

Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service: Design Review Recommendation Report

February 2021

Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service: Design Review Recommendation Report

AUTHOR Urban Design London

Contents

- 1 [Introduction](#)
- 2 [Executive Summary](#)
- 3 [Analysis and review of DEP and D&C Panels](#)
- 4 [Recommendations](#)
 - A. [Create single Design Review service with specialist sub panels](#)
 - B. [Refresh and improve delivery systems](#)
 - C. [Integrate Design Review with wider Design Quality approaches](#)
- 5 [Appendices](#)
 - 1 Appendix 1 – Interview Notes
 - 2 Appendix 2 – Case Studies Notes
 - 3 Appendix 3 – Performance Criteria
 - 4 Appendix 4 – Cambridge Panel Observations
 - 5 Appendix 5 – Notes from Conversations with External Panel Managers
 - 6 Appendix 6 – Survey Results

1 Introduction

This report has been produced by Urban Design London for the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS). It examines two existing Design Review Panels and considers whether changes are needed to make the most of Design Review processes for the area. The two panels considered are the Design Enabling Panel (DEP) which was set up by South Cambridgeshire and the Design and Conservation Panel (D&C), established by Cambridge City Council.

To understand how these panels work at the present time, and consider future options the study included:

- Observations of panel sessions
- Interviews with panel managers and chairs, council leaders and planning committee members, those bringing schemes to panels and planning officers

- An online survey of panel stakeholders including those interviewed, panel members and community groups
- Examination of case studies of schemes seen by the panels
- Desktop review of existing Terms of Reference, website information and other background data on the panels
- Evaluation against current Design Review best practice as used and published elsewhere

2 Executive Summary

There is a clear commitment to delivering good design by both Councils and the shared planning service. Bringing together the planning functions has led to challenges and opportunities in this regard, which we felt were being addressed in an impressive way, not least by examining the work of the panels.

Design can be a subjective issue and we observed some differences in views over what 'good' might be across the different groups interviewed. This is a very normal situation, potentially helped by policy and other work we understand to be planned, but Design Review can be an important part of ensuring consistent, robust and appropriate interpretations of design requirements are applied. However, to do this the review system itself needs to be consistent, robust and appropriate, which our analysis showed was not always the case. To this end we recommend three key changes:

A. Create a single Design Review service with specialist sub panels

Because there are significant differences in approach between the panels, leading to differences in attitudes from those involved and the quality and consistency of advice. This is likely to be undermining the potential usefulness of reviews for the shared planning service

B. Refresh and improve delivery systems

Because Design Review has expanded and matured across the country since the panels were set up, leading to improvements in established best practice. The Cambridge service would benefit from updating its Terms of Reference and day to day practices to reflect what others have found to work well elsewhere

C. Integrate Design Review with wider Design Quality approaches

Because Design Review is only one tool and can work best when clearly integrated with all other design related planning work from policy writing to pre app negotiations, community engagement to committee deliberations.

3 Analysis and review of DEP and D&C Panels

The extensive analysis undertaken used the Baseline Report, Interviews, Survey, Observation of Reviews, UDL Criteria Analysis, Best Practice.

From this work we identified strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement as set out below. These are summarised across both panels. A more detailed breakdown for each against the assessment criteria used is provided in the appendix.

Strengths

- Both Panels have delivered a significant number of reviews over the last decade.
- There is recognition across all groups who interact with DR that is a useful and important process that can help deliver better quality built outcomes.
- There is significant gratitude and warmth for existing panel managers, chairs and members and the significant commitment, hard work and dedication they have shown.
- Both Panels hold within their membership and collective work a wealth of knowledge and experience of the specific contexts within which they work. People on the panels know their geographical areas, their characters, pressures and history. They remember many schemes seen have observed how the areas have changed over time. They understand the specifics of their work, for example the D&CP understands the 'colleges' as developers while the DEP has good experience of the kind of issues and community concerns that may relate to village extensions. The manager of the DEP, in particular, is committed to making the panel a success and appears to have the relevant experience and skills to make this happen if our other recommendations are taken forward. Although, future roles will need to be defined through the Terms of Reference and a fair selection process.

Weaknesses

- Wider knowledge of and respect for the Panels
 - There is little wider knowledge of the panels' existence or role. 67% of community representatives who responded to the survey had never heard of either panel
 - The three Panels in Cambridge are perceived differently by those who know about Design review with the Cambridge Quality Panel (CQP) seen as the best managed, best quality and most capable Panel.
 - Three different panels operating in the same area with different processes can be confusing for applicants and others not directly involved in one or another panel.
 - Planning Committee Members vary in their knowledge of DR, with some suspicion and concern about DR role in the planning process.
- Relationship with Planning Process
 - There is inconsistency and a lack of clarity about the role of the Panels in terms of their relationship to the work of planning officers and Planning Committees.
 - There seems some confusion and inconsistency of approach over whether panels should 'green light' or 'sign off' schemes going to committee as opposed to providing advice to officers as part of the negotiation and assessment work.
 - There appears to be a lack of a positive connection between the panels/officers/councillors, of the three being part of the same team working to the same objectives.
 - Panel members and chairs do not seem to know a lot about how the shared planning service works while some officers and councillors do not seem aware of how the panels work.
- Governance and Transparency
 - Some of the governance and review arrangements are poor and out of date, for example the way panel membership is refreshed, or not, and how briefings are provided to panel members.

- There appears to be little and inconsistent managerial oversight or ownership of the panels from within the shared planning service.
 - The panels are not transparent, there is little public information about the process, no consistent Annual Reporting and little guidance or training for those involved.
- Skills and Attitudes
 - The panels themselves have varying levels and ranges of skills within them. We noted people calling for more landscape design and street design skills, but we did not audit panel members skills at this time.
 - There does not seem to be mechanisms in place to review the performance and usefulness of the panels or assess whether panel members should continue to take part.
 - There are no systems in place to openly advertise for and refresh panel membership in a consistent, fair and transparent fashion.
 - Panels did not appear diverse in terms of the 12 protected characteristics defined by the Equalities Act (2010).
 - Knowledge within the panels of the policies and design objectives for the area seemed patchy, no training on this had recently been given and panel members did not come together to share experiences and concerns at annual meetings or similar.
 - We saw that some were looking forward to improving the panels and felt this would be very useful, but others did not feel there was a need for change. A shared willingness to improve and accept change would seem important at this time.
- Adding Value
 - Panels can act as a useful local resource with members providing training for officers and councillors, advice on strategy or policy and supporting community conversations and workshops on design issues. Such opportunities do not appear to have been taken to date.
- The Review Process
 - Both Panels processes fail to meet current best practice in terms of how reviews are organised and run although the DEP is closer to this than the D&CP. In particular:
 - Criteria for deciding which schemes should be seen and when, are not clear and consistent and decisions seem too influenced by the need to fill a 6 week timetable.
 - This timetable may also be limiting the number of schemes seen and may mean schemes are not seen at the most appropriate point in their development.
 - There is a lack of consistency in how officers brief panels, who attends the reviews and how review comments are fed back and used by both officers and Committees.
 - Panel reports are produced in different ways between the panels.
 - Not all reviews involve a site visit to fully understand the context for proposals.
 - Not all reviews include briefings on background information and what officers would like the panel to advise before the review or constructive debriefs following the panel review.
 - Both panel reviews involve significant discussions without the applicant present.
 - The use of the 'traffic light' system by the D&CP does not appear to work well and does not allow for a rounded summary of advice.

Opportunities

- We found significant skills and enthusiasm across the different groups involved. These could be cherished and made good use of to improve review delivery.
- There are clearly two very different areas within which developments are proposed – within and outside the City. The need for specialisms to deal with this was clear, although the need for different processes across both was less well formed.
- The shared service is undertaking policy, pre app process review and other work, while nationally changes to the planning system, including greater use of design codes, is being proposed. A refreshed design review service could support and work with such changes in the shared service area.
- We heard ideas around introducing a new design quality management system. If this is taken forward design review could play an important part in its work.
- Nationally, almost all design review services are now funded by review charges to applicants. We found no resistance, including from developers, to doing this in the shared service area, as long as the service charged for was good quality.
- There is some evidence that community members are interested in design review. This could help to link community engagement and review systems in some areas or support the creation of a community design review panel. However, the priority should be to get the expert design review panel in place first.

4 Recommendations

A. Create a single Design Review service with specialist sub panels

The analysis of the existing panels demonstrates that despite the hard work and commitment of those involved they are not delivering the quality of Panel process needed by GCSPS. A change of approach is needed to deliver a consistent and highly respected Design Review process. This report provides advice on how a more streamlined and consistent approach to delivery would lead to it having a greater impact.

Whilst recognising that the areas covered by the two panels are very different it is also clear that running the Panel process is quite a generic activity and in itself does not have to differ due to the location within it operates. A new single Panel would ensure efficiency, clarity, and a strong message that the shared planning service has a consistent approach to the requirement for and delivery of design quality.

A single panel could be managed by a team rather than individuals, ensuring consistency and backup should any single panel manager be unavailable. If the team was also responsible for other design quality delivery work, this would help embed the panels across such activities.

Combining panel management activities may offer efficiency savings but we are not in a position to say as we do not have information on how the shared service is set up and run. Certainly ensuring a particular team, and manager, is clearly responsible for the delivery of the design review service, including deciding on which schemes are seen when, the role of case officers at the review and having oversight of how review comments and advice will be used, will help reduce inefficiencies caused by confusion and lack of clear responsibilities. Such clear management should also ensure better overall review service.

In terms of opportunities to use reviews to support other work, for example if design code evaluations are needed, a single management structure would make updating the way it works and taking such opportunities easier and simpler. The clarity and strength of a single large, very active panel could also make it more relevant and useful as a training and community engagement resource.

A single panel would require just one set of Terms of Reference (including issues like which schemes would be seen when, and panel refresh and training), one funding/charging mechanism and one panel of advisors. This would reduce the administrative burden as well as being a much clearer situation for applicants, communities and councillors.

A single panel could have multiple chairs and sub panels made up of specific sets of advisors for particular areas or types of scheme. There could be specific sub panels that focused on city centre historic areas, village residential extensions or country house proposals. In this way a new single Panel could have sub/specialist panels within it that respond to the different typologies and uses.

Panel membership could be flexibly shared across sub panels to ensure best fit of experience for particular proposals. For example, if it is hard to find enough people with street design experience and this specialism is most required when looking at village extensions, those with this skill would sit on that sub panel. If the issue is occasionally relevant for city centre schemes, a specialist street design panel member could be added to a city centre panel for those particular schemes.

Other areas use single panels and sub panels. For example, both Essex and Hertfordshire now have large single panels serving a variety of district councils. In both cases the service is managed by the County council, provided to district planning authorities by agreement. Both have large panel pools and can set up area or scheme type specific panels as required. But they both have single payment and terms of reference systems. They are slightly different to the option for Cambridge as they provide arms-length provision for planning authorities, but they show how a single larger panel can work (Essex is better established than Hertfordshire at the moment).

One Panel can achieve everything required and deliver a flexible responsive service. But all panels would work to the same delivery standards and use the same methods to ensure consistency, transparency and efficiency across panel work.

Although outside the remit of this report, there may come a time when the CQP would wish to join a combined single design review service. They are a large and very well respected part of the Cambridge Design Review story – and better connections between them and other panels work would be of benefit to all.

B. Refreshed and improved delivery systems

Design Review is an exacting and demanding process that requires great attention to detail to ensure it is respected and utilised.

The Sub recommendations set out below describe all the ingredients needed for a new single panel. They are arranged under the UDL Criteria for a successful Panel.

- B1 A Design Review Service that is governed well
- B2 A Design Review service that is managed well
- B3 A Panel and Chair with skills to meet the needs of all schemes
- B4 A Scheme Selection Process providing clarity for all involved
- B5 A well-managed Scheme Review Process
- B6 Panel Outcomes that are useful to all involved
- B7 A Panel that Influences design quality and knowledge
- B8 A Panel that is trusted and respected by all involved

B1 Establish a new approach to Governance with an Independent Advisory Group

To ensure that the **Design Review Service is governed well**, with independence and transparency, a new approach is needed for the Governance of the Panel.

Governance is the overarching management and scrutiny of the Panel. Design Review Principles and Practice (CABE, 2013) sets out why it is important.

‘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. 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’

An Independent Advisory Group will provide an independent body to ensure accountability in the public interest. The Group will meet at least once a year and review the Annual Report and assess any issues. It is suggested that the Group consists of three/four people including the Chair(s) of the Panel and two external DR Panel experts, such as Chairs in other panels, or professionals involved in managing panels. The Group could also include senior officers and planning committee Chairs.

We suggest that you set up such a group to oversee any new service you wish to create, and that the group advise on many of the issues covered below.

B2 Write a Terms of Reference to set out the Governance and Management of the Panel

Drafting and agreeing new Terms of Reference (ToR) will help ensure the refreshed service is robust, transparent and appropriate. It is also your opportunity to clearly set out how you want the service to work for the shared planning service and committees, stating this in one place.

We suggest that you use the creation of new ToR as an aid to pulling together stakeholders and discussing varying views and ideas. The ToR should be understood, owned and accepted by all involved. The ToR may cover:

- **Purpose**
For example - to provide impartial advice to all involved in raising the standard of design, supporting good design and to be a critical friend.

- **The Approach**
 For example, explaining the use of a single Panel for GCSPS area with a single group of Panel members and sub panels within to respond to the different needs of City Centre and South Cambridgeshire.
- **Principles and Practice**
 This may include issues such as how the panel sessions will be formatted, when site visits will or will not be required, what is expected from applicants who are presenting schemes, your charging mechanisms and costs etc. You may also like to set out how information about the panel will be made public, for example on your website.
- **Governance**
 Explaining who is responsible for the panel at senior officer/councillor level and the role of your Independent Advisory Group.
- **Management**
 Setting out who will manage the day to day running of the panel, what they will do and what they will be responsible for. For example, the ToR might require the publication of a single design review service contact details, which may be a generic email address.
- **Panel Members and Chair Recruitment and skills**
 Explaining how you will advertise and select panel members and chairs, what is required of them and how you will support them. For example, through updates on local issues and policies Length of term, expected number of schemes each panel members will be invited to review etc may also be included in the ToR , or if not made clear in the Handbook Set out how you will refresh or expand panel membership and how and why you will end involvement from particular panel members if required.
- **Remit**
 Explaining which schemes will be seen when, by who, why and how. You may wish to set out a protocol covering how schemes will be seen by different panels – i.e. when the CQP or the new combined panel will see a scheme. Criteria on scheme types either within a protocol with another panel or relating to which schemes your panel will see when often include:

 - Scale – more likely in SC due to large sites.
 - Site – more likely in City Centre with sensitive sites in conservation areas and listed buildings.
 - Local Issue, Exceptional Challenge, Public benefit – can include policy documents and strategies.
- **Panel Review Types**
 Explaining the different types of review your panel/s may perform and when you would use these, for example: Full Panel Sessions, Workshops, Chair Reviews.
- **Meeting Advice Outcome**
 Setting out how the thoughts, comments and written report from reviews will be drafted, agreed, shared and used within your planning processes.
- **Conflicts of Interest**
 Explaining clearly your processes and responsibilities for managing conflicts of Interest.
(Definition: 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).

- **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Setting out your process for monitoring and evaluation. This may include individual feedback and an Annual Report.

B3 A Design Review service that is managed well

For the DR process to function well and have credibility everyone involved should have a good understanding of how it works. Transparency is therefore key and there needs to be information on process publicly available to meet all needs. This should include the Terms of Reference, a Handbook for the management of the Panel and a Quick Guide for applicants.

A handbook can set out processes to be used by all involved in Reviews, including planning officers, the wider council and panel members.

A Quick Guide for Users of the service for applicants will help ensure they know how to get the best from the review, including how to send in pre review information, present and access the subsequent report.

Here are some suggestions as to what such documents might include:

Handbook for Panel and Council

- Introduction, Statement from Chair, Aspirations, Map
- Role and Remit, The Panel's Independence, Concept of Panel, 10 Principles of Design Review (CABE, 2013)
- Relationship with Planning Service, Pre application process, The Review, Using the Panels advice
- Being a panel member, The role, The type of panel we are running, How we manage Conflicts of Interest, The importance of Confidentiality, Do you need Professional Indemnity?, How we manage Fees and Expenses, What about Intellectual property, What to do if there is a problem
- How the panel process works, How the process is managed within the planning process – process maps, How each review is managed, from set up on the day to outcome
- Panel recruitment, term of service, how to apply
- Panel communications, How we will let you know what's going on, Newsletter, Annual meeting

The Quick Guide for Applicants

- Design Review - what is it?
- GCSPS Design Review Panel - why do we need it?
- The Panel - who are they?
- The Review Process - what applications does the Panel review?
- How to apply for a review
- The Review Session - how does it work?
- Confidentiality - what information is public?
- Conflicts of Interest - how are they managed?

A web page for the new service is a vital part of better communication about the Panel and its outcomes. The web page should include:

- Terms of Reference
- Quick Guide
- Information on Schemes after Planning decision, including advice letters
- Annual Report

One key issue to be clarified is the role of the panel/s in 'signing off' or green lighting schemes before they go to committee. Some seemed to see the panel/s as replacing the role of officers in assessing and evaluating schemes, while others felt the panel/s should be supporting and advising the officers. This needs clarifying within your planning service, but our recommendation is that panels should support and advise officers, not look to replace their or planning committee roles in any way. As such an officer might like to talk to the chair or request a second review of a scheme if they are not sure if it has adequately taken on board earlier panel session, but it is up to the officer and councillors to weigh up the merits of the scheme and come to a rounded judgement on it. Officers should be able to interpret panel advice to be able to consider compliance with it themselves in many cases and should not look to the panel to say yes or no to a scheme. For this reason we recommend you move away from the traffic light system as it looks to give one definitive answer on the acceptability of a scheme rather than rounded description of varying issues.

B4 Establish a costed service

A service that meets best practice will need sufficient resource. In order to achieve this, it is recommended that you charge fees for reviews. You may wish to include your fee structure in your ToR, it should be publicly visible and reasonable.

Fees vary from panel to panel across the country but tend to be between around £1,000 to £2,000 for a returning scheme or chairs review (shorter sessions with less people involved). A first review of a significant scheme might have a fee around the £4,000 mark.

It is suggested that you use the following type of calculation when deciding on your fee structure:

Staff costs¹ + panel member costs² + overheads³ = cost (per review)

Cost + uplift⁴ = price to charge (per review)

¹ You can calculate this from an estimate of staff time needed per review x the relevant hourly/daily rate for those staff

² Most panels use 4 panel members and a chair for most reviews. Panel members are generally paid around £200 to £300 per half day, £300 to £500 per full day each, and chairs closer to £500 to £700 but this depends a little on how much of the report you wish the chair to write. These fees are generally much lower than the commercial day rates for the panel members, they tend to see design review as a pro bono exercise.

³ You should be able to estimate your overhead costs, both for your staff if you have not included this in their cost, and for the actual review venue, catering, facilities, travel costs etc.

⁴ You may wish to charge more per review than it costs to run it. this uplift might be used to cover the cost of reviews or other panel support for community groups, to fund design training for councillors, officers or panel members or other relevant activities.

Your per review costs and charges may be affected by the number of reviews you carry out a year in so far as the overheads might be lower per review and your uplift might be spread across more charges. So you may wish to test out your fee structure using a few review number scenarios. We expect a combined panel would see around 45 schemes a year, but this will depend on how you set out which schemes are to be seen.

You may wish to charge different amounts for different types of reviews – if so you will need to factor this into your calculation – for example cost - 50% for a minor residential scheme but cost + 50% for a very large housing scheme etc.

It is recommended that the skills for the staff involved include an urban design officer, and an administrator.

B5 Set up a monitoring and evaluation process and produce a public Annual Report

A consistent evaluation process will provide evidence of impact, helping justify your use of design review and charges. But it will also, very importantly, allow you to critique your processes and evaluate opportunities for improvement. A robust monitoring system also helps to ensure all involved know their performance is of interest and will be looked at.

Your monitoring system should fit in with your wider Key Performance Indicators or other evaluation processes. But you might find it useful to look at the monitoring templates on the Public Practice website which have been developed by other panel managers. Closer to home, the CQP has a process that could be adopted.

Here are a few key points to consider when setting up a system:

- Monitoring should look at both attitudes and experiences of those who have been involved in reviews and tracking the progress of at least a sample of schemes seen to see if the review impacted the design and decision.
- You will need good record keeping noting what versions of schemes were seen at reviews when to be able to tell if the schemes seen changed/improved and where granted or refused permission.
- Everyone involved in the process should be offered the opportunity to comment on their experience, annually or more frequently.
- It is useful to follow up on schemes seen to understand impact. This can be done using a reminder and questionnaire system set to trigger 6 or 12 months after every review.

The findings of the regular evaluation put into an Annual Report, a public document prepared by the panel manager and scrutinised by the Panel Advisory Group.

B6 A Panel and Chair with skills to meet the needs of all schemes

Panel/s are only ever as good as their members and chairs. Therefore, recruiting and supporting these people will be an important element of future success.

The planning authority should openly recruit, using public advertisements and clear selection criteria. People should be appointed on their own merits, not as representatives of any organisation.

You should be clear about who will make decisions, for example the appointment of Panel members may need to be agreed by Advisory Group, Chief Planner, Chair Planning Committee etc.

You should give clear information you will require from applicants. Some panels interview prospective chairs but not panel members. Some use test reviews. It is also useful to think early about issues such as insurance. Some panels are limited in who they can appoint as they have overly onerous liability insurance requirements. These may be ok for architects working in private practice, but they might exclude people in public organisations or other jobs elsewhere. Panel members are giving advice, they are not designing projects and the insurance requirements should be proportionate.

In general, the skills needed for a good chair are not the same as a panel member. The chairs need to be able to summarise many points into a coherent conclusion. They also need to steer the discussion making sure all relevant issues are covered. Good chairs listen and ask pertinent questions of both applicants and panel members more than they put forward their own views on a scheme, although these of course will be influencing their questions and summaries.

Panel members need to be articulate and constructive. They need to be able to understand a scheme quickly and apply their experience to what they are seeing. They need to be collaborative and build on the thoughts of other panel members, but they need to know their own mind and be confident enough to say what they think. Although it is important to have varied background skills on a panel, panel members should not feel that they can only talk about their 'specialism' or that they have to say something about that issue at every review if it is not particularly relevant for the scheme. Good designers do not always make good panel members and vice versa.

A recruitment process needs to reach out to a diverse range of built environment professionals to ensure a Panel with appropriate skills. The process should also reach out to particular groups currently underrepresented, such as women and BAME.

There are no fixed rules as to how often you should renew our panel, but 3 or 5 years are often used. You may wish to refresh and change the panel bit by bit, so say a third of the panel every 2 years. This is more work for the administrators but ensures both consistency and freshness across the panel.

The professional range of skills your panel/s need to cover should include, but not be limited to: architecture, urban design, planning, landscape architecture, public realm, green infrastructure, sustainability, highway engineers and designers, transport planning, conservation, biodiversity, active travel, town centre management, water management etc. you may also want to ensure panel members have between them experience relevant to the type of schemes seen, such as large scale housing, education buildings, scientific research hubs, country houses etc.

We recommend a panel of about 40 people, with 2 to 3 chairs and 2 to 3 vice chairs. Larger than this and you may find you are using panel members very rarely, so they do not connect well to your work, smaller and you might find it hard to find people available for all reviews.

Some panels look for people who live or work in the area covered. Some do not. There is no fast rule here, but panel members should of course understand and value the area and be committed to delivery of good design within it.

B7 A scheme selection/referral process providing clarity for all involved

A well-defined Scheme Selection process helps to ensure that the Panel reviews the most significant proposals in the area. The Panel Manger, Planning Committee Chairs, Lead Members and planning officers should be involved in these discussions to ensure that appropriate schemes are identified at an early stage in the design process. Within GCSPS there will be a wide range of schemes seen at Design Review. Within the City the main focus is education related schemes and those related to tourism. Within the SCDC area it is predominately large scale residential.

We have already mentioned that scheme selection, or remit, should be set out in the ToR.

These are the type of issues you might wish to include:

- **The scale of development and land uses**

The criteria can set a lower limit on number of units, and/or size of site. You may wish to review commercial, industrial or educational buildings based on floor space but residential schemes based on number of units or site area.

You can specify your approach to infrastructure projects, Public realm schemes, Masterplans, policy development, design codes and any change or proposal that may not require express planning permission but which the council has responsibility or interest for. You may even wish to set out if you would like the panel to advice on schemes outside your area which you are consulted on.

Some local authorities use their design review panels to advise on their own housing and other development schemes. But if this is done then clear separation between panels used for this, and for planning functions, is needed.

- **The Site**

You can specify particularly sensitive areas or sites where you will always wish to review proposals. For example, sites which have a significant impact on their area such as heritage or views or areas with significant flooding issues.

You may wish to explain how reviews will work in different types of local plan designation areas.

- **Local Issue, specific impact, Exceptional Challenge, Public benefit**

You may feel that irrespective of the first two types of criteria you wish to ensure schemes where there is significant public debate or concern, or impact beyond the physical from of the scheme, for example to the standing or image of your area, are reviewed.

B8 A well-managed Scheme Review Process

As mentioned regarding the ToR, we recommend that you propose, discuss and agree new review processes from scratch. There are some good practices within your current set up, but there are many inconsistencies and some ways of working are worrying.

Your new process may involve all aspects of review from preparation to the advice letter. Some aspects of the new process will differ from the existing. In particular;

- Site visits, including going onto sites and other private land to ensure full understanding of context are recommended for all schemes (only one visit needed for recurring schemes)
- the briefing of Panel members must be thorough and held before the review, with the case officer and other relevant officers present at the pre review briefing
- notice of any conflicts of interest and clear introductions of all present (including observers) should be carried out at the start of the session.
- the presentation materials required and how these will be shared should be well defined
- a site visit must always be held unless it is a returning scheme
- Panel members should have only a brief time for points of clarification and spend the majority of their time on comments
- The Panel should hold all their discussions with the applicant present, apart from the briefing
- De briefing with officers is best practice after a review. It helps the panel members and chair consolidate what they have learnt themselves from the session, and helps the officers clarify what has been said and how they may use the advice going forward. The debrief helps develop a partnership approach between panel and officers

The process will be set out in the ToR, Handbook and Quick Guide so it is transparent.

C. Integration of Design Review with wider Design Quality approach

We learnt through interviews that the shared planning service may be looking to refresh its design quality management approaches generally. If this is the case, we recommend that design review is fully integrated into any new system within a Design Quality Charter or similar.

We found, through our research, that lack of integration and inconstant approaches could be hampering both design review practice its eventual impact on place quality. We set out below recommendations as to how better integration might be achieved.

C1. Link to Pre App Processes and Planning Performance Agreements

An effective local authority Panel will have a close working relationship between the panel process and the planning application process, A process agreed by the GCSPS and the Panel Manager should be set up to embed DR in the PPA process, and also in the Policy Development process.

Agreeing referral criteria and how reviews will be structured/who should attend/how outputs should be used will help. But in addition, we recommend that the use of reviews is specified in any PPA including their number, the stage in the process when they will be used and the fee.

To help you may wish to provide information on the role of DR on your website where you set out your Pre App process [here](#).

You may also like to consider setting up a checking process for new schemes at validation stage to identify if they should go to design review. More information on this approach can be found at Public Practice (<https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources/in-house-design-review-dashboard-template>).

You may feel that regular updates on Design reviews with planning officers, particularly if you have major scheme management meetings or similar would be helpful and show reviews as an integral part of the process.

Planning Officers attending DR can enhance their understanding of the process. For each scheme, the Case Officer should be there and in addition their Senior Manager, and anyone else relevant to the application. It will also be useful if officers from Senior Management downwards observe Panel sessions.

C2 Raise the profile of Design Review

If people across the shared planning service and the separate councils are more aware of DR and its potential benefits for them, they may be more willing to integrate it into their work. As such you may wish to set up a programme of training/information and discussion events and encourage other Council services to use DR for example regeneration, housing, parks and recreation.

C3 Integrate more fully with Cambridgeshire County Council Highways Authority

As is often the case with DR, there can be a disconnect between advice given by the panel and that provided by the highways authority. This can be particularly difficult where new roads are required as part of significant housing schemes, or where car and cycle parking and other facilities can be seen as at odds in urban areas.

We recommend that you work to agree a protocol with the Highways Authority that sets out how they will use and respond to design review advice, attend and interact with panel sessions and move to

C4 Consider creating a Community Design Review Panel

A Community Review Panel operates alongside but separately to the DR Panel. It provides a consistent involvement for representatives of the community to have their say on planning applications and other proposals. They are selected by a recruitment process and given support and training on Design Review and design issues.

To facilitate communities involvement in a Design Review process GCSPS should consider a Community Review Panel.

C5 Develop a closer relationship with CQP

The CQP is the most respected Panel in the Cambridge area and there is an opportunity to develop a closer relationship with the new Panel. This could start with CQP sharing their approach and experience with the new Panel. There could also be regular meetings (every 4 months) to keep in touch about the schemes and issues being reviewed. In the future it might be possible to consider a single Panel for the whole area.

The CQP uses the Cambridgeshire Quality Charters format for its reviews called the 4Cs (connectivity, character, climate, community) to ensure key issues are considered for all schemes. This might form the basis for a new structure of the shared planning service reviews.

The relationship with CQP should be set out in the Terms of Reference. The remit of schemes reviewed by the CQP is set out within its Terms of Reference and these should also be reflected in the Terms of reference of the new panel.

C6 Promote good design including but not limited to the use of Design Review

Consider a package of actions including

- Regular meetings and communication with the established developer forum.
- Set up a planning officer group for those with an interest in design.
- Provide public feedback on the benefits of DR.
- Use the Panel Members to support design training within the Council.

5. Conclusion

Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire areas are wonderful places with a wealth of environments, communities, and activities to be proud of. There is much energy and potential for development and a real enthusiasm to protect and enhance the areas as they change.

The coming together of the two local authority planning services has created challenges and opportunities. In relation to this report, it opened the door to a review of the two existing design review panels, with the opportunity of creating a better service in the future.

We have learnt much about the existing panels, and have found real enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism from officers, councillors and panel members which should be commended. But at the same time we have found some significant failings in the current set up, which have likely contributed to the existing panels not being consistently seen in an entirely favourable light by those who come into contact with them, and not having the impact they should.

Although we are not grading the existing panels against each other, it is fair to say that the C&DP has more problems than the DEP. This is probably because it was set up a very long time ago, when Design Review was a different thing, and does not benefit from 'ownership' within the council. As such it has not modernised and is not well linked to planning services.

The DEP is a newer panel and exhibits many good qualities. However, it also has weaknesses, including a lack of refresh and training of panel members.

This report summaries the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities we discovered across both panels. It sets out a number of specific recommendations for change and provided advice on how these could be taken forward.

But in summary, it is our view that the shared planning service would benefit from a full-scale reworking of the Design Review services, forming one new, openly appointed panel, strengthened review practices, both within the sessions themselves and in the wider management and use of panel advice. We also recommend tackling some of the external issues that may be preventing design review from being as useful as it should be, including linking it better into other planning processes and any future Design quality Management system and agreeing how Highway advice from the County Council will relate to panel advice.

We hope our assessment of the current situation and recommendations are of help and wish the shared planning service the best as they reform and improve their design review service.