

Borough Design Panels

What are they and how can they help.

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Introduction

A design panel is a group of design experts who meet regularly to assess development schemes. It is a bit like a Conservation Area Advisory Panel, but looks at the general design quality of a wide range of schemes across all parts of a borough. The panel can not make decisions on planning applications, but it can advise those that do. Panel members are appointed by the authority, and it exists to serve that authority, but it offers independent design advice.

The most famous design panel is CABE's Design Review programme. This is around 6 years old now, and has assessed hundreds of schemes. But recently more and more local and regional authorities have been setting up their own design panels. CABE have published a guide and video to help those setting up panels. These can be found at www.cabe.org.uk. The guide identifies 10 tips for success that you may find useful.

In London, as far as UDL is aware, Haringey, Islington, Lewisham, Richmond, Southwark, and Westminster City Council have active panels. Kingston Ealing, Lambeth, and Merton are also just setting them up. That means when proposed panels are up and running, almost a third of London will benefit from the design advice panels offer.

This short paper explains the main benefits of using a panel, and runs through some of the things you will need to consider if you want to set one up.

The Benefits of a Panel

We all know that well designed places add value. People like using them, they are easier to maintain, more inclusive, profitable and sustainable. We also now have robust national and regional policies requiring good design. PPS1 and the London Plan make no bones about the need for good design. PPS3 will probably follow suit shortly.

Knowing we need good design is one thing, recognising it within schemes is quite a different matter. London is very lucky to have some very highly skilled and professional officers and councillors, but they can only do so much. Panels add an extra resource. Unfettered by internal decision making processes and protocols, panels can bring fresh eyes and ideas to schemes, often helping to improve them. When the worst comes to the worst their advice can be invaluable within appeal evidence.

Panel sessions can also offer great opportunities to learn. The discussion between panel members can open the minds of those listening or taking part. A well chaired panel session can be entertaining and enthralling. Everyone likes reviewing schemes, attuning their eyes to assess plans, and thinking

through the multitude of design objectives any schemes should try and meet. Staff observing can find it a very rewarding experience.

The Disadvantages of Panels

The main problems with design panels is the time, energy and money they require. One London Borough said that their panel probably costs around £40,000 a year. They find it very useful, and great value for money, but if members had fully understood how much it was going to cost, they may never have gained approval to set it up. Another Borough consider that the time savings staff make by relying on panel advice outweigh the time taken servicing the panel, so the cost is minimal. True costs will depend a lot on the individual circumstances of your panel, such as how often they meet, accommodation and the staff time required to service the panel.

In the past panel members are not normally paid, but many new regional panels across the country are now paying those who attend. Even if you are not offering a fee panel members may claim travel expenses. The biggest 'cost' will probably be in staff time to organise agendas, liaise with applicants, set up rooms, invite and service members, and write up the sessions. Without good officer support panels will flounder and fail.

The only other potential problem is that authorities may think that by having a panel they have fulfilled their obligation to ensure well designed places. It should be made very clear that the panel is only there to advice good decision making across the authority. It may be best to ensure the panel does not just look at planning applications, or pre application schemes, but also reviews highway schemes, housing proposals, school developments, draft policy etc from time to time. This may help to ensure the panel is a resource for the whole authority, reminding departments other than planning, that they too should be ensuring good design.

Setting up a Panel - what to consider

Leadership

High level support is going to be essential. This could be an ideal job for Design Champions. It often takes one committed person to work with the appropriate officers and members, from a variety of departments and committees, to agree financial support and terms of reference. It will be important to explain that the panel is just there to offer support and advice, it would not replace the role of the planning committee or other decision makers. It will be important for you to think carefully about how you can ensure your panel is independent of the department that funds it.

Relationship to national and regional panels

CABE run England's national panel, which sees 'significant' applications from across all English regions. They choose schemes based on criteria listed in their Design Review document (available at www.cabe.org.uk). They do not just review the largest and nationally significant schemes, but will look at 'locally significant' proposals. However their resources are limited and it is

unlikely they will see many schemes from your Borough. It will be the case though that CABI will still expect to be consulted when significant schemes come forward, even if there is a local panel.

At the present time there is no London wide regional panel. Other regions, such as the south east, have set up and service very successful review programmes and it is likely that a London panel may emerge in the future. Regional Centres of Excellence (in LDAs) or Architecture Centres tend to service regional panels, and it would seem highly possible that the new Design for London organisation will look at the need for a London panel. However, London governance is significantly different from other regions, and a London panel run by an organisation which sits under the Mayor may focus on serving him, the assembly or 'Mayors family' officers. This may give a panel a slightly different focus, linked to decision making in a way that other regional panels are not.

A national and regional panel does not take away the need for local panels, there are many more schemes that would benefit from the review process than can be seen by CABI or any future London panel. But you should be clear about your relationships with other panels, think about how you will deal with schemes that may be seen by more than one design panel, and consider how you might present the thoughts of other panels at your sessions. CABI's general advice is that two publicly funded bodies should not be reviewing the same scheme at the same time. It can be confusing for the applicants and the planners. However they may possibly see them at different times in the design and planning process.

Facilities

Design panels need to look at lots of drawings and sometimes models. Often the proposal will be at pre application stage, and could be commercially sensitive. This will mean the applicant will not want to leave the material for other applicants or observers to see. So you may need 2 rooms next to each other. They will need to have walls to pin up plans, and space for models. If you have 2 rooms, an applicant can set up in one while the panel is reviewing in the other room, then swap over.

Some applicants might want to blind you with powerpoints, computer flythrough etc. Take care, today's sophisticated graphics can be appealing, but they might not be showing a scheme as it would really look once built. This may be unintentional, as lots of the details used to create virtual models, like materials or detailing, may not been considered by the architects yet so the computer modellers make up the details. Powerpoints also always seem to take longer than they should, and your panel's time is precious. Some boroughs have said outright that only plans and models can be presented. It is worth thinking upfront how you want to approach this.

Staff time

It will be unrealistic to expect your existing staff to take on the management of the panel as well as an existing full work load. Don't underestimate the time it takes to set up meetings, liaising with multiple applicants and panel members.

It is very important that the session is accurately recorded, which will also take time. Regional panels usually have one to two full time staff organising the whole process.

Panel Members

Selecting who will be on your panel can be one of the hardest things to do. For a good session you probably need between 5 and 8 members present. This means you will need a pool of maybe 20 or more members. The number of panel members will depend on the commitment individuals can give and the number of times the panel meets.

You should look to include a range of skills and expertise, including people who know about sustainable design and construction, historic conservation, landscape design, highway and streetscape design, inclusive design etc. You can then invite specific panel members when you know a certain issue is particularly relevant. But be realistic, you probably will not be paying panellists, and you may be asking them to come along to numerous afternoon or evening meetings, so don't expect everyone to be available for all sessions. Panel members will need to know well in advance when they will be expected to attend.

It will be very important to get the dynamics of a panel right. You don't just want people who like to criticise, or people who like to fix things, or people who are good at listening, you need a whole range of personality types as well as design specialises for a good, useful review. If you don't think the dynamics are working, think about adding different members, or don't invite personalities that clash to the same sessions. If you find some members aren't really contributing, you don't have to invite them again – its your panel, make sure it works as you want it to.

As more and more London Boroughs set up panels the pool of suitable members is likely to be used up. It is advisable that you ask local architects and agents, luminaries and stakeholders, but remember they may already be on another boroughs panel. It may be a good idea to invite design champions and officers from other Boroughs. Maybe not your immediate neighbours to avoid conflicts of interest, but cross borough panel membership could be really helpful for all, supporting networking as well as panel discussions.

It is worth setting a time limit for panel membership. Two years is about right although you may leave the option open for members to reapply. You may want to advertise for members, but however you identify people make sure you have a robust and transparent selection process in place. You may feel that consulting on your proposal to set up a panel helps alert potential members. This will also be helpful if you come across objections to you using panel advice in the future.

We could consider setting up panel membership for a whole sub region. So even if you have your own sessions in your own borough, you can call on a wider group of panel members. If Boroughs wish to do this UDL could help to set up and manage panel lists.

Conflicts of interest

An age old worry. If you have architects, developers, consultants, agents etc on your panel, obviously they will not be able to be present when schemes they or firms they are connected with are being discussed. Sending out agendas and scheme details well in advance of the meetings will help people know when they should stay away.

Chairing

A good chair is vital. They should ensure everyone has the opportunity to express their views freely, and that all members respect the views of others. They should also ensure that all relevant design issues are considered. CABE's design review spends at least an hour on each scheme. You may feel this is too long, especially if you are holding evening review meetings. It is therefore very important that the chair gives time to a variety of design issues such as layout, scale, landscaping, inclusive access etc, and does not focus on one issue for too long. You could use the list of things to be covered in design and access statements as a rough guide to steer discussion, but try and prevent the review becoming a tick box exercise.

The chair will also need to sum up at the end of each review, setting out the panels conclusions. Different members may very well have different views on any one scheme, and it is up to the chair to balance these and provide definitive comments that can be relayed to the developer and council.

Freedom of Information

Where the panel is reviewing a planning application, draft policies or council proposal all information and comments made should be advertised on your website. Where you are considering a pre- applications scheme, CABE advise that wherever possible you should make your comments public. However, there may well be cases where it will be appropriate to give advice on a confidential basis. If a pre application proposal is followed by an application, the panels comments may then need to form part of the application file and background papers and so will become public. You should make this clear to applicants.

There seem to be differences in opinion over whether a Freedom of Information request to see panel comments at the pre application stage would be valid. One borough refuses to provide them and has not been challenged, but others think they may have to supply them if asked. You should check with your own Borough FOL team and be clear from the start what position you will be taking.

Agenda items

It is likely that your panel will never be able to see all the schemes you would like its advice on. CABE's design review sees the dissemination of lessons learnt from the schemes it sees as very important. So every year it published Design Reviewed documents, sometimes focusing on building types or issues. For example there is a Design Reviewed on town centre development, and one in the pipe line on tall buildings.

You may not think dissemination of lessons learnt is the primary role for your panel, but it is still probably worth making sure you see a range of scheme types, from all parts of the Borough over time. If you are having evening sessions 3 or 4 schemes per meeting would probably be all you could review properly. You might want to focus on schemes affecting your Area Action Plans, or pull together similar schemes such as high density housing, or retail developments. This will help members really get to grips with the design requirements of certain areas or development types. Don't forget that your regeneration or highways teams might also benefit from reviews of their work – your panel does not have to just look at private sector proposals.