sourcebooks/councillors-companion-design-planning-2018/>

Urban Design London training events

UDL runs regular events for professionals in the planning and design industries, many of which are relevant to Planning Committee Members. Attendance is free for Local Authorities with membership and includes national events. If Councillors are not included on invites, planning/design officers should be able to forward information

⁴ 2018 National Planning Policy Framework, Achieving well design places. Paragraph 12

⁵ [london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ggbd_london_quality_review_charter_web.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ggbd_london_quality_review_charter_web.pdf)

⁶ London Plan, Policy D2 – Delivering Good Design. Section D2, paragraph F

- <https://www.urbandesignlondon.com/events/>

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Reviewing Design Review in London – GLA, UDL, UCL, Place Alliance
<http://placealliance.org.uk/research/design-review/>
- Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission
<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/building-better-building-beautiful-commission>
- National Design Guide
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>