



How can we make sure design review panels represent the diversity of the communities they serve?

Design review panels play a key role in promoting design excellence and improving the quality of our places, but often these panels do not reflect the population they serve. Through establishing clear standards for recruiting panel members, regular review processes, and early career outreach, Authorities can set- up design review panels that better promote equality, diversity and inclusion, and really understand local people and places.

WHAT IS DESIGN REVIEW AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Design Review is a process that supports local authorities (Authorities) to ensure that developments meet high design standards and are context-specific, addressing the needs of their communities. Typically, a panel of independent, multidisciplinary professionals – a Design Review Panel (DRP) – evaluate schemes at the pre-application stage (before a planning application is submitted), providing Authorities and applicants with advice to improve developments. These reviews are often also followed up with further appraisal at later stages (the post-application stage).

Formats for design review meetings vary, but generally involve around five panel members, representatives from the Authority including planning officers, and the applicant team (the people submitting the planning application) which often includes the architect and consultant team. The applicant pays a fee to the Authority for the review. Panel members provide feedback on presented schemes, highlighting strengths, weaknesses and any opportunities for improvement. Following a DRP meeting, a report is issued to summarise feedback, including a discussion of issues

facing the scheme and how these should be dealt with. These reports are used by Authorities when analysing and determining applications.

WHO MAKES UP A DESIGN REVIEW PANEL AND HOW ARE THEY RECRUITED?

Panels typically consist of industry professionals, including architects, landscape architects, urban designers and engineers, often including specialisms such as heritage and sustainability. Panel members are typically paid for their time. Recruitment to these panels varies depending on who and how a panel is being managed. Panel positions can be advertised publicly similar to a job advert, through recommendations from other panel members or wider industry networks such as a Mayors Design Advocate if a specific skill is needed.

Due to the level of expertise and experience expected of panel members - and the general demographic of professionals in many of the built environment's industries - panels are often at risk of lacking diversity. As a result, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) can become a challenging subject. For example, in a recent GLA survey of Design Review in London, 60% of respondents reported their panels are not representative of the communities they serve.

HOW TO INCREASE THE DIVERSITY OF PANEL MEMBERS?

As part of my role as Principal Urban Design Officer at the London Borough of Hounslow, I manage their DRP. We are seeking to promote better equality, diversity and inclusion across the panel, to become a more accurate representation of Hounslow's wider population and, as a result, better protect the general public's interests in a fair and considered manner. According to the UK Office of National Statistics, Hounslow has a gender split: 49.1% female, 50.9% male, and in terms of ethnicity: 51.4% White, 34.4% Asian, 6.6% Black, 4.1% Mixed/Multiple, 2.1% Other Ethnic Group, 1.4% Arab. The Hounslow DRP as of April 2020's Annual Review is 57% male and 83% White. The following are some examples of things we are looking to do in Hounslow to help increase and diversify the membership of our DRP:

1. Setting standards for introducing new members: Ideally, panel recruitment processes would use a clear scoring system in a similar way to tender or hiring processes to be as transparent as possible as well as increasing the places in which recruitment for new panel members are posted publicly.
2. Conducting a regular panel refresh: This could be by proposing a two-year panel 'refresh' and/or updating a panels Terms of Reference to stipulate a clear maximum length of term for any panel member.
3. Producing an annual review: Using a template such as this [Annual Report Template](#) to regularly review a DRP can help monitor and evaluate the impact of the panel in terms of its make-up and who ends up attending the reviews themselves.
4. Increase the number of panel members who have a personal connection or have worked previously within the authority: This could be done with more locally-focused advertising and by trying to get a clearer overview of local skills available in the authority (e.g. ARB register, local business search, previous appointments from the council). A 'local score' could even be built into the application process based on locally-specific questions such as 'Please describe any personal connections with this Authority.' We also see the potential of the DRP to become a driver for wider change in the built environment industry by supporting a younger, more diverse generation of professionals, so in Hounslow, we hope to:
5. Introduce Mentee Panel Members into our DRP process: By reaching out to targeted groups (e.g local colleges as well as those not at senior or director level in their firm) we hope to offer those early in their careers to gain experience as part of panel reviews and provide ongoing training by and to existing members.

6. Assist those who don't have any prior panel experience: There is also an opportunity to encourage young professionals who don't have any prior experience of being a panel member to apply. The application form could include a question specifically that allows for transferable skills to be assessed e.g. 'Please give details of delivering design advice or support through workshops or consultation processes, and outline any lessons learnt from those experiences.'

USEFUL PUBLIC PRACTICE RESOURCES

- To learn more about the impact of Design Review and how to measure it, read the [Measuring Design Review](#) Practice Note which includes template monitoring and survey reports.
- If you are in an Authority looking to set-up and run your own in-house panel, there are some helpful tools on [Running Reviews](#).
- To read more about the benefits and ways of involving councillors more in design review check the [Engaging Members](#) Practice Note.

FURTHER READING

- For a wider overview of Design Review read [Design Review Principles and Practice](#), produced by the Design Council, Landscape Institute, RIBA and RTPI in 2019.
- The Mayor of London recently published a [survey of design review in London](#), following on from the [London Quality Review Charter](#).
- Urban Design London produced an interesting [report tracking DRP's influence over the quality of planning applications](#) in 2019.

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