



## GREATER CAMBRIDGE SHARED PLANNING

Year One Review of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) and the incorporation of the Disability Consultative Panel into the GCDRP

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**Report to:** Cambridge City Council Planning Committee (for Information)

**Report by:**

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**Ward/parishes affected:** All

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### **1. Executive summary**

- 1.1 Members will be aware that the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) was set up and launched in January 2022 offering an independent and impartial evaluation of the design of significant proposals, at the pre-application and planning application stages, by a panel of built environment experts. As part of the Terms of Reference an Independent Advisory Group (IAG) was set up to oversee the governance, which met in September 2023.
- 1.2 Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS) also run a Disability Consultative Panel (DCP) which reviews the accessibility of

significant planning applications and pre-applications by a panel which consist of people of different disabilities or those that have cared for people with disability. Schemes that are reviewed by the DCP are also reviewed by the GCDRP.

- 1.3 The purpose of this paper is to inform Planning Committee of the recommendations made by the IAG and to provide detail on the incorporation of the DCP into the GCDRP. A similar report was also presented to the last meeting of South Cambridgeshire District Planning Committee on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2024.
- 1.4 Incorporating the disability access remit into a single body (GCDRP) will bring several benefits including making it easier for applicants who would be receiving advice in a single panel review meeting instead of having to attend two meetings; enabling disability access and inclusive design to be discussed alongside other specialisms; benefitting from GCDRP's established pay to use service that recovers its costs, enables the quality of service to be sustained including recruitment, review of its processes, its impacts and remunerating its panel members.

## **2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 Officers recommend that the Cambridge City Council Planning Committee notes:
  - The recommendations made by the Independent Advisory Group (IAG) about the GCDRP and how these will be taken forward, and
  - The incorporation of the Disability Consultative Panel into the existing GCDRP and establishment of an Accessibility Forum.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1 Members will be aware that the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) was set up and launched in January 2022 after a review of existing design review arrangements in Cambridge City Council (CCC) and South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC), following the formation of the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS). Design Review is an important and valued, if discretionary, service and is recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework (2023). The aim was to ensure that the planning service and applicants had access to a consistent, efficient, effective and independent panel and one which recovered its running costs.
- 3.2 Design Review Panels offer independent and impartial evaluation of the design merits of significant proposals, at pre-application and application stages, by a panel of built and natural environment experts. The advice of the panel is advisory, with the aim of identifying where improvements that can be made, to influence the planning process, improve the quality of buildings and places for the benefit of the public. It is governed

according to its terms of reference (see Appendix 3). Between 1 January 2022 – 30 June 2023, 23 full reviews and 4 subsequent reviews have taken place.

- 3.3 This is the first annual report undertaken by the IAG, and as such its focus has largely been on matters of process, as schemes considered so far by the GCDRP are at an early stage and either still going through the planning process or only recently received consent. In future years the annual reports will be able to review schemes as they progress and are built and comment on the difference the panel has made to outcomes on the ground.

### **Recommendations of the Independent advisory board**

- 3.4 As per the terms of reference, an independent advisory board was setup to oversee the governance of the panel that included the chairs, vice chairs of the GCDRP, lead members of planning for both councils, Planning Committee Chairs for CCC and SCDC, Senior Officers of GCSP and two independent chairs. The independent chairs in consultation with the Joint Director of Planning would make recommendations to adjust working practices to ensure the effectiveness of the panel.

- 3.5 The Independent Advisory Group met on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2023, which was chaired by Robin Nicholson (independent chair of IAG), and attended by Co-chair of IAG, Esther Kurland. It made recommendation to improve the working of the design review panel which are summarized as follows:

- To apply the 4Cs framework of the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter flexibly and limit the questions asked by panel member to those that are relevant and a matter of fact,
- Made suggestions to chair the panel more effectively with the chairing spread between chairs and vice chairs,
- Suggested having a private briefing session with planning officers after the panel meeting to reflect and provide feedback on the review,
- Suggested that officers should provide an update to the GCDRP chairs and vice chairs on the outcome of planning applications that went to panels quarterly,
- Recommended that Applicants/Planning officers explain how the scheme has evolved after GCDRP's input within the design and access statement and planning officer report,
- Acknowledged the expansion of the Design review service to other planning authorities and incorporation of the disability panel within the GCDRP,
- Acknowledged the need to expand the membership to include more expertise in sustainability, biodiversity and accessibility.
- Suggested to have an annual meeting of the GCDRP and the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel.

- 3.6 In discussion with the Chairs, Vice Chairs and the Joint Director for Planning, most of the recommendations will be taken forward with the exception of a private briefing session with planning officers post a review as this could be perceived to have an impact on the independence of the panel. Detail of the IAG meeting and the annual report are attached as Appendix 1 and 2 respectively.

### **Incorporation of the Disability Consultative Panel in GCDRP**

- 3.7 Members will be aware that the GCSPS also run a Disability Consultative Panel which focuses on advising applicants on the accessibility of significant planning applications, preapplications in Cambridge City and more recently in South Cambridgeshire District by a panel with people of different disabilities or those that have cared for people with disability. The panel has been operating since 1999, free of charge, without any cost to the applicant.
- 3.8 The DCP needed a review to see how the panel was running, in order to develop resilience if an officer was sick or went on annual leave, to ensure there was consistent attendance (looking into issues of remuneration), recruitment and refresh of members, to ensure that it recovered its administrative/management costs and to ensure it provided a consistent service across SCDC and CCC.
- 3.9 Following an internal review of the Disability Consultative Panel, it was considered that there are significant benefits for incorporating the disability function within the GCDRP. These include:
- Streamlining processes within GCSPS that make best use of existing resources and deliver value for money for both councils.
  - Making it easier for applicants to obtain independent advice on all design issues, including accessibility in a single meeting.
  - Enabling disability access and inclusive design to be discussed alongside other specialisms, as many of the issues around design are inter-related and linked.
  - Recovering the cost for administering the service.
  - Benefiting from all the professional expertise, back of house processes, website, administration, management, communication, governance, best practice, terms of reference, monitoring, scrutiny, publicity offered by the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel.
- 3.10 The existing DCP is made up of residents / community members, some of whom have different disabilities themselves or who care for people with a disability and are able to provide their lived experience on issues of access and disability that schemes need to overcome. Whilst the GCDRP will be able to provide the specialist expertise, it perhaps, may not be able to provide the lived experience that DCP panel members offer depending on who applies to come onto the panel. Existing DCP members will be invited to apply.

- 3.11 In addition, GCSPS is proposing that it also establishes an Accessibility Forum to meet with GCSP and the access officers every quarter, in the same way as it does with Agents, Parish Councils and Residents Association Forums. Through this existing DCP members, and any new members that wish to join, will be able to provide an insight, in a voluntary capacity, on various initiatives, guidance and strategies that the Councils may deploy to educate, advocate, and improve disability issues across the Greater Cambridge area.
- 3.12 GCSPS officers have advised DCP members of the changes that are being proposed and are in discussions about the new arrangements. Sufficient notice will be provided before the new arrangements are in place.
- 3.13 The next steps are as follows:
- Finalising the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) following discussions with the Equality Officers of both councils.
  - Amending the terms of reference of the GCDRP to make it explicit that design review explicitly covers accessibility, inclusive design, and disability.
  - Recruiting for new GCDRP panel members in March, April 2024 to cover matters of accessibility and inclusive design, together with other specialisms. This will include inviting the existing members of the DCP to apply, should they wish to.
  - Amending our back of house processes to ensure that the applicants and the design review panel incorporate disability issues.
  - GCSPS would like to express our gratitude to the DCP for their advice, all that they have achieved and contributed in this capacity over the years by holding a 'Thank You' event.
  - Establishing an Accessibility Forum.

## **4. Implications**

### **Financial Implications**

- 4.1 Implementing most of the recommendations of the independent governance group will be within the existing resources of the GCSP service.
- However, we intend to raise the fee of the GCDRP by £500 for each review type, from April 2024, to remunerate panel members by an additional £50 and account for an additional disability expert. The remuneration is a honorarium which is benchmarked against other panels including Frame, Essex Place Panel and Cambridgeshire Quality Panel.
  - The expansion of the panel to adjacent authorities will likely attract additional, external income into the team and would be beneficial to both councils.
- 4.2 The proposal to incorporate the DCP into the GCDRP will be absorbed within existing resources of the GCSPS. However, when implemented, it

will represent a saving by streamlining the functions from two into one panel i.e. the GCDRP which is paid for by applicants. This will save the councils administration, room hire, staff attendance, management costs which are currently not recovered.

### **Staffing Implications**

- 4.3 GCSPS will resource the expansion of its design review service based on and proportionate to the income it receives. It will use existing resources within the team.
- 4.4 The proposal to incorporate the DCP into the GCDRP will be absorbed within existing resources of the GCSPS.

### **Equality and Poverty Implications**

- 4.5 An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) has been undertaken; officers have discussed and clarified:
- The purpose of incorporation of the DCP into GCDRP to streamline processes to become more efficient, avoiding duplication, providing a consistent service to both councils, securing better and effective outcomes, rather than necessarily saving costs.
  - Proposing to amend the terms of reference of the GCDRP to include disability, recruiting experts in disability (who may have a disability and able to provide lived experience – existing DCP members can apply) to provide comfort that disability and access issues will be given equal standing in meetings.
  - Using existing council resources and existing membership to contribute in new ways (for example awareness campaigns – for example accessibility to pubs) by establishing an Access user group that meets every quarterly.
  - Providing comfort that appropriate scrutiny is in place through the establishment of Independent advisory group of the GCDRP to monitor and review the panels functions that includes disability.

### **Environmental Implications**

- 4.6 The recommendations proposed by the IAG and the incorporation of the DCP into GCDRP have an aim to help improve planning decisions and better environmental outcomes through the delivery of better buildings, place and landscapes.

### **Procurement Implications**

- 4.7 Appointment of new panel members will be done following a transparent, open process following Council Policy.

### **Community Safety Implications**

4.8 None.

## **5. Consultation and Communication Considerations**

5.1 GCSPS have discussed the changes that are being proposed with DCP members. Officers met with the DCP members at a meeting of the Disability Panel on 28 November 2023 and outlined the changes discussed in this report. The Team has prepared a EQIA and consulted with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion forum for SCDC.

## **6. Background papers used in the preparation of this report:**

- Appendix 1: IAG Meeting Notes and recommendations
- Appendix 2: Annual Report of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel 2022 - 23
- Appendix 3: The Greater Cambridge Design Review panel's terms of reference: the Terms of Reference

## **Report Authors**

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