REVIEWING DESIGN REVIEW IN LONDON
Commissioned by:
Urban Design London, the Greater London Authority and the Place Alliance

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

This report focuses on design review: the peer review process for the design of built environment projects. Whilst in London this process is sometimes referred to by other names including: quality review, place review, project review, and design surgery, in this report the universal term ‘design review’ is used to cover all such practices. Quotes have been changed to reflect this and to maintain anonymity.

Projects are brought forward to design review panels by a combination of developers (and their design teams) and, in the case of public realm schemes, by local authority clients (and their design teams). Typically, these parties are referred to as ‘applicants’ in the report, although if a finding relates to a particular sub-group of applicants e.g. developers, then that term is used instead.
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The research
This study, undertaken throughout 2017 by UCL researchers, examined a range of design review cases in London. Design review is a formal peer review process focusing on the design of built environment projects. The research findings are based upon in-depth interviews with applicants, designers, panellists, and panel managers, providing a 360-degree analysis of the diversity of design review practices across London and the benefits that flow from high quality provision.

1.2 A success story of more and better provision
The practice of design review has been on a growth trajectory in London linked to the withdrawal of national funding for design review after 2011 and its replacement by a new market for design review services. The period has seen a professionalization and localisation of design review and a consequential move away from informal local panels and top-down national ones.

Overwhelmingly those interviewed, from all sides, were positive about the purpose and value of design review, accepting that for a modest cost the process did improve design. For those managing, commissioning, serving on, or presenting to design review panels, the aspirations for review are clear and unified. They focus on achieving better design and placemaking than would otherwise be achieved without design review. Developers tend to be more circumspect about design review than these groups, but also accepted that the process is a necessary means to raise the standard of design.

The research revealed that generally the practice and experience of design review across London is improving, although there remain some important challenges.

Widespread agreement about the benefits of design review
There is widespread agreement about the range of benefits that design review can bring, and collectively that these underpin a solid case for investing in it. These impacts benefit all parties with a stake in the outcomes from the development process: society, the design team, the applicant (developer) and the planning authority.

The research confirmed that well managed design review delivers:

- Culture change locally through which better design is seen as the norm
- Better designed projects and places
- A more collaborative process
- More empowered designers
- A more intelligent design process
- A faster formal planning process
Overwhelmingly interviewees felt that the costs associated with design review represented value for money, particularly if it led to a smoother and more streamlined route through the planning process. Whilst the charges levied for design review varied significantly, they were never seen as a barrier by applicants, and many developers would be prepared to pay more if it meant that the planning process was expedited.

*Reviews form part of a larger process of securing better design*

Whilst the range of positive impacts from design review are clear and significant, as an approach to improving design quality it has its limitations and should never be seen as the sole means to achieve design quality. Even if a number of design reviews are conducted on a project, it can never replace the on-going dialogue that it is possible to have with a permanent design advisor within a planning or highways authority. In-house design advice and independent design review are most effective when working together.

The recommendations of panels are also only as good as the determination of all parties to see them implemented. Ultimately the success of design review is dependent on:

i) An applicant and design team willing to engage positively with the process and address the concerns of the panel
ii) A public sector willing to deny the necessary permissions (or funding) unless and until the concerns of the panel have been addressed
iii) Failure to attend design review when invited being treated as a material consideration in the planning process
iv) A continued focus on delivering design quality by the development team and planning authority even after the necessary regulatory gateways have been passed.
1.3 Refining the process of design review

The research deliberately examined design review as delivered by the range of design review management models used in London. The passage of 12 projects through 8 panels were explored in-depth, giving considerable insights into the best management practices.

There is no ‘right’ way of managing design review

Design review panels come in four types: internally managed (free or charged) and externally managed (private or not-for-profit). There was no evidence revealed that any of these four models is intrinsically superior to the others. All are capable of delivering excellent design review services.

Whilst qualitative differences between the various providers of professional design review services were hard to detect, there were clear differences between services run on a shoe-string within local authorities, or even on a free (voluntary) basis, and those that were professionally organised (either in-house or externally) and fully costed. Paid reviews provide consistency and quality of service, which is a great benefit to all parties.

The use of ad hoc design review in Boroughs without dedicated panels of their own represents a sub-standard model. It leads to a lack of consistency of panel membership and to an associated lack of local contextual knowledge.

Demonstrating independence is important

To be effective at offering impartial design advice, panels need to be independent, with their role and status made clear. Independence requires that a distance be maintained between applicants and the panel and panel managers at all times. The research indicated that the absence of this demonstrable independence can quickly undermine trust in the process. As a minimum this should require that, even if a provider of a design review service is paid directly by an applicant, that the client for the review remains the public authority.

Panels need to be more explicit about their conflict of interest provisions, including being clear with applicants (as well as panellists) about how such matters are managed.

A high quality panel with a clear understanding of their role is key

The most important factor to get right in design review is the constitution of the panel. The research revealed that different panels look for different things when recruiting, typically a combination of:

i) The professional standing and expertise of individual panel members
ii) Local knowledge and commitment
iii) A broad spread of inter-disciplinary expertise across the panel
iv) A diversity of panel members reflecting an inclusive recruitment process.
Good design review comes down to the panel members being open-minded and constructive in their criticism. Panellists with very fixed stylistic views, for example, should be avoided in favour of those with a more open and pluralistic attitude to architectural design.

Well-integrated design review works best

Rather than design review being seen as peripheral, merely a ‘tick-box’ exercise, or the only check on the quality of the project, review works best when its role in relation to the wider processes that shape projects is properly established and well understood. This should begin with consistent criteria for determining which projects should normally be subject to design review. For example, ‘all major projects and other projects of local or city-wide significance’.

The most effective Borough panels i.e. those whose advice has the greatest impact, are the ones that have managed to get and retain the confidence of both officers and the planning committee. This requires the design review panel to have:

i) A good understanding and respect for the local policy context, development challenges and planning process
ii) A means to dialogue with the planning committee and key officers that goes beyond the reviews themselves
iii) A high status when feeding their views into decision-making.

It is important to establish from the start what issues are within or beyond the scope of the design review process. Panels should take a broad view of design that incorporates the critical notion of design as placemaking and which extends across spatial scales from very large-scale urban design concerns to the internal arrangements of buildings.

Adopting best practice principles to conduct design review

Each panel operates differently, often with good reason, although some practices continue to play into ongoing negative perceptions about design review. These can be avoided by focussing more effort on a number of uniformly important characteristics of successful design review.

The research confirmed that well managed design review involves:

- Consistent panel membership across successive reviews on large schemes (the absence of which can significantly undermine the credibility of the process)
- Panels that are not larger than they need to be (smaller panels were consistently regarded as more effective than larger ones)
An optimum journey through design review for large projects would typically involve three visits to the panel: at inception to discuss the concept, after consultation to discuss the design development, and again at detailed design. Smaller projects requiring a one-off design review should be seen at a mid-way stage when the design is well resolved but it is not too late to make serious changes if required.

Producing clear reports leading to a demonstrable response

Many panels adopt the standard that the report should be provided within ten working days of the review. The research confirmed that it is important that reports are concise and written in plain English. Clear recommendations should proceed in a hierarchy from fundamental concerns to the ‘nice to haves’.

Design teams should demonstrate how they have made a considered and intelligent response to the recommendations of panels. Including a section on this in the Design and Access Statement ensures this is made publicly and formally as part of the planning process.

For their part, when case officers, planning committees and other regulators choose to depart from an explicit recommendation of a design review panel, a careful justification should be incorporated in the officer’s report and/or decision letter in order to justify the response.
1.4 Challenges for the future
Despite the benefits, negative perceptions about design review remain widespread. Panels argue that they continue to battle against what they see as outmoded associations with the old (pre-2011) design review model. The fragmentation and commercialisation of design review services after 2011 has meant that the sharing of good practice has often been absent, and this can mean that poor practices persist. A new more open learning culture is needed.

The need to be transparent and accessible
The principles of design review encompassed in Design Review, Principles and Practice\(^1\) state that design review should be: independent, expert, multidisciplinary, accountable, transparent, proportionate, timely, advisory, objective and accessible. These are reinforced in the Mayor’s Design Review Charter.

The research showed, however, that the majority of panels are not ‘transparent’ or ‘accessible’. Whilst there were often very good reasons for being more closed in style, it is clear that there was a cost to this in the reputation of panels and to the process at large. Given that some panel hearings are already far more open than others, without obvious damage to their processes, levels of engagement or reputation, a greater degree of transparency should be the norm.

If design review is to be demonstrably seen to be conducted in the public interest, then the closed nature of many panels needs to be reversed.

The need for a learning culture
There is also a need to be less secretive and better at sharing the experiences and practices of design review between panels and across the sector. Such a learning culture will benefit everyone involved in design review. This report represents a start to that process.

A learning culture should begin by establishing robust mechanisms for securing feedback on how local design review practices are operating. Currently this is a neglected aspect of most design review services. It might include:

i) Feedback from service users to those managing design review on their experience
ii) Feedback to the panel members on how their recommendations are being used and on the effectiveness of the service
iii) Feedback to the public about design review services, about the role of design review and its impact.

\(^1\) https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/DC%20Cabe%20Design%20Review%2013_W_0.pdf
PROJECT
Land at Plevna Crescent, London N15

LOCAL AUTHORITY
London Borough of Haringey

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Developer - Garden of Eden Ltd
Designers - Ayre Chamberlain Gaunt Architects, Open Spaces Landscape & Arboricultural Consultants

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Externally managed local authority panel, with Frame Projects as the external provider

PROJECT BACKGROUND
This application for a residential scheme relates to a challenging triangular site bounded on two sides by railway lines. The site supported sycamore woodland with areas of rough grassland, tall herbs and scrub, and was designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation in Haringey’s Local Plan. The surrounding streets are predominantly residential with two and three storey dwellings.

An outline planning application for the whole site was refused in 2014, but a ‘split’ decision at appeal allowed for part of the development on Plevna Crescent to provide up to 42 residential units, whilst 53 dwellings on Ermine Road were dismissed. Negotiation then commenced with the council for a development on Plevna Crescent and this eventually led to two design reviews.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
New proposals were presented to the Quality Review Panel in 2016 and 2017.

At the first panel the proposals included five residential pavilions of five storeys providing 75 residential units. The panel suggested that the number of pavilions should be reduced to four in order to decrease the density and provide greater opportunity for landscaping to enhance the development and views of, and through, the site from the neighbouring areas.

The design / development team wholeheartedly accepted the recommendation and worked to re-design the four new blocks in order not to lose too much accommodation. At a second review in 2017 (this time...
a Chair’s review) the consensus was that whilst the proposed development density remained quite high, the reduction of ‘perceived’ density achieved through the loss of one pavilion was significant.

The relationships between the blocks themselves, and the neighbouring dwellings on Plevna Crescent had also significantly improved. The proposals now featured more generous spaces between the proposed blocks, better amenity within the accommodation itself (avoiding problems of windows in close proximity), and increased scope for views through the development. It strongly supported moves to create high quality amenity space within the site.

**OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW**

As a result of the design review process the scheme was improved through the reduction of one pavilion, the re-orientation of the blocks to allow views through the development, and modulation of the blocks in response to the topography. This reduced overlooking and increased the opportunity for improved landscaping. The architects were at pains to show how the panel’s advice had a significant and positive impact on the scheme, and in their Design and Access Statement, included a sequence of drawings to demonstrate the transition in response to the feedback received from the panel.

By providing constructive advice about the best ways to improve the scheme, the panel assisted the applicant to revise the proposals in order to address the key issues of density, massing, landscaping and integration of the proposals with the existing context, all issues that had previously led to the refusal of planning permission. The designers worked constructively with the panel’s advice and, from the developer’s perspective, there was no loss of residential units. The second panel commented “The proposals had improved significantly since the previous review. This has resulted in a scheme that optimises the development potential of the site, takes advantage of the site’s unique qualities, and prioritises high quality development”.

The scheme was submitted for planning approval in June 2017 and, at the time of writing, a decision was pending.
2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Using this research report to question and improve practice
Design review is a formal peer review process focusing on the design of built environment projects.

This report moves systematically through the design review process, from its set up, to its application, to its impact. In doing so it draws from the testimony of those interviewed, the voices of whom feature heavily in quotes throughout the report. Key findings and recommendations on every dimension of the design review process are presented alongside a number of short case studies. The case studies give a flavour of the types of projects that were reviewed and a sense of how the process of design review impacts on design outcomes.

It is not intended that this report be read cover to cover but instead dipped into by those engaged in design review and who want advice or a better understanding of practice relating to particular aspects of design review. It is hoped that by sharing experiences this work can help providers to question current practices and improve them.

2.2 Design review in London
Design review began in London over two hundred years ago with the establishment of the 1802 ‘Committee of Taste’ by the Treasury to review the design of “monuments to the heroes of the Napoleonic wars”. It has come a long way since then, but many of the practices used today still closely resemble those developed by the Royal Fine Arts Commission which was established in London in 1924 as the first national design review service. This morphed into the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in 1999 with design review remaining a core part of its work until its funding was withdrawn in 2011 and a reduced design review function moved to the Design Council. When set up, 70% of CABE’s design review workload was in London, and when public funding was withdrawn in 2011 London still represented 45% of its review workload.

After 2011, for the first time in 90 years there was a complete withdrawal of national government involvement from design review and the gradual emergence instead of a market in design review services across England. This was strongly endorsed in the wording of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2012, and has since received a further strong endorsement in the wording of the 2017 draft London Plan. This is accompanied by a Design Review Charter produced and promoted by the Mayor of London.

Whilst, in the turbulent economic climate of 2011/12, a market in design review services initially struggled to establish itself in London, recently it has burgeoned. Today there are approaching 30 formal panels operating across the city (and more informal ones). Many are directly funded by a charge levied for the service by local planning authorities. At the same time there remain very significant gaps in the coverage of design review.

The current flowering of design review and the divergence in provision make now a particularly important moment to take a step back and explore the new landscape for design review services in London. This research represents the first funded study of design review processes since 2008 when the former ‘statutory’ CABE conducted a national survey on the subject.

2.3 A shift to design review
The recent growth in design review across London was undoubtedly encouraged by the changes in national planning policy. There is also a strong element of Boroughs looking at each other in order to learn from and adopt the best practices of their neighbours.

“Our chief executive had had a very positive experience at her former borough, they’d had a panel there and she’d seen it work well”.

14 - Reviewing Design Review in London
Within this shifting context, attitudes to design review vary widely across London’s Boroughs, and four distinct reactions to the use of design review can be identified. These reflect, first, whether the pursuit of design quality is prioritised, and second, whether design review is included within the armoury of approaches used to address this concern. Recently there has been a noticeable move amongst planning authorities that use design review from the ‘design quality not prioritised’ to the ‘design quality prioritised’ camp, with an associated growth in the use of design review.

At a London-wide scale the decision in 2009 to review all Transport for London (TfL) street improvement schemes over £1 million firmly raised the bar on the public realm side. Elsewhere the increasing demand for development felt by some Boroughs across both Inner and Outer London and the squeeze on resources within local government have led boroughs to seek innovative means, including greater use of design review, to assist decision-making in local planning authorities.

As part of this there has also been a move away from the use of informal and / or self-appointed local panels towards the appointment of formal professionalised design review panels. Sometimes there has been opposition to this when locals felt disenfranchised, but the change has typically been driven by a realisation that such informal practices were not able to deliver the step-change in design quality that was required.

“Although the old group might have been more democratic, it wasn’t improving the quality of the outcomes we were getting and so we resolved to do that with specialist advice”.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE DIFFERENT PRIORITIES GIVEN TO DESIGN AND TO DESIGN REVIEW</th>
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<tr>
<td>Design quality prioritised</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design quality not prioritised</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design review used</td>
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<td>'We have or use a dedicated design review panel'</td>
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<td>'We use design review occasionally as an added extra'</td>
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<td>Design review rarely or never used</td>
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<td>'Design is important but we don’t need design review as our planning officers are perfectly well trained'</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Design isn’t really seen as a very important thing here and we don’t really have schemes that require design review'</td>
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2.4 Beyond London

Whilst this research is focussed on London, the majority of the findings will be of direct relevance elsewhere across the UK where recent research conducted by the Place Alliance has suggested a similar divergence in practice has occurred. Care should be taken, however, in applying the findings to different market environments where anecdotal evidence suggests it is sometimes more challenging to make design review pay.
TRANSPORT FOR LONDON
DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

PROJECT
Eltham High Street public realm improvements, London SE9

LOCAL AUTHORITY
Royal Borough of Greenwich

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Applicant: Royal Borough of Greenwich
Design team: East Architecture, Landscape and Urban Design

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Transport for London panel managed by Urban Design London

PROJECT BACKGROUND
Eltham is one of the three major town centres in the Royal Borough of Greenwich. Historically important as the place where Henry VIII grew up and home of Eltham Palace, its high street is a thriving centre with a mix of national brands and independent shops.

Transforming Eltham High Street into a more vibrant commercial centre and improving connectivity required improvement to the pedestrian environment with the potential to reduce severance caused by the busy road while retaining the movement functionality of the street. This was a significant challenge given the traffic conditions, but one that the Borough felt could be addressed by adopting some ‘shared space’ principles.

As there was no requirement for planning consent for the scheme, the design review was the only opportunity to obtain an external assessment of the proposals from an urban design perspective.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
As Eltham High Street was a Local Implementation Plan (LIP) Major Scheme, TfL funding required at least one design review session. This single review occurred in January 2015. At that point the proposals were at an early stage following the recent appointment of the consultant design team, East Architecture and the panel took the opportunity to comment on the overall design approach and concept.

High Street site plan, showing the strong emphasis on crossings and connections
The aspirations for the scheme included:

i) Creating a vibrant environment and an enhanced sense of place
ii) Promoting businesses and encouraging new investment and growth
iii) Making Eltham a destination of choice for residents and visitors
iv) Developing civic pride and encouraging community uses
v) Improving safety and permeability, and promoting active travel and better arrangements for buses

The panel commented that the proposals demonstrated a good understanding of the baseline information required to inform the scheme design and stakeholder consultation and encouraged further thinking around the connection between the high street and its hinterland, including to rear car parking. A range of potential design approaches to better reallocate road space were discussed, including removal of signage, use of gateway features to indicate a realm of slower speeds, reduced carriageway widths, easier pedestrian crossings, and so forth. It was noted that major new developments were planned for the High Street, including a new cinema and the conversion of historic tram shelters into community spaces. The scheme should therefore respond to these and ensure that bus stops and pedestrian crossings were located in the right place to serve key destinations. A range of recent precedents were offered to the design team with suitable contacts who might offer advice on refining key aspects of the proposals.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW

The panel concluded that this was a well-designed project that was broadly following an exemplary design process, and therefore the advice given was supportive rather than challenging. The successful design review ensured that the project secured the next level of funding for the scheme and also acted as a formal check that the project was reaching the required standard.

On-going consultations took place between the designer, the council, TfL, key stakeholders and the public to arrive at an agreed set of proposals for the high street and the comments that had emerged during the review fed into this process. The final proposals picked up on the importance of the transverse connections, the idea of strong gateway features, widening pavements by reducing the carriageway, bold pedestrian crossings, and generally the need to calm traffic and civilise the space.

Whilst not instrumental, the design review had played a key supportive role in the delivery of a high quality public realm in Eltham, not least as a gateway to ensure that public money was being spent wisely. The first phase of the works was completed in 2017.
3. SETTING UP AND MANAGING A DESIGN REVIEW SERVICE

3.1 Why? An aspiration for better design

For those managing, commissioning, or serving on design review panels, and for designers presenting to panels, the aspirations of design review are clear and consistent. They focus on achieving better design and placemaking than would otherwise be achieved without a panel.

Various reasons are given in support of design review:

- Better design is fundamentally in the public interest: both when delivered by the public sector, for example in public realm projects, and when part of a private development scheme
- A culture shift is required: shifting away from a culture where design quality was considered a ‘nice to have’ but was not routinely prioritised
- We need to raise the bar locally: in both the public and private sectors by moving away from the lowest common denominator development and instead raising ambitions: “Wanting to do something good, rather than something that’s good enough”
- Sharing ambitions across the team: In public realm schemes the range of stakeholders and their interests is very diverse, and design review can help to bring them together in one place in order to “get agreement through collaboration to a shared set of ambitions”
- Sharing ambitions across London: over time, to achieve a consistently higher quality across London “so that going from one Borough to the next doesn’t feel like falling off a cliff”
- Design ideas benefit from testing: Design review can be used to test ideas within a supportive peer group, and to get feedback on issues that are proving difficult
- Planning needs to be empowered to require better design: because planning is under-resourced and under pressure and design review can help planners to focus on quality as well as quantity in their decision-making
- We can use limited resources more wisely: because good design is not always about spending more money on design, it’s also about avoiding costly mistakes, and using the given resources more wisely to optimise outcomes

“There are plenty of rubber bands on those wallets and the design review panel acknowledges that, but still says ‘aspire because you can’.”
Developers were more circumspect in their aspirations for design review and whilst accepting that it did raise standards of design, it was often viewed as a necessary additional hurdle to be overcome on the way to getting planning permission. At the same time they saw its potential to benefit their primary economic motivation.

Developers see the potential of design review to:

- **Speed up planning**: because the design review process could remove a key uncertainty in the planning process, namely that associated with defining what is ‘good design’ in any given locality
- **Help navigate local objections**: through using the design review panel as a useful ally to support development (on design grounds) in the face of local opposition against the very principle of development. As one developer noted: “one could see it as the developer lobbying this expert group, who he or she hopes will give a much more favourable hearing than a bunch of NIMBY residents who may be spitting blood”

### 3.2 The local context

The ultimate decision about whether or not to use design review will be a political one and the most effective panels (those whose advice has the greatest impact) are the ones that have managed to get and retain the confidence of both the officers and the planning committee. This requires the design review panel to have:

i) A good understanding and respect for the local policy context, development challenges and planning process
ii) A means for dialogue with the planning committee and key officers that goes beyond the reviews themselves
iii) A high status when feeding their views into decision-making

**Understanding the local planning / policy context**

When setting up or commissioning a design review panel, a key consideration for London’s Boroughs has been how it will relate to existing services; notably to development management and to the sorts of pre-application advice and community engagement that has now become standard for major development projects.

In this respect applicants’ experience of London’s design review panels is mixed. Some argue that it is not uncommon for planning (and design) officers and the panel to see things differently: “I’ve very rarely experienced where they’re completely in sync”. This can give rise to tensions, even to the extent that officers can feel threatened and become reluctant to send schemes to design review. Elsewhere the work of the design officer and design review panel seem to be far more integrated: “Ultimately officers want the panel to give them all the support on design that they need for their report”.

To be taken seriously, it is critical that design review works with, rather than against, policy. And instead of a threat to the expertise of internal staff, design review should be seen as helping to empower them, raising their design concerns up the agenda.
Design review should support other local efforts to raise the standard of design:

- **Pre-application advice and design review should work as a package:** not in opposition to each other
- **Panel members need to be properly inducted into panels:** with a full initial briefing (and regular refreshers) about the local context, its challenges and opportunities and the aspirations of its local authority
- **The planning case officer or design officer should properly brief the panel:** about each development proposal prior to its review, whilst the briefing should cover the agreed outcomes of any pre-application negotiations and / or community engagement
- **Panels must be respectful of the policy context:** and of officers’ advice concerning what is or is not compliant with regards to non-design planning matters
- **Officers must be respectful of the panel’s advice:** and of the potential for peer review to provide objective and holistic design critique
- **Everyone accepts that views on design will sometimes differ:** and that the ultimate arbiter will be the local planning authority

“Design review is about ‘can we improve that?’, whereas planning is about ‘is it compliant? So it’s coming from two, very, very different places”

“Design review can complement the planning position and focus in on design providing a moment in time check as part of a larger process”.

A dialogue with (and between) decision-makers

In reality design review at the local level is immersed in local politics and, as one interviewee commented: “there are some very strong players [councillors] who do not want to be dictated to”. To ensure that council members and their officers understand the process and trust the decision-making of the design review panel, mechanisms need to be found to establish a dialogue between the two.

Various means exist to build knowledge of a panel’s work within its parent body:

- **An annual presentation:** Some panels have instituted an annual presentation to the planning committee at which the committee are talked through the decision-making processes behind recommendations on key projects
- **Annual general meeting:** others utilise an annual general meeting with panel members that also reviews decisions, and which allows the panel Chair and the managers to get feedback from the local authority
- **Non-participant observers:** a number of panels encourage planning committee members and ward councillors to attend their deliberations (without formally participating themselves), in order that they can see how projects are reviewed and recommendations derived: “so he or she can act as an advocate for the panel’s views and understands the process”
- **Shared panels:** where projects cross scales of interest (Mayoral and Borough) or are being funded across agencies (TfL and Borough). Using joint panels can help to ensure a shared perspective on design
3. Setting up and managing a design review service

“This is not about the Mayor telling Boroughs what to do, but it is about maximising potential through the investment that TfL is providing, to get the best scheme it can”

It is clear that boroughs need to invest in their panel, carefully briefing panel members about the local context and ensuring the panel meets regularly in order to build its local knowledge. In this way: “the panel grows as much as the officers become more trusting of it”.

The status of design review

The research highlighted the importance of a positive relationship between design review panels and decision-makers (both professional and political) within planning authorities and other agencies. It was the strength of these relationships and the trust placed by decision-makers in the recommendations of design review panels that directly determined the status of panels and the degree to which their advice was accepted.

“If the panel don’t like a scheme, it’s unlikely we’ll take it to the planning committee with a recommendation for approval”

Design review is required by TfL as one of a number of gateways through which large public realm schemes need to pass in order to access funding. With checks built in to ensure that comments have been addressed, the system offers a powerful mechanism to ensure that design quality is systematically factored into decision-making. For the Boroughs design review is a material consideration in development management, but the recommendation of panels needs to be balanced with other inputs from highways authorities, English Heritage, The Environment Agency, public consultation, and so forth, and with non-design related planning factors such as the percentage of affordable housing in a residential development.

When panels are at their most effective their status is high and their advice highly influential, with one interviewee even likening the process to the wielding of soft power: “it’s a political decision at the end of the day, but I think it’s almost like soft power as opposed to hard power, it’s a nudge in the right direction and if it has the weight of the panel behind it, a committee will take it seriously”.

A number of means can help to raise the status of design review panels and therefore the weight given to their advice:

- **Part of a systematic process**: Constituting design review as an end to end process which starts at the very beginning with discussions about the project brief and moves through to the detailed design, with reviews at key strategic milestones in order to help shape a project
- **Reviewer standing**: Ensuring that the quality and standing of the reviewers elicits an appropriate respect from all parties
- **Members taking ownership**: Ensuring that councillors and officers take ownership of the outcomes and buy-in to the process by involving them in commissioning the panel and in over viewing its work
- **Reporting back**: Ensuring that the panel’s advice is systematically summarised in case officer reports on planning proposals. This might incorporate the key advice received at pre- and post-application stages and also how applicants have reacted to it
Taking notice
The extent to which applicants have regard to a panel’s advice will also depend on whether they feel the panel’s views carry weight. As one interviewee admitted, “When the status of design review is too weak and developers feel they can ignore it, they will do”. In such cases “it can become a bit of a box ticking exercise, rather than anything else”; a reaction that is increasingly pronounced the later design review occurs in the planning process.

“The panel said ‘we’d quite like to see this again’ but ‘we’d ticked the box, we’d done it, it is a bit toothless and a bit of a waste of time’.

Not all panels have the same status or influence as an input into subsequent decision-making, but the research showed that far from being toothless, the advice of most panels was taken very seriously indeed. As one developer put it: “The important client is the planning authority. The developer is also the client because we listen to what a panel says, but in a lot of cases only insofar as we believe that the planning authority will give weight to those comments”.

3.3 Four models of design review
To classify the diversity of design review services in London, first, there are those set up and managed in-house within a public authority (usually a London Borough). A second major category are those managed on behalf of a public authority by an independent third party.

In-house providers can be further divided between those that charge, at the point of delivery, for design review services (or via a ring-fenced sum within a Planning Performance Agreement), and those that are offered free to the end user. External providers always charge and can be divided between not-for-profit providers of design review services and private companies.
3.4 Navigating the market

An important point made by many interviewees is that within a free market for design review there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. Instead it is quite appropriate for local authorities to tailor their design review arrangements to suit their particular circumstances. At the same time, those who regularly present to, or sit on, design review panels were clear that they have experienced an increasing divergence in practices, and not all practices are equally effective.

“I think there are certain principles that should apply, but then how those are interpreted and how the relationship between the panel and the local authority develops over time should be left to the local authority”

When setting it up or re-tendering panels local authorities are increasingly doing considerable research to review the various models in order to select which is right for them. As one panel manager commented, “We looked at the Islington panel, we went to some of their review days, the LLDC panel, the Newham panel and the Old Oak Common and Park Royal panel. So that helped mitigate some of the challenges that we could have faced”.

To pay or not to pay

A key consideration, in this new market, is how different players position themselves with regard to the service package being offered. One provider commented: “one of the issues around design review is the different layers of the market. If we’re bringing together a national, or an international group of experts and yet other players in the market are offering a much less expensive model, but with different quality of results, the question becomes how you value quality and how you pay more for quality, if that’s appropriate to your scheme”. In other words a premium service is likely to attract a premium price, but may not be appropriate to every circumstance.

Purchasers therefore need to have regard to the quality of the service being purchased and how this is reflected in the price being paid. Whilst there were clear differences between services run on a shoe-string within local authorities or on a free (voluntary) basis, and those that were professionally organised (either in-house or externally) and charged for, qualitative differences between the various providers of professional design review services were harder to detect.

Few design review panels are now run as free services. The Greater London Authority (GLA), through the Mayor’s Design Advocates (formally the Mayoral Design Advisory Group), and Transport for London, via their design reviews and design surgeries organised by Urban Design London, are the largest providers of free design review in London. The latter focus on reviewing publicly funded public realm projects about which it was noted: “we wanted to promote design surgeries and recognise the value that they offer, but as soon as you start charging, the level of interest begins to diminish”.

These are joined by a diminishing number of Boroughs offering free design review via an informal panel of unpaid volunteers. Whilst the London-wide services are fully funded by the Mayor and are run on a professional basis by Urban Design London, elsewhere compromises such as the absence of site visits, less frequent reviews, and a greater strain on internal staff time is the price paid for design review that is free. The cost of design review will be returned to later in the report, but given a general willingness of developers to pay in anticipation of a smoother planning process, alongside the professionalization of design review that it is possible to achieve through such means, the continued use of free or inadequately funded design review seems increasingly difficult to justify.

“Applicants are happy to pay for these things, that’s what they do, but they need the service and they need that whole business mind in how you run and involve them”
3. Setting up and managing a design review service

3.5 In-house or contracting out?
If the service is to be chargeable, then a key decision concerns who will manage it. The research revealed a range of perspectives on whether design review is best run in-house within the authority or contracted out to a specialist provider of design review services.

The benefits of contracting out
Three providers currently offer design review services in London, and together they run 12 panels:

i) Design South-East (D:SE), who offered services in London for the first time in 2017, to the Borough of Kingston upon Thames

ii) Frame Projects, providing services to the Boroughs of Camden, and Haringey, and also to the London Legacy Development Corporation (c/o Fortismere Associates), Old Oak & Park Royal Development Corporation, and High Speed 2

iii) Design Council CABE, providing services to the Boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Bexley, Brent, Greenwich, and Waltham Forest, and also to the Thames Tideway.

The benefits of contracting out as reported by those delivering and currently benefitting from such arrangements include:

- A ready-made network of credible expertise: The ability to tap into a ready-made network of credible individuals (the panellists) at a relatively small cost: “putting panels together, thinking about what sort of expertise would be best, and then helping them to find people that they can get on with as well”

- A hassle free, specialised and professional service: A complete and professional service covering everything from compiling the panel to ordering the coffees on the day: “we don’t even have to tell them what time things are on and ensure they know where to park, it’s all covered”

- A detached (clearly independent) view: A view that avoids those who are already involved day to day in negotiating on schemes having to also organise their review: “I think, having it externally managed, makes it slightly more likely that everybody will step back and look at it with fresh eyes, completely objectively”

- An experienced provider: The ability to quickly and effectively set up a credible panel by drawing on the experience of the provider with all the necessary systems already in place

- A financially neutral model: A model through which providers fund the service entirely through the fees received directly from developers: “with the volume of stuff coming in and the workload it’s very difficult for the planners to keep on top of generating invoices to developers, so we’re not financially involved at all now”

This final point is important because the perceived cost to the public purse of providing design review was the number one reason for not using a panel in the national survey of urban design skills conducted by the Place Alliance in 2017. With approaching half of London’s Borough panels managed in this way, the package offered by specialist external providers is clearly attractive to many of London’s hard pressed and over-worked Boroughs.

1 http://www.udg.org.uk/publications/other-publication/design-skills-english-local-authorities
**The benefits of staying in-house**

13 panels are managed in-house within Boroughs (Croydon, Enfield, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Hackney, Lewisham, Merton, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, and Wandsworth), some of which are informal and free for applicants and others formal and charged.

The advantages of remaining in-house as reported by those delivering and currently benefitting from such arrangements include:

- **An integrated service**: Ensuring that design review is fully integrated with other pre-application and post-application processes: “You’re so intertwined with the pre-application process that if you take it outside, you’re losing a lot and having to double up in terms of conversations with different people”.

- **Ease of organisation**: Being closer to the planning process allows for a smoother process of timetabling and organising reviews: “It’s much easier to arrange it internally because we can work very closely with developers and their team”

- **A known quantity**: Members already know and work with officers, and feel confident in that relationship: “members, I think, are reassured by the fact that they are in tune with the process”

- **Greater perceived flexibility**: Through not being tied to a contract: “If you employ a consultant to manage the panel, then it can be quite rigid, and you only get x, y and z because they’re doing work which is charged for by the hour, or whatever, like a bin emptying contract”

- **Less costly**: Fees vary and whilst the charges of in-house panels are often comparable with external providers, they are typically at the lower end of the range: “Our logic was that they paid double if they went externally and it had to be self-sustainable for us in order to be able to resource it, it was a bit of a no brainer really”

- **Easier to procure**: Procuring external services can be a bureaucratic and time-consuming process: “if it’s not a unique provider position, then frankly, life’s too short”

- **Potential for a surplus of staff time**: Because staff are employed internally, any surplus of time paid for but not spent on panel business can be fed into other design support activities: “you get that interface, that person who maybe is in the local authority day to day, making those connections with the case officers”

Of these, the dominant perspective was that design review should be part of a constant conversation between developers and their designers and the local authority, and if this wasn’t the case, there was a danger that design review could become out of sync, leading to mounting tensions between the two. Analysis of the externally managed panels suggested that this had not occurred, and that when well managed the work of panels could be integrated into other pre- and post-application processes in an administratively efficient manner.
3.6 An independent voice

Whilst influence depends on design review panels being connected into the processes of planning / development / design that they hope to influence, many panels also jealously guard their independence. Indeed, it is on this basis that panel members are typically recruited rather than to represent a particular local authority or client perspective. In this position they bring their personal and professional experience to bear in the public interest.

"The panel must be independent and if it disagrees with something that the planning officers or applicant has said, it should say so”

“It’s better when you get the panel just responding to what they see and they’re not being overly micro managed”

Being independent means that panels run the risk that their advice will be contradicted or dismissed when weighed against other factors. One panellist suggested “that is something that we welcome, to ensure that we are also challenged”, but others felt that such outcomes could be minimised by ensuring that panels are properly briefed. A panel Chair wryly observed: “Panels should be independent and say what they think, but not to the point of ignorance”.

Challenges for in-house panels: In-house panels in particular were sometimes perceived by applicants to be too close to the planning authority: “led by the planners and it doesn’t feel like an unbiased review”. In-house panels have to work harder to ensure that panel members know that their feedback should be unbiased and impartial. Some authorities clearly wished to keep a tighter rein on their panel than others, and this situation was compounded when councillors sat as part of the panel. Most felt that such practices should be avoided.

Challenges for external panels: Criticism was also levelled at external providers whose model of operation increasingly has them being paid by developers directly to deliver a design review service, albeit at the instruction of, and as required by, the requisite local authority with whom they (typically) hold a head contract. Some felt that at times this relationship between design review providers and developers could become too close. As one applicant who could remember the pre-market era in design review services commented: “you used to get proper nervous before a design review and now, it’s a cosy chat because it’s being paid for by the client”. Whilst this view was not widely held, the research did reveal the disturbing case of one unhappy applicant complaining about the review they had received and being offered a second one: “From being told that it was a terrible design, we were told it was a rather good design and they were looking forward to it happening”.

Maintaining a distance: This case may have been a one off in the early years of the post-2011 free market for design review services, and practices have clearly developed in the intervening years. To avoid such situations in the future, independence requires that a distance be maintained between the panel and panel managers and applicants at all times. As a minimum this should require, even if paid directly by a developer, that the client for the review remains the public authority. It also means that panels should not get too close to an applicant’s scheme. Even
if they have watched a scheme develop through successive reviews, they still need to be able to say ‘no’ at the end of the process if it becomes necessary.

“I don’t think you want to be that embedded in a scheme, I think the independence is what you want”

3.7 Other models: absent, ad hoc, and private

As well as the 25 local or specialist panels operating across London and the London-wide panels operated by the GLA and TfL, at the time of the research 12 of London’s local planning authorities (Barnet, Bromley, The City, Ealing, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Lambeth, Redbridge, Richmond upon Thames, Sutton, Westminster) had no dedicated design review provision. Some of these Boroughs periodically commission external providers to review particularly significant schemes on their behalf.

Interviewees that had either worked for these Boroughs or who had served on such ad hoc panels, were unanimous that such models are sub-standard because of the lack of consistency in panel membership and the associated lack of local contextual knowledge.

“One off panels don’t develop a relationship with the local authority. The most successful panels are those that are bespoke to the needs of the local authority”

The exception to this is when local authorities have had a financial interest themselves in a development, for example if they have a land holding. In such cases in order to avoid perceptions that they are reviewing their own schemes, authorities might be best placed going to an independent third-party panel, either arranged by an external provider or conducted by the panel of a neighbouring authority.

In a few such cases Boroughs have sanctioned panels being commissioned directly by developers with no corresponding head contract with the authority. This raises issues about who should be in the driving seat, how independent developer commissioned (as opposed to paid for) panels are likely to be, and consequently whether local authorities should accept their advice. This is a matter of all-important perceptions as well as reality.

In a few cases entirely ‘private’ panels outside either the planning or highways regulatory processes have been established in London. Hackney Housing (the Hackney Housing Authority) has its own advisory panel of 15 people, four of whom meet three or four times to review each of their larger social housing projects. In Lewisham, private developer, MUSE Developments, has established a panel to review their Lewisham Gateway proposals. These sorts of panels were outside the scope of the research.
PROJECT
Haslemere Industrial Estate, Ravensbury Terrace, London SW18

LOCAL AUTHORITY
London Borough of Merton

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Developer - Ravensbury Developments Ltd / First Base
Design team - Stitch Architects

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Local authority managed, in-house panel

PROJECT BACKGROUND
The scheme proposed the demolition of a local industrial estate on either side of a small road leading to the River Wandle. Redevelopment of the site was to retain employment uses whilst also providing residential accommodation and public realm improvements by the riverside.

The proposed mixed-use development comprised a main building of 4, 5, and 6 storeys, a new public open space by the river, and a row of terrace houses of 2, 3 and 4 storeys. The main building provided 826 sq.m. of commercial space on the raised ground floor with 81 residential units above and included a communal roof terrace. The new row of terrace houses provided 47 residential units, bringing the total for the site to 128.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
The scheme was the subject of extensive negotiations with the council’s planning department at several pre-application meetings from 2015-2017. There was one design review panel presentation in September 2015 at which the proposals received an amber rating on Merton’s traffic light system.

A range of issues were raised by the panel, including:
1. The blocks of flats were too high and dominant in a locality with no precedent for buildings of this scale. The applicant needed to consider the visual impact from local streets and further afield.
2. The blocks could be broken down further in order to read as a set of separate pavilions and should come forward to the street building line.
3. There were too many single-aspect flats, particularly those facing the noisy railway.
4. The relationship of the main block to the new open space was weak as window treatments did not acknowledge this important space.
Overall the panel felt that there were significant merits in the scheme, but the site was in danger of being over-developed and that the project would benefit from being designed from the new open space outwards.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW
The design review conveyed a sense of the importance of a high quality design for this locally important site. The rating system helped to indicate to the applicants the extent of revisions that were required before a planning submission should be made.

Following the review, the design was analysed and a range of new alternative schemes developed that ultimately led (alongside a last minute change to the planning parameters – more commercial and less housing) to a re-worked project with significant changes to a number of aspects. Notably the scheme was re-worked within a much firmer (and significantly reduced) building envelope. Some of the flats were increased in size and now achieved space standards which were 10% more than the space standards set by the Mayor, the new public space by the canal was improved in order to integrate with the existing urban street pattern, and the blocks were better articulated in order to give the sense of a sequence of smaller buildings, rather than one continuous mega-structure.

Looking back, all involved felt the panel was correct in its assessment, and through an early and rigorous critique it set the design process on a path that eventually resulted in a far better design: “When you look back, if you remove the emotional engagement that we have had, the DRP was right, it was too big”. The proposals were submitted for planning approval in July 2016 and consent was received in June 2017.
4. THE PANEL

4.1 Recruiting the panel
At the heart of design review is the design review panel. With the move from informal ‘self-appointed’ local panels to formally appointed Borough panels, alongside the creation of totally new panels, the recruitment of panel members has become increasingly high profile and formalised.

Local authorities are very clear that how appointments are made needs to be transparent with an open call for people. And within this context appointment typically occurs through a combination of formal advertisement, mining existing networks (notably Design Council CABE’s Built Environment Experts, its BEEs), and informally encouraging people to apply.

Some panels are less high profile than others and this impacts on the ease with which they are able to recruit. As one panel manager commented: “it’s a smallish borough and the sort of things we review are mid-scale where the quality is poor, or mediocre and the job of the panel is to raise that. It’s not always exciting, it’s interesting, but it’s not like ‘oh, we’re looking at the Shard today’”.

Whilst external providers are well used to regularly recruiting panellists, for local authority in-house panels the process is usually more complicated. This is because the recruitment of panel members is a non-standard procurement process and is inevitably both bespoke and time consuming. It may involve working with PR agencies and others in order to tap into the right channels and get the right people.

If well managed it is not uncommon to get over 100 applications for panel membership, meaning that short-listing itself can become a challenge. In such circumstances it is important to have clear selection criteria. As well as taking into account professional expertise, the recruitment process should give potential panellists an opportunity to state why they would be particularly suited to the panel.

“We spent a while making sure that it was detailed enough that we also got people that were truly interested in place and in the future of our borough, so a statement of intent was something that had quite a high rating in the selection process”.

Time limited membership
An important aspect to consider right from the start is the term that panel members will be appointed for. As one panel manager commented: “It’s quite difficult to stop it getting stagnant unless clear terms, for example three years, are defined”. Ensuring that this is explicit in the recruitment materials can prevent difficulties and possible embarrassment further down the line when a panel needs to be refreshed.

“We regularly go through the people that sit on the panel just to keep things fresh”

4.2 Panel membership
The most important factor to get right in design review is the constitution of the panel. The research revealed that different panels look for different things when appointing, although typically this IS a combination of:

i) The professional standing and expertise of individual panel members
ii) Local knowledge and commitment
iii) A broad spread of inter-disciplinary expertise across the panel
iv) A diversity of panel members reflecting an inclusive recruitment process

Local expertise vs. national standing and expertise
Almost all Boroughs were primarily concerned to have panel members with a good understanding of, and commitment to, their local area. At the same time this needed to be balanced with members that had a good standing in their professions and with
expertise that matched the demands that the panel would put on them. Here there was a balance to be struck.

As an architect who regularly presents to panels observed: “Panel members need to have a status and proven expertise, appointing local panel members alone may not provide this. With some of the panels that I’m aware of in London boroughs, you look at them and think ‘oh, no’ because it’s architects from very small practices, that don’t deal with large schemes and they can make very fundamental comments and you can almost be quite defensive about ‘well, who are you to comment on this?’”.

To avoid the problem requires some flexibility. An in-house panel manager commented: “In order to meet the criteria, you have to have a strong interest in the area, but that translates to living in the Borough, or having your company located here, or having built here, which is actually quite a broad church”. There was also an acceptance that over time, panel members, even if unconnected to the area, could build a local expertise. This was more likely to happen if panels were kept well briefed and there was a good degree of panel continuity over time.

Most applicants felt that it was important to be reviewed by people they could respect, but this didn’t necessarily translate into ‘big name’ architects. Some panellists even cautioned against making such appointments.

“you need people that are your peers in the context of the particular project, but who can test you and push you”

“When you get a starchitect on a committee there can be a lot of fawning going on. You want good quality architects on there, but you don’t necessarily need the starchitects because of their undue influence”

For public realm projects, having officers from other boroughs on the panel seems to be particularly valuable. They bring with them an awareness of “local politics and dealing with members” and can advise on the ‘process’ issues concerned with delivering projects.

An interdisciplinary panel of broad thinkers

Contrary to widespread perceptions amongst interviewees, all the panels examined during the course of the research recognised the vital importance of having an interdisciplinary mix of panel members from which to draw for reviews.

Whilst having a mix of expertise around the table was widely recognised as being important, it was also recognised that this could sometimes generate different conflicting asks, which could be frustrating for those being reviewed.

Key ingredients in the mix of panel members typically include:

- **Architects:** A core of well respected architects
- **Urban design and landscape expertise:** The vital importance of urban design and, separately, landscape expertise, both of which will almost always be needed on panels
- **Specialist skills:** The availability of more specialist skills, including, for example, expertise in, mobility, estate regeneration, heritage, strategic masterplanning, property development / viability, highways design, civic engineering, sustainability, and so on.
“the panel were single issue agenda people. One of them was up in arms about bicycles and one was up in arms about pollution, and none of them were doing what was actually required which was to give an informed review of the scheme in the context”

Partly because of this, but also because they were simply more useful, having people who were willing to speak beyond the narrow confines of their disciplinary home was always welcomed.

“Some people say ‘landscape, landscape, landscape’ because that’s what they’re there for, or ‘access, access, access’ - which is the most tiresome one of all – much more useful is people who look at things beyond their narrow realms of expertise”

Critically, therefore, it’s not just who they are on paper, but how they perform that makes a difference, with people that are able to understand design issues across the scales particularly valued. It also means knowing the limitations of the panel and being prepared to defer to expert technical help on certain issues when required. It means avoiding people who have known bugbears about particular architectural styles or ways of doing things, and who therefore can’t see the bigger picture or beyond their own narrow predilections.

**A diverse panel**

There was some feeling that panels in London too often drew from a relatively small pool of reviewers, with the same faces appearing on a range of different panels:

“Some architects become almost exclusively reviewers and they’ll crop up everywhere, creating a new role of architectural verifiers”.

Increasingly panels are committed to recruiting a diversity of panel members that better reflect society, although, as one panel manager admitted this is not always easy: “we do positively try and get more women on our panel, which is difficult actually and it would be nice to recruit more BME members, but that can be very difficult”.

**Gender:** More feasible is recruitment that is at least representative of the professions from where the panel members are drawn, including an appropriate representation of women. As one experienced panel Chair commented: “One shouldn’t necessarily get too hung up about the balance. You need good people, but in my experience, women architects and women landscape architects, are particularly good because men can be terribly dogmatic, whereas women will come in in a more gentle way and so I think gender balance should be an important principle”.

**Age:** There was also a feeling that a better age mix was required and that panels should not be overly dominated by retired architects. Some argued that not paying panel members was problematic in this regard as younger panellists tend to have less control of their diaries and cannot easily get time off to serve on panels.

**Lay members:** A few panels include lay / community members on the panel, although most felt that this went against the spirit of peer review and that community views were best captured by other means.

“Having lay people on there can be tricky as their views tend to be more trenchant and quite different from professional views”

**4.3 How big?**

The size of the panel is critical to getting both a better conversation and for marshalling views in a coherent manner. Some felt that if the panel was too small you ran the risk of “being hijacked by a panel member with a very strong outlying opinion”. Others felt that with too many in the room “you get into ‘I know better’ conversation as people have to justify their reason for being there”.
Different sorts of schemes merit different sorts of panels:

- **Full panels**: At TfL large public realm schemes go to full review with up to eight panel members. In the paid Borough panels (in-house and external), full panel meetings typically involve five or six panel members. Unpaid panels tended to be larger, with more panel members invited (around nine). Perhaps because they were voluntary, these panels exhibited a greater tendency for panel members not to turn up, often making for a smaller panel on the day.

- **Chair’s reviews**: Uncomplicated returning schemes or smaller projects can be subject to a Chair’s review (sometimes known as a desktop review) constituting the Chair and at least one other reviewer. TfL’s design surgeries for smaller public realm projects generally involve two to three panel members seeing a range of schemes across the day.

- **Workshops**: As well as formal panels, less formal workshop panels (or design surgeries) acting as a critical friend can be helpful: “So on large schemes let’s have a big, grand one, but let’s also have some baby ones focusing on particular topics, for example a little breakout to talk about landscape, which then gets taken back to the main panel.”

“The majority opinion from all sides of the process felt that smaller panels were more effective than larger ones. But within this guiding principle the number of panellists should reflect the scale and complexity of the project and at what stage in its development the review is being conducted. First reviews generally require a larger panel than subsequent ones.

“You can have a much more cogent dialogue with them if they’re not having to marshal 10 very different opinions and agendas”

“We started with quite large panels, 10/12 people, we found that that became a little bit unwieldy sometimes, so we tended to drop down to six to eight at a maximum”

“Within five you can get a landscape architect, a sustainability person, a couple of architects and an urban designer. Whatever sort of skills you need.”
4.4 How often and when?
On the question of how often panels should meet, some panels regularly meet twice a month and as much as three times a month when required. Others met as little as bi-monthly. Typically, panels meet less often in the months following their initial set up, but as they grow in terms of their internal reputation and esteem, demand increases and they meet more often.

The more often panels are able to meet, the more responsive they can be to the needs of development projects and the planning cycle. In this regard monthly meetings seem to be the minimum desirable for a responsive process. Some panels operate flexibly and meet as and when required by the development timetable of key projects, but most meet according to a pre-agreed and scheduled timetable, with externally managed panels often scheduling more dates than are ultimately needed in order that peaks and troughs in demand can be accommodated.

“It’s been quite good, they’ve been able to work according to the workflow that we have. Sometimes we can even have two panels running at once”

4.5 The problem of continuity
The single biggest gripe from applicants and designers about the review process concerned the potential for a lack of continuity in panel membership between successive reviews on large projects. In such cases not only did applicants and their teams feel that they are having to waste time bringing new panel members up to speed, but there was also the danger that successive panels would have different and perhaps contradictory views on projects.

“Well, you never know who’s coming as the design review panel, it’s who can chuff up on the day and, if you’re going to run these things, that’s not right”

For applicants, having a guaranteed consistency of panel membership was the single thing most likely to encourage them to engage positively with design review. This involved decisions about the initial selection of panel members, and their subsequent availability for repeat reviews.

Selecting the right panel for each review
Panel managers have an important role to play in selecting the panel that is right for a scheme. This requires keeping good relations with all the panel (a pool of anything from 12 to 50 people for Borough panels), getting up to speed with what their strengths are, and knowing how they work as a team. As one manager commented: “it used to take me ages putting the panel together because it was a balancing act. On the same day you’d have different schemes that had different needs, and you’ve got returning schemes for which you’re trying to provide continuity”.

Typically, the process begins with the Chair, with the panel built around the Chair in order to:

i) Complement his/her expertise
ii) Ensure coverage of the full range of professional competences appropriate to the development type
iii) Include panel members appropriate to the stage the project has reached

Some applicants felt that they should have a say in this process by being able to state their views about the particular mix of skills required. Currently this does not happen and the selection is made by panel managers, sometimes in consultation with relevant local authority officers.

Practically this creates a number of challenges. In order to cater for the busy schedules of many panellists, panel members are often programmed in for dates well ahead of time and before the programme of schemes needing to be reviewed is known. Closer to the date it often becomes
apparent that the scheduled panellists may not be the right choice for a scheme or would not provide the necessary continuity for a returning project. As one panel Chair admitted: “we get in a situation where some of the panel members – because a lot of schemes return – hardly appear at all because they haven’t managed to get onto a cycle; whereas others appear all the time, and that’s the difficult challenge of panel management”.

**Maintaining continuity**

For at least one London panel with a large pool of panellists on a rotating schedule, lack of consistency is simply the price to be paid in order to maintain a free service. There, in order not to call on voluntary panel members more than twice a year, successive panels are almost always “a brand-new panel”. Most other panel managers attempt to maintain at least some continuity for returning schemes.

> “Having another review on a scheme can be like shaking the tablecloth all over again, but, if it’s well chaired and well briefed problems can be avoided”

A number of practices are adopted to better manage the problem of panel continuity:

- **Absolute continuity is not necessary**: It is important to seek a good degree of continuity between successive reviews, particularly in the Chair, but absolute consistency is not necessary, and different skills may anyway be required at different points in the process.

- **Careful briefing**: Ensuring that the briefing process recaps on what was said last time and what has been addressed in the returning scheme. Asking returning panel members to brief new members can help.

- **Focus on the changes**: Requesting (in advance) that applicants focus their presentation around what has changed since last time.

- **Sharing the previous report**: Ensuring panels have access to the full report from any previous reviews on a scheme.

- **Setting the panel’s limits**: Instructing the panel to focus on new information, changes or areas of concern from first review, and to accept other areas as settled.

- **A special panel**: For large and complex schemes, consider establishing a special dedicated panel to see schemes through from start to end.

- **Go large**: Begin with a larger panel and, as necessary, allow it to reduce in size through subsequent reviews rather than opening it up to new members.
4.6 The all-important Chair

The Chair plays a critical role in the design review process and all agreed that a strong chair was absolutely vital to the process. The role involves:

i) Moderating the conversation
ii) Being versed in the local policy, political and physical context in order to feed that into the conversation
iii) Ensuring everyone has a chance to speak and that no one dominates or is unduly rude or negative
iv) Reconciling views when required, and mediating sometimes tense discussions and big personalities
v) Setting the limits of the conversation and avoiding blind alleys
vi) Keeping the discussion flowing and avoiding it becoming bogged down in the detail
vii) Recognising the design problems that come up repeatedly and helping to steer a clear path in order to deal with them
viii) Summarising at the end and ensuring clear recommendations are made
ix) Keeping applicants, panellists and the whole process to time
x) Commenting on the final report
xi) Maintaining the credibility and authority of the panel to ensure it is a professionally managed and credible process.

Typically, the Chair is an experienced built environment professional in his or her own right and is likely to have a view on any scheme that is being presented. However, as panels become larger, the role tends to focus to a greater degree on the moderation function. Some argue that non-architects are particularly effective at chairing because they tend to be less strident in their views on design, and at least one panel uses a non-expert Chair as someone who can focus on the remit of the panel, rather than on giving advice. In that panel, the panel manager (an officer of the authority) is tasked to summarise and give feedback.

“The chair needs to broker the conversation. Sometimes a building is a bit marmite and the Chair needs to reconcile that to ensure something valuable comes out of the conversation”

“It comes down to needing a good chairperson for the panel who co-ordinates the response, as lots of different views doesn’t really give anybody any direction”

Repeatedly the vital role of the Chair was stressed by interviewees, and how wrong the process could go if the Chair is not up to the task. Care should be taken when considering appointing a starchitect to chair a panel. As one experienced panellist commented: “It looks great in the papers, but then you find that the star architect, hasn’t got time to chair and won’t be terribly good anyway because he’s got very strong opinions of his own and will dominate the panel with his views”.

Given the importance of the Chair, most panels have more than one, and one panel has six. This gives greater flexibility when timetabling meetings, reduces the pressure on Chairs who are often very busy people, and ensures they can be rotated to avoid conflicts of interest.

4.7 Conflicts of interest

The nature of design review as a peer review process with built environment professionals commenting on each other’s work means there is considerable potential for the system to be abused. Arguably this potential is multiplied because of the very large sums of money that are at stake in connection with London’s development schemes, and the interface (in the same room) of potential clients and consultants who would like to get work. The result is a need for clear mechanisms to avoid conflicts of interest, but also for a transparency in those mechanisms and that they are obvious to all.
Some applicants argued that the world of large London developers and large consultancy practices is a small one and so some conflicts are to be expected. Moreover, with architects assessing other architects’ work in an environment where they often know each other well, expecting to get completely unbiased advice might be unrealistic. Such perceptions were exacerbated by developers and their design teams being generally unaware of the conflict of interest provisions that govern most panels. Consequently, many were concerned (erroneously) by what they see as the lack of attention to such issues.

“It is a bit of a club really. One day you’re sitting on the panel and then two weeks later, you’re reviewing the scheme of the person who’s presenting to you”.

In order to address such perceptions, panels may need to be far more explicit about their conflict of interest provisions, including being clear with applicants (as well as panellists) about the processes that are in place.

Given the significance of such provisions, it was notable how infrequently the ten principles set out in the industry standard Design Review – Principles and Practice were referenced by interviewees, and even when they were, how little attempt was made to demonstrate explicit compliance.

Various practices are in place to help avoid conflicts of interest:

- **Residents’ provisions**: Being careful to avoid having local residents (professional and lay) that are personally affected by schemes on design review panels
- **Council owned schemes**: Sending schemes on council owned sites to an external panel for review in order to avoid the perception that councils are reviewing their own schemes
- **Maintaining a distance**: Avoiding too much sociable chat with the architects and developers either before or after design reviews in order to maintain a professional distance
- **A register of interests**: Maintaining a register of current and former (in the last five years) clients with whom panel members are working and therefore whom they are unable to review
- **Don’t release names**: Avoid releasing the names of panellists chosen to review particular projects until the day of the review
- **Being transparent**: by listing all the people who are on the panel on a website, alongside clear terms of reference, and a Code of Conduct that includes declaration of interest provisions
- **Future work**: Provisions should be in place to prevent panellists from taking jobs from developers that they have reviewed for at least two years after the review
- **Councillor panellists**: Carefully considering whether councillors can be design review panellists and at the same time serve in a formal capacity on the planning committee. This issue divided opinion amongst interviewees.
A design review panel was established for the Thames Tideway Tunnel in 2011 to advise on the design quality of the above ground work proposed on 24 sites along the tunnel route. The Victoria Embankment Foreshore works, one of these sites, makes a connection between the Northern Low Level Sewer No. 1 and the Victoria Embankment river wall in order to control flows along the Victoria Embankment. Above ground a new public space was proposed.

This site comprises an area of the foreshore of the River Thames and a section of the pavement and carriageway of Victoria Embankment. It falls within the Whitehall conservation area, which comprises a number of listed buildings, other buildings of international importance, and various statues and monuments in a high quality built environment. Victoria Embankment is characterised by an avenue of mature London Plane trees.

THE DESIGN REVIEW HISTORY
This panel reviewed each of the sites prior to and during a Development Control Order Examination Process. During this process all sites (except Beckton) were reviewed at least once in a two-stage process of ‘sketch’ and ‘scheme’ reviews, with Putney Embankment Foreshore and Victoria Embankment Foreshore reviewed three times each. The overarching aspirations for the design of the site included:

1. To allow people to feel closer to the river
2. Acknowledge the threshold between the Embankment and the foreshore
3. Make the public space feel as generous as possible
4. Provide a de-cluttered space that encourages flexible use
5. Help to tell the story of the tunnel
6. Keep the details simple and let people animate the space

The panel looked at aesthetic quality, how the intervention related to its surroundings, its functionality, quality of materials, inclusiveness, sustainability, heritage, accessibility and place-making. This included attention to the ventilation columns and the expression and lighting of street level features. Because the site sits on the busy Victoria Embankment Foreshore, the new public space represents a prime opportunity to sit away from the traffic and experience the river from the north bank. Facilitating this was a key concern of the panel. Accessibility for those who are less able was a key concern.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW

The panel’s advice led to a rationalisation of access routes across the site and to a de-cluttering of the ramp area by removing above ground planters which would have created a visual barrier to the accessible route for less able users. In the re-design the ramp was drawn out to provide a gentler slope, removing the requirement for handrails and additional visual clutter.

The panel advised on the positioning of the proposed kiosks in order to avoid clashes with buried access covers to chambers below whilst increasing site permeability and encouraging users into the site. Following the advice, the kiosks were consolidated into three rather than four structures, as had originally been envisaged.

The green landscape elements were also revised, including the removal, on maintenance grounds, of a proposed climber along a pergola and its replacement with a green or brown roof. This decision also informed a re-think of the pergola itself in order to redefine its purpose as a continuous shelter between the kiosks. Finally, a new strategy was adopted for the planting of trees which were compromised by the below ground engineering constraints.

Following advice it was determined that above ground planters were not appropriate because of their size and instead the trees were removed from the design in favour of seeing the site against the wall of mature street trees along Victoria Embankment.
5 THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY

5.1 Choosing schemes for review
The journey through design review taken by individual schemes begins with a decision that they should be reviewed. Design review is still far from the norm as the large majority of projects seeking planning permission in London, and most public realm schemes go nowhere near design review.

The clearest criteria for deciding which projects to review are set by the GLA and TfL. The GLA require that all projects to which they commit funding go through design review as a key milestone before moving from the development to delivery phase. TfL require that all public realm schemes over £1 million are subject to design review. For the latter, given that there is no planning permission or pre-application discussions (and often no public consultation), design review becomes all the more important in order to get an outside perspective. Some projects are subject to full internal design review, smaller projects to a more informal design surgery (both managed by Urban Design London), and some go to an external panel. All are part of the same process.

Amongst the boroughs, and no matter whether internally or externally managed, schemes for review are chosen on the advice of the design officer or planners. Many interviewees argued that it is critical to have an integrated process between pre-application procedures and design review to ensure that the right schemes come to review in a timely manner and key projects don’t slip through the net. It was obvious, however, that in many cases a smooth process is not in place as design review is reliant on individual planning case officers identifying schemes that are important. For some panels it is not uncommon for projects to be added to or withdrawn from the list of schemes to be reviewed at the last minute.

“You just need to be very clear that you aren’t just doing it as a gravy train, you’re doing it for good reason and I think you do need to be very clear about when you’re going to use it and when you’re not”

One Borough reviews all residential schemes over 50 units, commercial projects over 5,000 square metres, and large public realm schemes. Some simply include all ‘Major developments’ in the programme of design review, whilst others recognise that smaller schemes with a big impact on place, or those that present particular design challenges, should also benefit from scrutiny. These latter types of project require a more subjective judgment about their likely impact. Applicants feel that a greater degree of consistency in selection criteria across London would be helpful.

“It would be helpful to know what ticks the box, certainly for London, and would give developers more certainty and a level playing field”.
5.2 To compel or not to compel?
Whilst TfL requires that large schemes go through a compulsory process of design review before they can get sign-off for funding, smaller schemes are encouraged to go voluntarily to design surgeries. Similarly, whilst the NPPF advocates the use of design review in planning, it does not mandate it. This means that applicants do not have to submit their projects to design review. Many, however, clearly believe it is in their interests to do so, and the research revealed very few incidences of refusal. Whether this is a reflection on the value that the applicants see design review as having, or simply a pragmatic judgment that it is part of the process and that not attending will slow their application down, is harder to tell.

“We say ‘it would be beneficial if you presented to the design review panel’ and 95 percent of the time, they do, although five per cent of the time I have had to work hard to get some people to come”

The interviews revealed that the perceived mandating of design review by pre-2011 ‘statutory’ CABE, often late in the planning process, was something that applicants resented. Case officers were generally of the view that reluctance to appear before a panel meant that the views of that panel would not be taken very seriously, even if attendance was made compulsory. On that basis there may be limited value in forcing applicants to attend a design review, and it may be more sensible to retain design review as a voluntary service. In such circumstances failure to attend when invited should nevertheless be a material consideration in the planning process.

“Some are incredibly enthusiastic. Others say: ‘well, we’ll think about it. How much does it cost? Who’s doing it? What are the benefits?’ You can tell from their responses how seriously they’ll take it”
5.3 The thorny issue of timing

Various opinions were expressed about when schemes should come forward for design review, with one applicant arguing: “It’s very hard to know where the sweet spot is sometimes. We can be criticised at an early review because of a lack of detail, but detailed work is very time consuming and expensive before the basic urban design principles are agreed.”

**Going early:** The largest body of opinion stressed getting projects to design review as early as possible in order that the panel could have a constructive and meaningful dialogue with the applicants early in the design process before options had become too fixed: “one of the things that we’ve tried to do is to use our expertise to brainstorm at the early stages and to critique what’s coming through, rather than waiting to the end and picking holes in it”. At an early stage different options could be presented and explored by the design team. Some argued that design review could even be used at inception stage, before any designs are in place, in order to focus on the analysis, the opportunity, the challenges, and the brief.

“We more or less went with a blank canvas and said ‘this has been done, we’re not too sure about it, but let’s just have a discussion’”

**Going too early:** A second body of opinion (particularly amongst developers) argued that going too early with a scheme that was not resolved, risked the danger of being knocked back before ideas had been properly developed. As one interviewee colourfully expressed: “if you go in and present something that you’re not sure of, you’re sort of stuffed before you start”. Case officers also often seemed to favour going to design review a little later. For them design review was most useful once the key planning decisions had been made in order that the review could focus on testing the design implications of those decisions.

“If the officers aren’t keen on it to start with, then we’ll ask them to do a bit more work before we present it to design review”

**Going too late:** Most agreed that going too late to design review should be avoided, particularly if the review was a one-off. For applicants changes late in the day were difficult and costly to make, especially for schemes that had already been subject to many months of negotiation, consultation, and revision. At this stage, therefore, changes to projects were often resisted. For panel members, seeing schemes very late in the day was equally frustrating. At this stage they felt they couldn’t contribute in a meaningful way to the development of the design and so the process was wasting their time.

“What we don’t like doing is taking something which is an application to the panel because there’s far less scope for them to change because they’re already on their treadmill”

The right timing for schemes to be reviewed was therefore a matter of judgement, particularly for schemes that were only likely to be seen once by a panel.

“It gets to a point where you think you don’t want to go too much further until you get to that review”
A number of pointers can be used to help strike the right balance and ensure schemes are reviewed in a timely fashion:

- **A negotiation**: Timing is typically a negotiation between the planners and applicant, but involving the panel manager can help to get the timing right.
- **An early review**: An early panel in the form of a Chair’s (desktop) review or informal workshop can help to give an initial understanding of the project and ensure the right choice of subsequent panellists for a more formal review.
- **One off design reviews**: Schemes likely to be subject to a single review should be seen at a mid-way stage when the design is better resolved but it is not too late to make changes: “when the scheme is still at the sketch rather than the CGI stage.”
- **Call back**: Timing should allow space for a call back to the panel if the project needs significant alteration.
- **Multiple reviews**: There was widespread consensus that an optimum journey for large projects would typically involve three visits to the panel, at an early (concept), mid (full design) and late (post-application or detailed design) stage.
- **A three-review journey**: This might involve an initial more informal (perhaps even workshop) style review, moving to a formal review, and finishing with a smaller Chair’s review.

### Dealing with outline schemes (and Permission in Principle)

One of the most difficult issues for panels is the use of outline permissions for schemes where panels are being asked to consider projects where many key design considerations are being held back as reserved matters. As one panellist commented: “If you have an outline scheme for a relatively small site it doesn’t give a lot for the panel to get their teeth into. Comments are generally, ‘this presentation’s too vague and it should be a detailed application’.”

In such circumstances when the design solution is insufficiently developed, it may be inappropriate to take such proposals to design review at all. This is particularly the case if there is a danger that the applicant will feel that the design review box has been ticked and they need not return.

With the advent of Permission in Principle, the appropriate moment for a full design review will almost certainly be in the run up to applicants applying for Technical Details Consent, rather than at the moment that Permission in Principle is applied for. An early concept-level review may still be useful, however, in order to explore design options, confirm the right quantum of development for a site (prior to Permission in Principle), and help to establish a brief.

### 5.4 Multiple reviews, why and when?

Many felt that on large schemes having a number of design reviews at key stages can provide valuable opportunities for the design team to debate key points of departure with the panel, and act as a critical friend to help refine the project. Combined with pre-application discussions, such a sequence of design reviews to guide the planning process was widely supported by architects as exemplified by the comments of one experienced presenter to design review: “public consultation is fantastic, getting a good planning officer is critical, but if you can also get a very regular design review process going that’s the golden ticket, you will end up with the best architecture at the end of that process.”
This was the same for both TfL funded public realm projects that should be seen “at inception, after consultation and again at detailed design (whilst trying not to undo earlier decisions that would lead to abortive work)”; and for development projects going through planning, which would benefit from: “one at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end, so you’re building through the process”. Typically this implied two before submitting the planning application and one after, with reviews clearly focussed on the stage the scheme had reached.

“An optimum process will see projects early and often in order to fully test the fundamentals of projects”.

5.5 Setting up the review

Behind every review is a huge amount of work setting it up so that it runs smoothly on the day:

“there’s the money coming in, money going out, paying the panellists; co-ordinating with the case officer, liaising with the applicant, editing the briefing note, checking the presentations that come in, arranging the site visit(s), booking a room and refreshments, and so forth. So, there’s a lot of co-ordination”.

For design teams it is important to have an indication as soon as possible when they are likely to be called for review so that they can plan for it. This means programming likely review slots early so that there is no delay between the time schemes are ready to be seen and the actual review. As one developer commented “For us, it’s all about speed and convenience and when you get to a point where you want it to be independently checked, you don’t want to be waiting six weeks for it to be organised”.

Equally, for panel managers, it is not uncommon for there to be a lot of last minute shuffling of schemes as projects that are not quite ready and are pulled and others appear out of the woodwork. To manage this and generally to ensure a smooth and effective process, it is vital to have very clear and reliable management systems in place.

Common management mechanisms for the effective administration of design review include:

- **A shared live schedule**: populated with reviews that are potentially coming up, including key contacts for each scheme and basic information about size and type
- **An online guide**: to design review for applicants setting out the process, including a list of issues to be covered in the review and expectations for the presentation
- **A document handling system**: with documents distributed to panellists via a password protected website or Dropbox account
- **Pre-prepared letter templates**: for applicants setting out the structure for the day, guidance on issues likely to be covered, paying for the review, the format for materials to be presented, key deadlines, and so forth
- **Background information collection**: via a well designed pro forma of ‘essential’, background information required from the case officer and applicant for the purposes of briefing.
5.6 How many, how long?
All agreed that there is a need for sufficient time for a comprehensive presentation, followed by an open discussion, but exactly what that meant varied widely. Single reviews varied in length from (as standard) a single scheme seen over half a day (including the site visit), to seven public realm schemes seen in hourly slots over a full day. Normally reviews were either an hour or an hour and a half, although Chair’s reviews tend to be cut down to 45 minutes and some panels routinely spend two hours on a review.

“If there’s too many reviews, it starts to frazzle your brain”

Panels tend to see up to three schemes in a review session that lasts half a day, with voluntary panels often meeting in the evening rather than during the day and tending to dedicate less time to each review. Some externally managed panels fit two review sessions into a day, depending on the demand.

“To make it work smoothly you need lots of breaks in between, tea and biscuits, and that the schedule has enough contingency time. It’s a goodwill thing”

Time for the presentation
Within the total time allowed for review, the time given over to the presentation also varied considerably, from 10 minutes to 45 minutes, with most panels allowing 20 minutes for the presentation. This aspect of the review garnered most disquiet, with applicants generally feeling that the time was too short. Often they attempted to exceed the allowance.

As one designer commented: “The time is very short to properly test the design of complex schemes. I wish we had more time to look at the plans together and brainstorm. It should be more thorough”. Others felt that good designers should be capable of succinctly presenting their projects and that applicants needed briefing better in order to know what to expect, and to ensure enough time was left after their presentation for the all-important questions and comments from the panel.

Pragmatically, some panels offer double review slots for very large or complex projects, for example those requiring examination of the masterplan and particular buildings on the same day.
MAYOR’S DESIGN ADVISORY GROUP, MAYOR’S PROJECT REVIEW

PROJECT
Elephant Square public realm scheme, Elephant & Castle, London SE1

LOCAL AUTHORITY
London Borough of Southwark

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Applicant: London Borough of Southwark
Designer: Witherford Watson Mann Architects

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Greater London Authority for the Mayor’s Design Advisory Group

PROJECT BACKGROUND
Elephant and Castle is home to some of the most significant regeneration opportunities in inner London with a growth potential of 5,000 homes and 4,000 jobs. The redesign of the notorious system of roundabouts at Elephant & Castle represented a significant element in the regeneration of the public realm of this area, and the opportunity provided to create a new square as part of this was key.

The Mayor’s Project Review, led by members of the Mayor’s Design Advisory Group (now the Mayor’s Design Advocates) is part of the official GLA process to review projects receiving funding from the Mayor of London. TfL, who were funding and delivering the project, requested a review of the Elephant Square project as part of its consultation process in the lead up to construction of the first phase in 2015-16. As the first phase scheme did not require planning consent, this represented an important moment for external review and assessment of the proposals.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
One design review session was held to ensure that the proposals met the public realm objectives set out by the GLA, the local authority and landowners, and to obtain views from a panel of experts on the design.

Elephant Square, as proposed
proposals to date. The review took place in January 2015 with the panel consisting of a Chair, a visiting critic, and two panellists, one from the GLA and one from TfL. Observers also attended from the two organisations and from the local council – Southwark.

The panel comments included the following suggestions:

1. A more detailed study should be undertaken of the phasing and interim stages of the delivery of the project to ensure that all phases would work in their own right, and that public realm benefits were maximised early on.
2. The proposed pedestrian routes shown as aligning with key desire lines (in particular between the Bakerloo and Northern Line tube stations) were seen as essential to encourage convenient movement across and through the space.
3. The landscaping should provide spatial and visual continuity, and through a robust strategy, integrate with the wider area, including a clearer hierarchy of the spaces within the square.
4. The possibility was raised of retaining sections of the subway as more than an historic reference, for example to be re-opened with a publicly accessible use, such as a café or gallery.
5. Shared surfaces should be considered for cycle lanes within the footways and areas of public realm, with integration of SUDS, lighting concept and CCTV coordination.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW

The design review panel was supportive of the project proposals at the conceptual stage and urged action to ensure continuity of the design team as the project developed. It did not lead to significant changes to the design but gave all parties the confidence to move forward with the design in the face of growing pressures to deliver rapidly. Ongoing consultations were held with GLA case officers, specialist consultants and stakeholders to address the issues raised at the review.

The first phase of the work went on site in 2016 and included new routes along clear desire lines, a simple palette of robust materials and careful robust detailing as had been advocated by the panel. Further phases will include an improved entrance and ticket hall for the Northern Line tube station, a new street food market, and trees and landscaping as proposed in the scheme subject to design review. The original design team was maintained to advise TfL during the implementation, commenting on detailed design drawings and the inspection of workmanship on site. One of the key outcomes was the opportunity the review presented for all the key stakeholders to meet in one room and discuss their requirements. This was a hugely complex public realm scheme with a wide array of public sector project partners (including different directorates within TfL), and so coordination was vital to ensure a common set of design aspirations.
6 THE REVIEW EXPERIENCE

6.1 Conduct of the review
Most design review follows a very similar process encompassing: a site visit, briefing, presentation from the applicant team, comments and discussion, a summary and offering of initial advice, issuing the report, and the response to the report and delivery against it.

“\textit{The whole process is about working towards getting that recommendation \ldots use this process and it can reward you}”.

Negative perceptions about design review are still widespread amongst developers and some architects. Panels argue that they have had to battle against what they see as negative perceptions associated with the old design review model (pre-2011) when the nationally funded Commission for the Architecture and the Built Environment (‘statutory’ CABE) delivered services centrally in what some saw (rightly or wrongly) as a “slightly detached and imperious manner”.

Despite this, practices today vary considerably and could not always be described as ideal. This plays a role in continuing to undermine design review as a service, with the most prevalent concerns focussed on panels being:

i) \textbf{Unstructured}: Sometimes panels are perceived as being a bit chaotic particularly when the panel is large: “It becomes a bit of a shooting gallery and one says ‘black’ and one says ‘white’ and you’re not really quite sure what their view is going to be”. Other times it is “a bit of a free-for-all without apparent structure, and a tendency to raise specialist topics, for example relating to energy without warning when there is no appropriate expertise in the room”.

ii) \textbf{Closed minded}: Some feel that design review can sometimes be less open than it should be to design approaches that don’t chime with those favoured by the panel members. As one architect commented: “It is not a place for you to rant about your particular architectural perspective, it has to be a process that takes the given parameters within which you’re working as the starting point and responds within them”.

iii) \textbf{Uninformed}: With comments that too often relate to matters outside the control of the applicants and therefore, despite the briefing, betray a lack of understanding about the context, for example relating to neighbouring land holdings or to prior permissions. As one
applicant noted: “none of the panel members really understood the degree to which, for want of a better word, the horse had already bolted because they were saying ‘we don’t want this, we don’t want that’ and we already had planning permission for those elements”.

iv) **Too constraining:** Others felt that the format of design review can itself be too constraining with too little time given to explain schemes and their context properly: “The format can seem a bit formulaic with little flexibility, we were given half an hour to present and we had to have 12 boards to present and they all had to be A1 and we knew that if we stepped over 31 minutes, we would be stopped”.

As was repeatedly emphasised in interviews, good design review comes down to the panel members: “it’s about members who are open minded about different approaches, it’s got to be a constructive communication method”.

**Being open**
The degree to which panel hearings were open as opposed to closed and remote in their conduct represented a major concern for applicants, and whilst there were often very good reasons for being more closed in style, it is clear that there was a cost to the reputation of panels and to the process at large.

**All out in the open:** Some panels felt firmly that on the day of the review they should be as open and transparent as possible. This means that all comments, including the officer briefing, should be made in front of the applicants to avoid perceptions that there had been a prior ‘stitch-up’. The same panels tended to eschew the use of a private session at the end of the meeting to discuss and agree comments: “to avoid a situation where comments were generally positive, but a week later the letter arrives and there’s all sorts of new stuff hatched up in a confidential session at the end”. In this way, they argued, the process was as productive as possible for the applicant and there weren’t any surprises.

“There’s no discussion away from the applicants, it is all open, it’s transparent and what gets said at the review gets written up”

**Open and closed sessions:** By contrast, many panels still favour the tried and tested practice (handed down since the days of the Royal Fine Art Commission) of open and closed sessions. At the most extreme, neither the case officers nor the applicant were present for the briefing or the post-review discussions. More commonly only the applicant and their team are invited to leave for a period at the end of the open discussion in order for the panel to agree their recommendations, before being invited back for a summary. As one panel manager commented: “that gives the panellists time and space to be completely scathing about the scheme, reflect on it, and then think about how to marshal the comments in a positive fashion”. Such an editing process, it was argued, can be useful.

“They leave the room and we have a confidential conversation where we can say things that we don’t really want to say in front of the architect and the developer like ‘oh my God, I can see the architect’s being manipulated here and is clearly under the cosh’ and we want to encourage him to do something else”.

It was notable, however, that closed sessions seem to lead to resentment amongst applicants and their design teams, who argue that they are excluded from perhaps the key part of the process, the discussion. As one applicant observed: “you feel like you’ve got this short period of time to get something out, then you go out of the room and then people talk at you for a while and then you’ve got to leave, well that’s not a process”.

6. The review experience
The workshop format: A number of interviewees argued in favour of a more widespread move to the workshop format for design review. In this mode panels need to think of themselves more in the role of enablers rather than professional critics, being more hands-on and even suggesting potential solutions to identified design problems. For their part applicants need to be even more open to change, not presenting a fait accompli, and avoiding being too defensive whilst still having clear arguments in favour of their scheme. Workshop formats are used by a number of panels for certain types of scheme, including for large-scale masterplans, urban design frameworks and for policy documents and design codes where more of an interactive discussion can be useful.

“It often feels as though you’re going into a court to present your case - ‘we are the experts and we know best’ - they should be run more as design workshops, I think they should be more interactive”

Open to all: In one of the panels examined during the research the deliberations of the panel are open to the public: “Anyone who comes along is welcome as an observer. Although they don’t take an active role offering their opinion on the design, they can certainly see how the process works out”. Elsewhere the argument is often made that at the pre-application stage commercial confidentialities are at stake and applicants won’t be so open to appearing unless the discussion is in camera. Certainly the degree of openness between panels varies widely and a case might be made for a greater degree of commonality across the sector. Given that some panels are already far more open than others, without obvious damage to their processes, levels of engagement or reputation, a greater degree of transparency could be the norm.

Being constructive

The language used by members of the panel is important and is a factor that developers often complain about. More often than not design review still reflects the adversarial ‘crit’ review system used in architectural education. Whilst this is familiar to most designers, it can be alien to developers and seem unnecessarily confrontational and rude, making it “even more daunting to appear before a room full of architects”.

Some panellists are very direct in the way that they deliver comments, and when this is in the form of a negative assessment is can be very difficult to receive, particularly, as one architect admitted, “when you’re the one who’s put the work and effort in to get a scheme to that point”. Undue negativity from the panel can also quickly generate a very defensive reaction from designers, “not least because they’re likely to be in front of their client”. Experienced panellists increasingly stress the importance of offering positive advice on how to improve schemes, an emphasis that seems to be broadly welcomed by applicants and their design teams.

“Unduly negative comments or comments based on petty dislikes can quickly overshadow any constructive engagement”
A number of communication pointers were revealed during the research:

- **Avoid sounding unduly paternal**: by identifying what works well elsewhere, or what hasn’t worked previously in the locality, or by offering constructive directions of travel.

- **Avoid being adversarial**: “it’s not ‘I don’t like those materials,’ it’s ‘what else could you do with those materials?’ Or, ‘how are they used in the context’”

- **Keep it positive**: Whilst being robust, avoiding undue negativity: “it’s not just ‘how great am I. How well can I criticise this scheme,’ it’s about a conversation about getting planning permission, ultimately”

- **Be constructive**: Seeing the role as a critical friend rather than a judge and jury.

- **Sometimes a bit of code is necessary**: in the feedback: “where a developer needs to get themselves a decent architect, we say ‘well, maybe the design team needs to be strengthened’, not ‘you should sack your architect’”

- **Educate new panel members (and presenters)**: As an experienced panel member observed: “You can always tell the ones who are panellists themselves, who are then presenting, they’re much more open to discussion and much less defensive; whereas I think, the ones who aren’t, sometimes they don’t handle it very well”.

“No can get a better result from encouragement and positivity, rather than focusing entirely on negatives”

**The room**

Setting the tone of the review in part comes down to the very practical issue of the room in which the review is conducted and how it is laid out. On this issue an open discussion facilitated by seating around a table (rather than in a courtroom style) can help. As one panel chair observed: “It is good to avoid an us and them situation, by laying the room out in a less confrontational style”. Having a comfortable room, with good projection facilities, and enough space, is also important.
Despite the sentiment encapsulated in this comment from one interviewee (and shared by many), practices with regard to site visits varied significantly, from reviews actually held on the site, to no site visit at all. In general the site visit was regarded as an important part of the briefing process, and typically site visits are arranged for all but return schemes.

Site visits tend to occur on the day of the review as part of the organised review process. Sometimes they occur in the days running up to the review and some panels ask panellists to make their own way to see the site at a time that suits them. As a panel manager commented: “generally, they know the area, or if they work nearby, many of them actually whizz by on a bicycle, or go around and have a look, or have a look on Street View”.

Putting aside the danger that panellists may not actually visit the site, the opportunity to discuss the site collectively as part of the briefing process is foregone if the panel visit individually and separately. As one interviewee argued: “the whole point is to get the group together in order to discuss it”

The exception to the general consensus that collective site visits were always desirable were some of the smaller and more explicitly technical public realm schemes seen by TfL which, officers argue, don’t need a site visit.

“I’ve done reviews both with and without a site visit, but the successful ones have always been ones that involved us in a site visit”

Suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the site visit included:

- **Invite the case officer**: Site visits should always be attended by relevant Borough officers as explaining the context on site can be easier to grasp
- **Brief on site**: Combining the site visit with the formal officer’s briefing can be particularly effective, having the full briefing on site
- **Invite the design team**: Having the design team attend the site visit so they can be involved in some of the discussion and briefing can build trust and understanding
- **Review on site**: Utilising different review venues as close as possible to sites, or even using a suitable space on site (if one exists) can allow the presentation to flow directly from the site visit
- **Visits for late comers**: For return schemes, any new panel members should visit the site and be fully briefed.
6.3 The briefing

The formal review itself typically begins with an officer briefing, but the briefing process itself starts prior to the day of the review and extends through the site visit up to the point when the applicants present to the panel.

**The briefing note**

Many applicants worry that panels are not properly briefed and therefore fail to understand the constraints they are operating under, often dictated by the prior processes, including earlier design reviews. As one applicant complained: “The negative is always the unknowing nature of it and whether panels have been briefed properly, whether they’re aware of the design evolution process and the long journey with planning officers, design officers, councillors and the consultations with local residents”

The briefing note is vital in filling in this detail, but it is important that it is well presented and well written. Practice in this regard varied widely.

“*We get a very heavily redacted pro forma. If we were given a proper pack to review, a skilled panellist would be able to get 75 per cent of the story*”.

Some suggest that, at this stage, applicants should be invited to raise issues about which they would like advice in order to encourage them to buy into the process and help to steer the discussion.

**Well-written briefing notes:**

- **Are concise**: if busy panel members are going to read it prior to the review
- **Include The agenda**: The full agenda for the day
- **Cover background information**: on the site, the planning history and policy context
- **Outline case officer concerns**: Providing an indication of planning concerns relating to the scheme
- **Introduce the proposals**: Offering information on the design proposals themselves (usually the applicant’s presentation) provided by the applicant.
- **Are ready well in advance**: Ideally the note should be made available to panellists a few days before the review, although some panellists readily admit “we’ll cram the information the night before”.

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**Officer briefing**

A small minority of panels felt that they couldn’t expect busy panel members to do prior work (particularly if unpaid), making the officer briefing on the day all the more important. For others it was vital to reinforce key issues and constraints, ensure background information had been fully understood and absorbed and that all reviewers were on the same page when they reviewed the scheme.

“Design is a result of constraints, so you need to know what the constraints are in order to be able to criticise it constructively, otherwise it’s like winding down your window and saying ‘how do I get to Windsor from here?’ and receiving the answer ‘well, I wouldn’t start from here’”.

Typically, the officer briefing is given by the planning case officer, who should always be present at the review, either at the start of the formal meeting or before it starts as part of a pre-meeting. Occasionally the panel manager provides the briefing, based on a prior consultation with the case officer and design team, although in such cases opportunities for interaction may be reduced. The intention is to present the planning context and ensure that issues are identified on which the officer needs particular advice: “in which case it is important that the panel responds to those issues as many planners are not confident when dealing with design”.

The officer briefing should also apprise the panel of discussions that have taken place between the developer and the local authority. As one case officer explained: “it avoids the embarrassment of giving advice to the developer which is directly in opposition to the advice they’ve already received from the planning officer”. At the same time, she warned, “as the local authority you’ve got to be very careful that you’re not steering the panel too much ... so it’s a bit of a balancing act”.

For some panels this activity occurs in front of the applicant team, and for others, including TfL’s public realm reviews, it feeds into a private pre-meeting at which potential lines of questioning for the applicant team are gathered, discussed and agreed.
6.4 The presentation

The presentation follows and is a standard part of the design review process, with the single exception that in a small minority of in-house panels post-planning application schemes are reviewed without a formal presentation. This can be an efficient way of doing things and also ensures that comments are restricted to the materials actually being submitted for planning permission. It assumes, however, that projects have been seen by the panel in the pre-application phase and that panel members are sufficiently familiar with the history and philosophy of the design proposals.

Presentation requirements
All panels have clearly specified requirements about what they will and won’t accept from applicants for the presentation, and these need to be made explicit to applicants prior to the day of the review and re-emphasised on the day. It divides into two parts, the materials and the presentation:

The presentation materials: There is little consistency here, and whilst some panels expect presentation boards and encourage models, others require a PowerPoint presentation. All expect clear and honest presentation materials that don’t attempt to misrepresent schemes.

“I’ve seen all sorts, I’ve seen one architect take out a sketch pad and start drawing while the panel’s talking about their scheme and literally just create. I’ve seen others who underestimate the panel and just put up three A3 drawings and think they’re going to get away with it”

Giving the presentation: The actual presentation itself needs to be strictly controlled, with clear time limits that are given in advance and rigorously enforced to allow sufficient time for discussion of the project. A panel manager confided: “Sometimes applicants engage in a form of filibustering, where they do a very, very long presentation focusing on the bits that they are comfortable with, seemingly in order to limit time for discussion about the things that are clearly less good”. Elsewhere it is not unheard of for designer egos to become unduly inflated, along with their presentations, and as one Chair commented: “sometimes a presenter, quite diplomatically, needs to be put back in their box in order to shut them up”.

The quality of presentations
The quality of presentations can vary widely and panels still need to be able to make an informed assessment. An experienced panellist observed: “Good schemes can be incredibly, badly presented; bad schemes are very well presented and you have to cut through that sometimes. Some architects are very good at describing their work, others get far too caught up in the detail”.

“Some applicants are fantastic and in 20 minutes, they can give you a bit of background, the progression of design, the key principles and the details. But it can just go horribly wrong and you can get 20 minutes of the area’s history”
A number of presentation practices were favoured by panels:

- **Don’t hide anything**: Presentations should show all key views: “You have to be so careful because when you find you’re not being shown key views it is important to note that in the report and that it requires more detail”

- **Use models**: All panels welcomed physical models around which they could gather, interact, and discuss and where nothing could be hidden: “Turning up with a model shows a level of openness and engagement, whilst relying solely on carefully chosen street views can give the impression there is some sleight of hand occurring”

- **CGIs are not required**: In general, panels prefer drawings that suggest schemes are a work in progress and that the panel’s input will be welcomed, rather than polished and expensive CGIs which imply the project is a fait-accompli.

- **Telling a story**: Schemes that are explained with a clear narrative will be received better, and that show the thought processes from the concept to the parts

- **Setting the design constraints**: Presentations that set the parameters to respond to and the difficulties of the project, including the economics: “It isn’t always about trying to achieve the optimum scheme but instead the optimum achievable within the given constraints, but this needs to be made clear”

- **Focus on design**: A presentation from the design team, rather than the developer or public sector client will be favoured in order to focus directly and only on the design aspects of the project and avoid time spent justifying and ‘trying to sell’ the project.

- **Asking for help**: Applicants should use the presentation to establish the areas they would like help with: “A very good architect came up with three or four different versions and that was very interesting because we discussed the pros and cons of each of them.

### Clarifications (Q&A)

A final part of the presentation typically involves a small amount of time given over to questions and answers related specifically to the presentation. This is the opportunity for panel members to request technical clarifications prior to the panel moving on to discuss the project. It is also the opportunity for the design team to clear up any misunderstandings.

In some panels this is the final opportunity for the applicant and design team to have a say as beyond this stage the discussion is primarily limited to panel members themselves. Sometimes applicants are not allowed to speak at all following the presentation, and many report that this can be frustrating, particularly “when it is obvious that panel members have misunderstood something”.

Following the clarifications, certain Chairs ask the case officer if s/he has any further points to make following the presentation. Again, this can help to keep the panel focussed and ensure that the needs of planning officers are met. Otherwise the review should quickly move on to the panel discussion.
6.5 Comments and discussion

Ideally the discussion should consider the scheme in the round, “starting from the big issues and working to the small”, but the potential for panels to go off on a tangent, become bogged down, and end up failing to address important issues is always a danger.

“You find that one voice, one interjection (often the first) can unduly steer the conversation”.

To avoid this good Chairs will often attempt to steer the conversation rather than allowing a free-for-all. A number of strategies are employed by Chairs to achieve this. For example, it is important that the person who kicks off the debate starts with the big issues not the detail, so carefully choosing the first contributor is key: “If the first panel member starts talking about the bins on a 20 storey block in a five storey neighbourhood, I’ll say ‘can you say something about the scale’”. Others will ask reviewers to specifically address key issues in order to get the conversation flowing in the right direction.

The potential of pre-defined topics

The potential of a pre-defined set of topics in order to avoid the danger of panels going off-piste was much discussed by interviewees. In general, most favoured a more structured approach to the conversations than is often apparent, with reference made by one interviewee to the Cambridgeshire QRP which focuses its reviews around four ‘c’s: community, connectivity, climate and character: “As applicant we knew about this so were able to structure our presentation accordingly. It gives a logical order to the discussion”.

“A clear structure avoids panels dancing around what might be an elephant in the room, usually the scale of a development”

“I think it might be a good idea to work to a framework because it really is all a bit off the cuff at the moment and we rely on the panel manager to write a sensible version of the conversation”.

A number of means can be used to structure the discussion, firmly focus the panel on design issues and avoid the problems of scattergun feedback:

- **A list of topics**: Applicants, in particular, would prefer greater structure to design review sessions, with potentially a list of topics circulated in advance as part of the briefing note in order to allow them to prepare more thoroughly, and to ensure they bring along any necessary specialist expertise.
- **Picking up policy and problem issues**: Topics might relate back to areas of design policy and pick up common problems in design
- **Draw from the briefing**: Issues raised by officers in their briefing, or even by applicants in their presentation, should inform the discussion, and space should always be allowed to open up the questioning.
Against the idea of a list of topics were a minority of voices who were concerned that the free-flowing nature of many design review conversations might be undermined. Others felt that it might lengthen the whole process. A panel manager confided: “The time we tried an explicit agenda, it was terrible, they were all talking about massing for ages (the first thing on the list) and I was thinking ‘how do we get onto the next thing?” Greater structure may mean that more active chairing is required than some panels have been used to in the past.

“It’s a bit Ronseal isn’t it, the design review panel, it does what it says on the tin, but for someone to say beforehand ‘these are the things to pick up on,’ it’s like giving them the answers to the questions to start off with”

Greater structure across reviews
As well as considering the structure of individual reviews, applicants in particular were concerned that for large projects with multiple reviews, the topics should move from broad strategic issues to the detail across successive reviews. As one commented: “there’s always the danger that you get to that second review and you go right back to the beginning and you’re like ‘no, guys, you told us that we’ve addressed it, that line has been drawn’”.

Being clearer in the briefing pack about issues already discussed and agreed upon or successfully responded to by the design team would help to overcome such concerns. It would also avoid the problem of panels feeling they have to cover everything in each session.

“When you’re trying to cover everything in one session, it’s a bit like trying to eat an elephant really”

6.6 The substance of design review

Turning from the process to the substance of design review, the view of many panels was that issues often repeated themselves, particularly in the current context of large numbers of higher density residential schemes being built across London. Whilst sometimes sitting on a design review panel was not as stimulating as it otherwise might have been, this has the advantage that common problems could be anticipated and quickly homed in upon.

“They’re all pretty similar, they’re all 20, 30, 40 flats, they’re all towers, they’re all brick, so we talk about the roof and we talk about how it reaches the floor and giving stuff back and have they thought about terraces and dual aspects”.

Height, density and scale

Foremost amongst the repeat design concerns were matters of height, density, bulk and scale. These matters, relating to the appropriateness of buildings in their setting, were also often the issues that the planners felt least confident to deal with. For their part, developers were not beyond a trick or two to get their way. As one admitted: “The usual thing is you have a building that is far too large and you say ‘do you think it should be pink, or red?’ because you don’t want to have them talk about the size of the building, you want them to get down to arguing about the colour”.

But avoid pre-determined questions and tick-box review: Few thought that overly prescriptive pre-determined questions or a ‘tick box’ approach to review would be appropriate as it would end up stifling discussion

Pointers, not topics: For those who feel a topic list would direct things too much, a less explicit set of pointers for consideration might be tried in order to structure the thinking of panel members, including during the site visit.
There’s no doubt that it is a bit of a battleground out there. Local residents are, understandably, concerned about over-development of sites, spilling over into problems for them ... mainly they seem to worry about car parking spaces.

A number of approaches related to the question of development quantum:

- **Nailing it down early**: Given the fundamental nature of these issues to project viability, an early design review can help to bring clarity for all involved, and given the impact for developers on the financial bottom line, panels need to be very explicit in their advice relating to the quantum of development.

- **Distributing the bulk**: Advice usually involves removing some of the bulk or alternatively redistributing it across the project: “so it will be pushing something down here and squeezing something up there”.

- **Supporting density where appropriate**: Typically, developers attempt to maximise height and design review attempts to restrict it, but design review is generally more amenable to higher buildings than planning and, if well designed, can provide support to developers on this front.

- **Going higher**: On occasions panels have even suggested going higher than is proposed (sometimes in exchange for a reduction elsewhere), but only where the design will positively benefit from it.

- **Detail is important**: The increasing densities being achieved in London mean that a new focus on the detail is vital: “where will the bins go and what about the bicycle parking and security, and how about the quality of the public realm? It’s all tied in”.

- **Accommodation quality**: A repeated concern is the quality of the accommodation being provided in residential schemes where the development potential is being maximised. Panels are often concerned about the quantity of single aspect units, the poor quality of day lighting in flats, torturous access and internal circulation arrangements, and space standards in flats themselves.

- **Views, near and far**: The impact of building high on close and medium range views, and from a distance is a constant bug bear for some panels. In such cases developers are often advised to go away and prepare long range views to better demonstrate the impact of their proposals.

- **Outstanding or not**: Whether a design is ‘outstanding’ (or not) is often viewed as the key test before policy limits on height can be broken. Planners look to design review panels to make that judgment which then needs to be explicitly stated in their report.
Placemaking

All panels took a broad view of design encompassed in the notion of design as placemaking. This extends across spatial scales from very large-scale urban design concerns to the internal arrangements of buildings.

“It isn’t just private development schemes that we review, it’s all of the components that make a place; so that would include schools and parks and public spaces and spatial masterplans that really have an influence on how the place changes”.

Beyond the site: Whilst the majority of projects that are subject to review are individual buildings, it was the aspiration of most panels to view projects holistically and beyond the red line boundary around a site. Likewise, for public realm schemes, it was the whole space from building frontage to building frontage that was considered important, and not just the publicly managed parts of the street environment. As one interviewee commented: “the committee always encourage the building to be more generous to its environment, and to be more generous with the public spaces and the communal space, including the use of roofs as positive spaces for their occupants”.

Quality or place review: Some panels deliberately labelled their work ‘quality review’ or ‘place review’ in order to unambiguously recognise the larger remit of their interest. These panels felt more empowered to push the boundaries of design review to incorporate matters that elsewhere were regarded as planning rather than design concerns. As a panel manager noted: “For us, it was really important that we were concerned with placemaking; so affordable housing, community, the right mix of uses, climate change, and things like that are issues that we want the panel to look at”.

The remit of design review (setting limits)

Developers were often less convinced that such a broad notion of place quality should be taken, and argued for clear limits to the remit of panels. In this regard the major bone of contention is typically the percentage of affordable housing, which panels often complain is too low. Developers argue that there is a separate viability process and associated negotiation that they need to go through to justify their approach on such issues. Consequently, sweeping statements from design review panels, without full knowledge of the negotiation, are unhelpful.

“It does seem to be a common occurrence that it goes completely off subject and it’s almost like a separate review of planning, rather than design”.

Recognising the sensitivities, but determined to maintain a say on such matters, one panel chair argued: “we can try and deliver a bit of strength to the arm of the planners by saying that we don’t particularly see any abnormal design circumstances here that would suggest that the affordable housing targets can’t be met”. The depth of concerns expressed by applicants on this issue suggests that it is important to clearly and transparently establish – ideally in the published Terms of Reference – what issues are within and beyond the scope of the design review process. For the sake of certainty, any subsequent conversations should then be guided by those limits.

The technical stuff

As well as the more fundamental design issues around the impact of a project on its context, panels dealt with a range of technical issues that tend to repeat themselves from place to place. These include:

i) Compliance with the Mayoral Housing Standards
ii) Energy use and conservation, in connection with which there should be an appropriate expert on the panel for large schemes
iii) Arrangements for the long-term management of public areas (particularly in connection with public realm schemes)
iv) The use, quality, specification and aging of materials
v) The application of tenure blind design principles in new housing.

Whilst technical, many of these issues have significant impacts on project costs and/or the viability calculations of applicants and can be the subject of stiff resistance. Establishing up front (in the Terms of Reference) that they are legitimate concerns of design review can help to give strength to a panel’s views.

“We always try and encourage them to mix people up a bit more, but that flies very strongly against the commercial, hard nose of most developers”

6.7 The tricky question of aesthetics
This was the area that most accepted was more subjective than others, and therefore needed careful handling. As one panel Chair commented: “It is a dangerous area, isn’t it, whose taste is it? If you were to bring in Prince Charles to chair a design review, then it would be a very different outcome than if you appointed David Chipperfield, so you do have to balance taste a little bit”.

Because of its subjectivity, some felt there was a danger of innovative design solutions being undermined by the collective scrutiny: “to convince a whole room of other people that your scheme is worth building you tend to design defensively. You don’t really design what you want to see, you design a building that’s going to get through the system, and that is always a disaster”. Whilst this was a minority concern, the question of aesthetics, and the need not to discourage design creativity (in whichever style) comes down to the choice of panel members; notably the avoidance of panellists with very fixed stylistic views and the appointment, instead, of those with a more open and pluralistic attitude to architectural design.

Some argued “Design review services need to move away from aesthetics or commentary on architecture to a more holistic approach that improves the design process”. But the evidence from the interviews was that this has already happened. Whilst elevational treatments and the aesthetic quality of proposals in their setting is discussed by panels, they are certainly not obsessed by style or aesthetic considerations.

6.8 The sticky question of viability
Amongst many applicants, a strong perception exists that reviewers are divorced from the commercial realities of projects (whether publicly or privately funded), and that these realities often get in the way of achieving an optimum design solution.

“Development economics gets dismissed, there is usually a lack of appreciation of cost, ownership, easements, and below ground constraints. Sometimes the impact on programme and cost as a result of design review comments can even result in a decrease in affordable housing or a necessary increase in density”.

Some panellists felt that “They’re almost meant to be divorced from viability issues because their role is to critique design”. Moreover, by helping to set a clear ceiling within which developers are forced to work, the process can stretch design teams to think more creatively about projects, not least “to think ‘well, how can I reclaim some of that within the new benchmark that has been set’”. But if the credibility of panels is not to be undermined, then having a greater awareness of viability constraints, without blindly accepting every viability tale they are told will be important.

One panel includes a viability expert as part of the panel and can call on that expertise when required. Others might make viability a standard part of the
briefing process. For example, not every publicly funded public realm scheme will be designed to the same specification standard. Some are meant to be low-key (albeit important) projects for everyday places, with relatively modest funding to match. Panels should be aware of such matters and direct their comments accordingly.

6.9 Summary and advice

The final stage on the day of the review itself was the feedback to the applicant team from the panel (usually by the panel Chair). This involved Chairs being able to rapidly synthesise the discussion and summarise key points and then crystallise the advice into a series of recommendations.

Some Chairs believed that in the interests of panel harmony, and to fairly reflect the whole discussion, it was important to include all panel views in this process, including views held by a minority of the panel that were unlikely to be reflected in the recommendations: “The responsibility is to be disinterested, you’ve got to be fair and unbiased, you must put your own particular design peccadilloes to one side”. Whatever is included it is important to be clear, succinct and fair when summing up as this is the advice that applicants and their teams take away and reflect on until the official report arrives.

Degree of intervention

The degree to which panels attempt to intervene is typically a consequence of the quality of the proposals they are seeing, with some projects requiring greater input than others: “Some panels are very challenging to such a degree that it can become almost like a weapon to further a particular design agenda”.

It is also a consequence of the confidence of panels and how far panels are prepared to go in the pursuit of particular design objectives. This varies significantly, although most agree there is a balance to be struck and a number of red lines should not be crossed.
Best practice requires that panels respect three red lines in their conduct:

- **Panels should not attempt to negotiate on behalf of the local authority:** Panel managers were clear that the review process is not a negotiation, and ensuring that panellists do not engage in negotiation on behalf of the local authority is a key role of the Chair, and panel manager. This limitation should also be made very clear when inducting new panel members.

- **Panels should not recommend other designers:** Whilst most panels have clear rules about the relationship between panel members and those appearing before a panel, few prohibit third party recommendations being made. Given that design review remains voluntary and design teams consent to appear, such recommendations can be profoundly uncomfortable for those in the room when directed against the existing design team: “You need their blessing, but they’re not the designers, and with quite a few design review panels it gets to the point that they actually suggest which architects you should use”. More subtle means of raising such issues need to be employed.

- **Panels should not attempt to design projects themselves:** The remit of all panels is clearly to critique. This can involve constructive criticism as well as the making of positive suggestions for change, but as one panel member complained: “the worst, possible thing that a panel should do, is to try to re-design a scheme, although there are quite a few architects who will try and do just that”. Most panels look to the Chair to rein such activity in but it can still occur.

> “Some can’t help but get involved in designing it and even start sketching, you think ‘stop, this is not your role!’ but you daren’t say that because you don’t want to wind them up”.

> “The panel needs to respect that it is another architect’s design, hence suggested directions of travel rather than dictating design solutions”.

Reviewing Design Review in London - 63
PROJECT
Redevelopment of the former Battersea Police station
112-118 Battersea Bridge Road, London SW11

LOCAL AUTHORITY
London Borough of Wandsworth

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Developer: Linden Homes
Designer: AWW Architects

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Local authority managed, in-house panel

PROJECT BACKGROUND
The project involved the part demolition and part retention of an existing building – a former police station – with the conversion of the retained building and erection of a new building to the rear to provide 46 new residential units with cycle parking, communal and private amenity space, and highway and public realm works to Hyde Lane.

Approximately 15 of the units proposed were affordable housing with 3 single aspect units, none of which were north facing. The applicants indicated their wish to incorporate public realm improvements along Hyde Lane, providing a shared pedestrian surface to the street.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
The applicant team had worked closely with the council’s design officer, and had responded to the feedback from local consultations regarding the height of the new rear block. The scheme was presented to a single design review panel in January 2014, shortly before it was to be submitted for planning approval. This was not ideal as the opportunity to revise the scheme in response to the advice offered by the panel was curtailed.

Comments by the panel were summarised in the council’s report to the planning committee and included general support for the project, particularly the decision to retain the old Police Station, but with reservations over certain aspects of the design. These included:

1. The way the new block would interface both with the existing building and the adjacent residential area.
2. The improvements to Hyde Lane were queried because they did not include a ramped access at the western end and had not gone further to explore how the development’s relationship to the surrounding area could be improved, in particular the areas to the west and north of the site.

3. The volume of the new residential block so close against the existing building was questioned because it resulted in an uncomfortable relationship between the old and the new buildings.

4. The high boundary to the south-west side of the site to protect privacy created a difficult relationship with the proposed lower ground floor flats with no opportunity for connections or positive overlooking to the adjoining public space.

5. The amount and layout of the amenity space needed further consideration as did the design quality of the south-west elevation.

6. Concerns were recorded over the lack of an energy strategy or clear rationale for the proposed materials.

**OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW**

The proposals were amended in response to the comments made by the panel, but given the time constraints, not as comprehensively as the panel would have liked. A detailed energy strategy was part of the application package and the important interface between the old and the new buildings was revised with a new glass link to clearly separate the two volumes of the old and new buildings.

The new design work was undertaken on the public realm aspects of the scheme along Hyde Lane to ensure a better transition between the street and the new block and improve accessibility. The access to the rear of the block (on the north west elevation) was made more prominent and tweaks were incorporated to the south west elevation.

The scheme was submitted for planning approval in February 2014 and approved in June with a strong endorsement from the Borough’s planning team. Issues that had been raised over the size of the internal atrium (too small) and choice of the brick finish were not addressed, the former for commercial reasons and the latter reflecting the general satisfaction of the design officer with the choice.
7 POST-REVIEW

7.1 Reporting back (quickly)

The degree of to-ing and fro-ing during the comments and discussion depends on the panel, “but ultimately the panel always has the last word” via the report (sometimes known as the letter) that follows. There is always a gap between the review itself and the report being sent out, although most interviewees felt that it is good practice to get it out as soon as possible in order to minimise any period of misconceptions that might flow from the discussion.

For applicants this period is time sensitive as changes can delay the submission of a planning application and the commencement of the formal planning process. If the review is held after the planning application has been submitted, the clock will be ticking in order to meet prescribed deadlines for processing planning applications. In such cases the planning case officers will typically specify when they need the report by in order to take it to a scheduled planning committee.

It could take between half a day and two days to write a report, depending on the complexity, and a standard adopted by many panels was 10 working days after the review. This allowed time for writing, checking, and then re-editing before issuing the report.

“The process takes about a week/week and a half, depending how busy everybody is”.

7.2 The report (or letter)

Beyond the (usually) brief summary provided by the Chair, the report is the key stage where conflicting views get ironed out in order to provide a coherent account of the advice that the design team is able to respond to. As one applicant commented: “it is not always easy to know what will be in the letter as some things said on the day turn out to be just comments rather than real concerns, whilst others are highlighted for attention”.

A widespread perception amongst applicants and their design teams is of a sort of “mission creep” that occurs between what was said at the review and what gets reported. Therefore, until the letter is actually received it is difficult to react to the review.

“We’ve all been to those meetings where you get a letter and you think ‘hang on a minute, were you in a different meeting?’ I think there should be an opportunity to review the letter before it gets crystallised”.

The skill of report writing

Writing the report is a highly skilled process and needs a good understanding of the design discussion – which can be very wide-ranging – and an ability to draw out salient points. Comprehensive notes are typically taken on the day by panel managers, and sometimes these are turned directly into the report, in minute form, as an objective record of the discussion; although structured thematically in order to make interpretation simpler.

“Nothing is different from what was discussed on the day, including the recommendations of the day which are summarised”
Other managers turn their own notes into a more concise report in which the essence, rather than the detail, of the discussion is emphasised. Sometimes this is written against a standard template in order to ensure a logical reportage of the salient issues. So, as a panel manager advised: “The first area is massing and development density, then placemaking, character and quality, and then scheme layout, and architectural expression. There might be a separate section for landscape, and then for inclusion and sustainability. If there’s been nothing said about an issue, I’ll say that”.

**Clarity of writing and recommendations**

Styles of report writing vary between panels from a punchy bullet point style, which some feel is a bit too abrupt, to a longer prose style—described by one applicant as “flowery language”—which some argue can sometimes lack clarity.

“I think they could be a bit more targeted and specific, but they usually give a sense of whether the scheme is good, or not and why, so you can extrapolate from that”

A number of practices help deliver more usable and effective reports:

- **Role and status**: Reports might begin with a clear standard statement setting out the nature of the advice and its status in the planning process so that applicants and the planning committee are reminded about how it relates to the wider process and how they need to have regard to it.
- **A good summary**: A good summary at the start can be valuable for the planning officer to lift out and incorporate directly into the relevant committee report.
- **Clear and concise**: Reports should be clear and concise with language that is not open to interpretation and with very clear recommendations in a hierarchy that begin with the fundamental concerns and end with the ‘nice to haves’.
- **Well structured**: Reports work better when well structured with clear sub-headings: “some of them dance a bit all over the place”.
- **Short and sweet**: Reports should avoid needless padding out and saying things for the sake of it, although one applicant observed that if the letter is too short, there can be a sense of not getting much from a costly process.
- **Emphasis**: During the writing process the Chair’s summary from the day of the review can often provide a useful steer with regard to the weight that should be put on different aspects of the report.
- **Clear recommendations**: The report should conclude with very clear recommendations which are not open to interpretation, in order to avoid “the danger that everyone cherry picks what they want to read out of the comments”.
- **A return visit?**: It is important to say whether the panel wishes to see the scheme again, or whether outstanding issues can be dealt with by a shorter Chair’s review or by the case officer alone.
Refining the draft
When they go into the public sphere at the planning application stage, design review reports take on a formal status and can be used by objectors and supporters of a scheme. As panels are meant to be independent of the authorities they serve, typically they are issued on behalf of the panel or the chair, although one external provider issues reports as that organisation’s official response and view. Either way, it is important that the content is thoroughly checked and signed off by the panel itself in order to ensure “the panel owns that letter”.

Some panels allow all panellists to comment on the draft report before it is issued. This can take some time and potentially adds complexity and delay to the process. Usually the Chair alone, acting on behalf of the panel, checks and signs off reports. As a panel manager commented: “We write it, but it’s cleared by the Chair. Some Chairs say: ‘oh yeah, that’s fine, that looks fine’, others go through it word by word and can almost re-write the entire report”. Another noted: “Sometimes, I put things in red text, where there is some doubt and I ask the Chair, ‘did you mean this, or did you mean that?’”

Traffic light systems
One panel had introduced a traffic light system in order to record and summarise its headline recommendations. An advocate argued: “Two people can read the same letter and take completely different things from it. One will say ‘What about the height of the building?’ Another, ‘Oh, no, we don’t worry about that, they loved our railings’. A traffic light system cuts through all that” by making the final analysis very clear: green the scheme is supported, amber, it has merits but still needs work and discussion, red, the scheme is not supported in its current guise.

Arguably such systems are powerful because they help to ensure that the design review carries more weight as it is hard to justify approving a scheme if it has a red light. As the panel Chair commented: “The panel makes advisory comments, but the planning committee take the green and red lights pretty seriously”. Others felt that such systems were too stark, and that a greater degree of nuance was required, perhaps with traffic lights recorded against the different aspects of design covered in reports, rather than a single light for everything. Only those areas which were of concern would be revisited at a subsequent review.

7.3 Publication (or the lack of it)
Gone are the days when design review reports were made publicly available as standard. Today much design review happens at the pre-application stage and therefore is considered commercially sensitive and beyond public scrutiny. Likewise reports of the review of TfL funded public realm schemes are not routinely available to the public. Panel managers argue that it is important to respect this boundary in order to maintain the confidence of developers who cannot currently be compelled to submit their projects to design review and who are paying for the service. As one noted: “Whenever I send out a report, I always say ‘bear in mind, this is confidential’ because it’s a pre-app”.

“Developers can be quite sensitive about their schemes and what they think is being publicly said about them”.

One interviewee nicely summarised the situation: “Comments are confidential and it’s all about whether they become public, or not. Sometimes they don’t and you never have the panel’s public comments”. For many this was viewed as concerning.
Despite the sensitivities, a number of means are used to bring the recommendations of panels into the public sphere:

- **On registration:** Some authorities publish design review reports in full alongside a registered planning application: “When the planning application comes in, the letter from the panel is automatically put side by side with it on the planning portal”. This allows interested parties to directly relate the comments to the proposed scheme.

- **A formal response as part of the planning application:** Here the applicants themselves take the initiative to demonstrate how they have responded to the recommendations of the design review panel as a formal part of the planning application

- **In the case officer report:** Some Boroughs include design review reports as a standard part of the case officer’s report to the committee. Others include them in whole or part at the discretion of case officers: “so it becomes a nice, little story, a narrative of the scheme”

### 7.4 Responding to the review

Once produced, the response of applicants to the report of a design review panel depended in part on their perception of how seriously it would be taken by the respective planning authority. For public realm schemes, TfL require that design review recommendations are implemented by respective Boroughs, and the Borough relationship manager has a key role in ensuring that the letter is fully understood.

**Responding negatively:** In the main applicants and their design teams respond positively to design review in the sense that projects are, to a greater or lesser extent, revised. Some, however, will respond only begrudgingly and will focus on the minimum they can get away with.

“We just do the bare minimum we can get away with, and then it all becomes a game to over-emphasise what has been taken on board and ignore everything else”.

A very bad review can make a few developers completely question projects and whether it is worth taking them forward at all. Commenting on a particularly negative review, one architect remembered: “It was quite destructive to the point where the client was considering ‘do I even want to do this?’”

**Responding positively:** Responding positively to design review does not necessarily mean taking on board every single aspect of a panel’s critique. The recommendations of a panel have the status of advice and need an intelligent response in the context of all material factors impacting on a development. As one developer noted: “we calmly and rationally said we don’t have to agree with all of this and responded accordingly”.

Demonstrating a considered and intelligent response can be achieved through a number of means:

- **A special drawing:** to illustrate the changes that flowed from the recommendations.
- **A pro forma issued by the authority:** on which a formal response is required against every recommendation and how it has been taken on board. So far this is a requirement of only one panel, ensuring that the loop from panel to response is fully closed.
- **A section in the Design and Access Statement:** setting out which changes have been incorporated and which have not, with careful justification for the latter.

### 7.5 Delivering on the recommendations

Beyond the response of design teams to the recommendations of a design review panel, the recommendations then need to be interpreted by planning committees, funders (in the case of public realm schemes), and, ultimately, on-site, as projects are subsequently being delivered.

**Representation at the planning committee**

In one panel the chair of the design review panel (a local councillor) also sits on the planning committee and is therefore available to directly address questions relating to the panel’s deliberations. This places design at the centre of decision-making, but it also, arguably, compromises the independence that most panels jealously guard. It necessitates a different role for the Chair on the panel, as mediator rather than expert: “I’m pretty mute at the design review panel on the basis that it’s important that I’m impartial and haven’t said it’s great, or bad, so at the planning committee I can represent the panel’s final view”.

Most panels adopt a policy of strict separation, but some interviewees raised the possibility of having the Chair or another representative available to the committee so that s/he could directly address any questions the committee had. As one case officer observed: “Most committee members, for perfectly good reason, don’t understand a drawing, don’t really understand the complexities of big schemes and sometimes they decide before they discuss it, whether they like it or not”. A more direct connection between panel and committee might help to circumvent such concerns and further reinforce the panel’s advice.

**Justifying departures**

Case officers don’t always agree with every recommendation of design review panels. Even panels themselves don’t always agree on everything. Ultimately, if there are conflicting views, it is up to the planning committee or funding authority to take a view, having weighed the panel’s recommendations with other factors.

But decision-makers should think very seriously about dismissing the views of panels without very good reason if they do not wish to undermine the legitimacy of the process and the status of panels. On that basis, on the occasions that they do, case officers, planning committees and others should carefully justify why they chose to depart from the recommendations of a design review panel, and this should be recorded in the officer’s report and/or decision letter.

**Monitoring delivery**

As one interviewee suggested: “you could argue that design review is a little toothless because it’s part of the early stage process”. Monitoring delivery after the relevant permissions are given could greatly strengthen its impact.

**Post-implementation review:** Some interviewees argued that if design review is going to impact on the quality of the built environment, then it needs to carry on after permission is given: “it needs to
be checking the discharge of the scheme as what gets built is often nothing to do with what gets permission“. In this regard there is often a dumbing down of projects following approvals. At this point the design team gets changed, sites are sold on, and the people actually doing the delivery are increasingly divorced from the actual design review process”.

“We’re talking about wholesale change of the character of something after planning permission. It might well look like those drawings seen by panel, but if it doesn’t feel like it, it’s a different building”

A specific form of post-implementation review, some argued, could help ensure that schemes are delivered in a manner that reflects the planning permission. With one exception, authorities have yet to take up such arrangements.

“Developers and architects who are new to the area get a bit of a shock because they think ‘oh my goodness not only do they really scrutinise the drawings, but we have to respond to whatever comments have been made and deliver everything that the drawings show … even the fanciful stuff”.

Design team continuity: For residential schemes, the architect responsible for taking projects through design review is increasingly rarely also responsible for the detailed design. Panels try to encourage a greater consistency in the design team between pre- and post-review stages by specifically recommending continuation of a successful team in their report. Such approaches carry little weight after permission has been granted.

“The letter often says we would recommend that you retain the design team in order to maintain the quality through delivery”

One authority imposes a financial penalty, enforced through the Section 106 agreement, if the architect is changed. In that case the money is used to hire the original architects back in order to conduct a form of post-implementation review of their own scheme by reviewing the detailed drawings and commenting on their delivery. They contend: “what we’re granting planning permission on is the architect, it’s the architect’s integrity and it’s what’s going on in their head, so you can’t just sell the plan and then say: ‘oh yeah, can you build that’, it’s stuff that is intangible”.

7.6 Feedback, three-ways
Three further post-design review practices were explored under the common label of feedback:

i) Feedback from service users to those managing design review
ii) Feedback to the panel members on how their recommendations are used
iii) Feedback to the public about design review services.

Feedback (reviewing practice)
Different panels adopted different approaches to the collection of feedback on their practices of design review, and these varied from nothing at all, to the systematic surveying of all those involved in the process, both immediately after a review and up to six months later. The latter, for example via a voluntary questionnaire, aims to capture responses on a range of topics from the organisation of briefing sessions and the conduct of the review itself, to the timely delivery of the report and the value of the recommendations.

The alternative was a more informal – on the day – approach which ranged from: a questionnaire; to a “general discussion with the applicants after the review about how they found it”; to a de-briefing with the panel focusing on the process: “did they get enough drawings, did they have enough time for the site visit, etc.”. External providers employ a periodic review of the service with the client body (the
Borough). Most interviewees felt that some form of more systematic feedback was desirable and should be used as standard.

_Closing the loop_
Panels find it very frustrating that they don’t know what happens to their advice once it has been given, and whether it has had any impact. This could eventually result in the disengagement of panel members. Whilst it was acknowledged that it is easy to go on the planning portal to find out what got planning permission, there was a common feeling that more should be done to keep panelists informed.

“We had no feedback, no evidence of whether they had taken any of our advice on board. Do we have any teeth? Does this actually make a huge difference?”

One manager commented that it can take some time between the review and when the final decision of a planning committee is made, and you would have to go back a long way to find the right panel and notify them: “So we have been criticised for not closing the loop”. Others had (or were contemplating) mechanisms that, if not on specific cases but in general, provided feedback to keep panel members appraised the effectiveness of their advice, and how to improve it.

Feedback mechanisms being used or contemplated included:

- **An annual report**: to panel members reflecting on which topics their advice was most influential, and on which it could be improved
- **An annual review**: or AGM providing an opportunity to review practices and consider what can be improved: “we will take maybe half a dozen schemes and focus on what happened”
- **Site visits**: to look at projects following construction
- **A newsletter**: “with monthly updates on what is happening, where schemes are at, and other key developments they should be informed about”
- **An online (but password protected) library**: of schemes that have been reviewed and built, and the improvements that were achieved.
Publicising design review

There was a widespread feeling that design review was poorly understood or, beyond the industry, even known about. Some felt this was a good thing: “if they advertise it too much, it might encourage the small minority of professional complainers, who would start to try and get to grips with the design review panel as well”. Others felt: “there was a suspicion from the public about these panel meetings held in confidence” and that a greater openness was required, including publicising the role of design review more effectively. Ideas included:

i) The instigation of local area reviews (sometimes known as Place reviews) where a panel works with a community to understand the character of their area and how it could change

ii) Production of a magazine or website to better explain to a lay audience how the process works and to give news about current projects and how they have fared through design review. This might double up as feedback to the panel as well.

More narrowly than ‘the public’, many felt that local authorities without any design review provision, and even councillors in local authorities with a design review service, often failed to appreciate its purpose and value. In part this was because of the continuing “obsession with secrecy” amongst some providers, but also that many didn’t realise that design review had moved on since the pre-2011 days.

As one provider noted: “what we’re not, as a constituency, doing really is sharing the good practice that’s out there in ways that enable people to see what they could have if only they knew it existed”. Consequently, “a very out of date view of what design review is persists”.

7. Post review
PROJECT
Site on Bream Street, Fish Island, London E3

PLANNING AUTHORITY FOR THE AREA AROUND AND INCLUDING QUEEN ELIZABETH OLYMPIC PARK
London Legacy Development Corporation LLDC

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Client: London & Quadrant Housing Trust
Designers: Alford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) and East Architecture, Landscape and Urban Design

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Fortismere Associates

PROJECT BACKGROUND
The project envisioned a residential-led mixed use development encompassing 202 residential units as well as employment, retail, exhibition and leisure uses on a vacant site at Fish Island. Part of the site was located in the Fish Island and White Post conservation area with frontage directly onto the River Lee Navigation.

The proposals were for seven buildings of between two and seven storeys and form part of the major regeneration area around Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park under the auspices of the London Legacy Development Corporation. From the start the LLDC has emphasised the importance of design quality and this informed the journey at Bream Street.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
Bream Street was subject to three reviews. A first panel was held at an early stage in the project’s development at which it was made clear that a high standard of design was expected. Following the review, the developer, encouraged by the panel, made the decision to appoint a new design team to take the project forward.

Subsequently there were two further reviews to assess an entirely new set of proposals. From this stage on the project was developed in close collaboration with LLDC officers through a series of design workshops. Consultation was also undertaken with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

At the second review in November 2014 the panel concluded that the proposals now set a high standard for this significant site with the potential to provide a successful mix of employment and residential uses. Aso that the canal buildings and public space had...
the potential to create an attractive and animated frontage to the waterside. The panel were less convinced
by the arrangement of the blocks which created two triangular areas of ‘left over’ space to the north of the
site. The larger of these spaces would have been overshadowed by a seven storey block to the south, with an
outlook compromised by its location next to Forman’s Yard. They also suggested:

1. The stepping down of building heights towards the conservation area
2. Reducing the scale of the six storey block to the corner of Stour Road and Bream Street.

The team considered the comments and responded by reducing the height of the two blocks by a storey
and reinforcing the intimacy of the waters edge with private gardens for the occupants on the ground level.
At the same time the employment building was developed as a landmark building for Dace Road with the
brick replaced with metal cladding to reference the industrial heritage of Fish Island. The landscape design
was also developed to incorporate on-site flood storage capacity requirements by using the landscape
language of a sunken garden with terraced seating.

At a third review in February 2015, as well as praising
the overall design, the panel pushed for a further
reduction in height for the building to the corner
of Stour Road and Bream Street, and for keeping
routes through the site open as much as possible
in order to integrate the development into its local
neighbourhood. Following the review the team
agreed to the reduced height of the Stour Road
building from 5+1 storeys to 4+1 storeys, allowing it to
more convincingly step down towards the conservation area.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN REVIEW
The design review process had a very significant impact
on the project. Initially this involved the appointment of a
new design team when it became apparent that the design
aspirations of the planning authority were not being
met. The case vividly demonstrates how design review
can help to change the local culture for design, ensuring
that developers employ high quality designers and come
forward with high quality solutions at an early stage.

Subsequently sufficient time was allowed to enable the
scheme to be amended in response to the comments
made by the QRP, statutory consultees, and other
stakeholders, and through subsequent negotiations with
the LLDC officers. The advice offered by the QRP on design
matters were part of a range of views to be weighed by the
applicant and the design team. Many of the suggestions made
by the panel formed the basis for revisions to the scheme, including the reductions in scale, the revised
interface with the canal, and new façade and landscape treatments. A planning application was submitted
for approval in August 2016
8. BENEFITS, COSTS, AND THE VALUE OF DESIGN REVIEW

8.1 The impact of design review

A final judgement about the value of design review needs to be made on more than financial considerations alone. The research revealed widespread agreement about a range of benefits that can flow from design review and that, collectively, underpin a solid case for investing in it. These relate to all the key parties with a stake in the outcomes from the development process: society, the design team, the applicant (developer) and the planning authority. Whilst not every interviewee saw every benefit or even agreed that all were benefits, there was a remarkable consistency across all groups that the overall impact of design review was positive.

Benefits for society

If the main aspiration for design review was to achieve better design and placemaking than would otherwise be achieved without the panel, then this was also the primary benefit that most interviewees saw for society.

Better design: Put simply, design review promotes good quality developments that help create better places and avoids the cost of poor design

- Making good better: Many interviewees were far from effusive about design review and often took issue with the recommendations of panels. They nevertheless saw that the process of discussion and being challenged on design by a peer group helped them to refine their design solutions, and often to confront aspects of projects which had not been fully resolved: “that extra thinking made a good scheme into an excellent one”

- Sinking poor schemes: Some applicants are very adept at ensuring that their proposals tick the necessary policy boxes even if the resulting project is inappropriate for a site. Design review “can give a completely different, non-policy view on how crap the scheme is as an extra weapon to make developers think again”. As one developer concluded: “The two biggest things I took away from the meeting is we shouldn’t go for the proposed concept design and we had to really think much more about context”.

- Addressing recurrent design problems: In London the pressure for development is enormous, not least to maximise the potential of every site to meet housing need. The unique interdisciplinary perspective of design review enables scrutiny “not just of the aesthetics, but of liveability, quality of place, quality of the accommodation, and the way it sits within the area”. In particular it helps to avoid the repeated problems associated with poor quality intensification.

A local culture change: As well as improving individual episodes of design, design review can lead to a culture change (locally) following which achievement of design quality moves from the exception to an expectation:

- Leads to the appointment of better architects: Design reviews signal that high standards of design are the expectation, influencing the choice of architect: “we knew that this was coming, and it was fine, we were prepared for that and that was one of the reasons that we instructed #####, they’re a really expensive architecture practice”
Benefits for designers

The focus on achieving better design is a win:win for society and the professionals whose role it is to design. A key benefit includes raising the status of designers and the importance of design generally within the development process. Whilst not every interviewee saw every benefit.

Empowering the role of the designer: Overwhelmingly design professionals reported that design review put them in a stronger position by bringing home to clients that design is important and that they are building bits of the city with long lasting impacts:

- **Standing up to the client:** On very commercially aggressive schemes architects argue: “if there is a strong body beside you saying ‘no, no, no, no,’ then you’re able, as an architect, to stand up to your client”. “That kind of solidarity is completely essential”
- **Standing up for the architect:** Other times panels are able to spot that there’s a very fine architect involved in a project who is being manipulated: “a good panel will spot a good architect and help create that room for them to design, by getting the client to back off a little”
- **Supporting innovation:** Panel comments are very valuable to support innovation in design against more conservative tastes or when buildings are located in an historic setting: “it encourages innovation, it encourages people to think outside the box and just be a bit different”.

Benefits for designers:

Empowering the role of the designer: Overwhelmingly design professionals reported that design review put them in a stronger position by bringing home to clients that design is important and that they are building bits of the city with long lasting impacts:
A more intelligent design process: Within the professional sphere, opportunities for peer group feedback are often thin on the ground. A structured means to provide such feedback seems to help raise the game of designers:

- **An objective dispassionate view**: “When you’re not the designer of a project, you have much more objectivity, you have distance that allows you to see other things and, as we’re all different, it’s interesting to have a different perspective”

- **Helping designers to think differently**: Panel members bring different experiences to a panel “helping people to think about solutions that they might otherwise be closed to or not naturally come to themselves”.

Learning opportunities for all involved: All professionals involved in design review (including panel members) report how valuable the process is, as an opportunity to share best practice and to learn from each other.

- **Professional development**: The process provides invaluable professional development, learning and sharing experience for panel members, presenters, applicants and officers: “I’ve invited junior officers in our team to come along, just as observers, and they enjoy it too, you do learn a lot”. “It’s made me a better planner, and now I’m pre-empting stuff that the panel would ask, which is good for the applicant and it makes them up their game”.

- **Benchmarking**: it’s good for benchmarking, particularly for public realm schemes where otherwise “there’s no external check for a Borough spending public funds”

- **Councillor training**: Where they are invited to observe the process, design review “provides knowledge and informal training for councillors”.

**Benefits for applicants**

Whilst developers were the most sceptical group about the value of design review and often reported on negative experiences, without exception they could see the benefits in a better designed built environment; as could public sector project clients.

- **Speeding up planning**: Applicants continually reported that achieving the greatest quantum of development in the shortest possible time was their prime objective. A good design review often assisted this.

  - **Streamlining formal planning**: Schemes that received a positive design review generally had an easier and quicker ride through planning: “when they come in for planning they sail through the planning process”.

  - **Reduces refusals**: The early intervention of design review (if recommendations are taken on board) is also helping to reduce the development delays and confrontation caused by planning refusals: “if the panel really don’t like it, applications are going back to the drawing board and are not coming forward in the same way for us to then refuse”.

8. Benefits, cost and the value of design review
Greater certainty in the development process: Applicants were also strongly focussed on reducing the risk associated with their development, and design review was seen as having an important role in this regard.

- **Early warnings**: Design review can reduce the developer’s risk, particularly if conducted early, by showing what is feasible on a site: “it can give an early warning that what they’re trying to do on site is not going to happen”

- **Empowering good developers**: Design review can empower developers to strive for better design: “I’ve had developers who’ve come back to me and say, ‘that was really helpful because it’s helped me realise that I need different architects’”.

- **Raising values**: Many were convinced that better design carries a premium in the market, and this was seen as a potential benefit for many developers: “Schemes in this area are not commanding high values just because of the location, it’s because people are excited by the places that are being created because they look good, both inside and out”.

Endorsement of challenging projects: Perhaps the greatest benefit to developers was the boost that a strong endorsement from a design review panel could give to their projects.

- **Endorsing controversial schemes**: A strong endorsement from design review can help to give momentum through the planning process, and help to give confidence to planners around key decisions: “Can give clients confidence, and the planning officers confidence, to take more radical decisions than they would have otherwise been comfortable in taking”

- **Pushing the limits**: A design-based approach can help to demonstrate where the limits on height and density might successfully be pushed (and where not): “It can result in us getting endorsement for a scheme where we may be battling with a rather ill-informed planning process”

- **Helping the planners**: A positive endorsement at design review can help the planners to make the case for development at committee: “as planners, it’s quite convenient to say ‘well, the independent panel has said this is good’”
Benefits for authorities
For planning and highways authorities the major benefits are aligned with those of society at large, namely the achievement of better design / place quality than would otherwise be achieved. In addition, there are a range of ‘process’ benefits from design review.

Helping to fill design skills gaps: Whilst most felt that there was no substitute for Boroughs having their own dedicated in-house design capacity, the provision of design review was sometimes seen as the next best thing.

- **Acts as a patch to cover a lack of internal resources**: Where a lack of resources means that internal design capacity is limited or absent, design review can help to fill the gap: “a lot of boroughs haven’t got the right design skills in-house, that’s obvious, you can really feel it”
- **Bringing a broader perspective on design**: Design review can bring a greater breadth and depth of experience than is ever likely to be available within a planning authority: “and can even challenge the design brief or the assumptions that lie behind a project”

Supporting internal design capacity (where it exists): Design has long been an area that many planning and highways authorities have struggled with and so supporting what resources exist internally with an external panel can help to strengthen the capabilities of the in-house team.

- **Working in tandem**: Ideally design review acts as an extra layer in the development process and in tandem with an in-house design team: “where we are seeing design review, generally the councils can afford design officers within the planning department as well”
- **A second opinion**: Design review can reinforce advice given by case officers: “there are schemes where the development team don’t listen to you at all. You might be saying ‘it’s too dense, it’s ugly, or it doesn’t work with the existing site context’ and they just don’t hear you and they want a second opinion and you can say ‘right, go to design review and get lambasted”
- **Raising aspirations**: Design review supports internal urban design teams giving them the confidence to push for something better: “It gives officers a bit more confidence and backbone about what line they should take”

Giving the committee / planners confidence: Where it exists, design review has become an indispensable part of the process, with planners and planning committees increasingly relying on its advice.

- **Managing expectations**: Design review can help to manage developer expectations about what the planning process will permit, making the process easier before it ever gets to committee: “It can encourage developers to do the right thing even if it carries a cost, because it helps them to get the necessary permissions”
- **Helps to clarify committee decision-making**: The panel report can help to cut through disagreements on design, either on committee or between officers and councillors: “We can point to the review and say: ‘our panel, who are here to advise on design have said its outstanding design’. That’s it”.
- **Gives the committee confidence**: Helps to give committee members the confidence to approve contemporary schemes: “The planning committee seem to really appreciate the design review and if design review likes a scheme, then the planning committee likes a scheme”.

8. Benefits, cost and the value of design review
8.2 The cost of design review

With the widespread move from a publicly funded service to a chargeable one, the headline fees of panels have been much debated. These, however, are only part of the total cost of design review.

The headline fees

The fees paid by developers to have their projects submitted to a design review panel vary hugely, from £0 to £5,000 (plus VAT) for a single full review. The average fee paid to the panels included in the research (excluding those that didn’t charge) was £3,670 (plus VAT). Fees are typically reduced by about £500 for a return review (when a site visit is not required), and are less for a Chair’s review, on average £1,500 cheaper than full a review.

Costs built into fees include paying the Chair, the panel members, refreshments, room hire, taxis, and the hours spent organising the review, preparing the briefing notes, getting the information ready, attending the review and writing it up. In other words, they cover all the directly incurred management costs of the organisation responsible for setting up and running the reviews, plus a profit margin / overhead in the case of external (and some in-house) suppliers.

Whilst some panels levied higher fees than others, there was no evidence that, as a category, external private, external not-for-profit, or in-house panels necessarily cost more or less to run, or levy higher or lower fees, than panels in a different category.

Fee collection

These costs are paid by developers in three ways:

i) A ring-fenced fee for design review paid to the local authority (who may then pass it on to an external provider)

ii) A fee paid direct to an external provider

iii) A fee included within a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA)

Increasingly design review is included as part of the PPA, alongside pre-application meetings, although some Boroughs reported a tendency for monies paid in this way to become hijacked for development management functions rather than for design ones. For in-house panels this seems to be the optimum approach for charging as “the whole thing is completely integrated as part of the pre-application process” and developers pay once and are fully aware about the design review obligation from the start (or at least after the PPA is negotiated).

When external providers are delivering the service, most now charge developers directly and the local authority need not get involved in the financial side. In such circumstances the PPA can still have an important role, as a case officer explained: “The PPA specifies that there will be a number of design review sessions, and when they will happen, and that the payment for those should be agreed separately with the panel co-ordinator”.

Applicants’ costs

Beyond the headline fees for design review, applicants are subject to two sets of (generally) more substantial ‘hidden’ costs: preparation and post-review costs.

Preparation costs: Most design teams put a substantial amount of work into preparing for design review. Indeed, as one panel manager admitted: “Whilst we stress that no additional design work should take place specifically for a review, one of the key hidden costs of the process is the work
of a design team to prepare and attend a design review, and this is a cost met by the developer”. An experienced panellist noted “how much more impressive the information presented to the design review panel is than that eventually submitted for planning approval”, suggesting that additional work is necessary in order “to get good vibes” from a design savvy panel.

“You’re asking for trouble if you don’t see design review as a very serious and important milestone, so we would always put a lot of resources into ensuring that the design is in the best possible place, going into a review”

The same goes for public realm schemes that, whilst not attracting a review fee, require extra work paid for by TfL and the client authority. Some developers see this as a time consuming and costly process, but most are happy to pay the additional costs as long as they get the outcome they desire. Others bemoaned the lack of predictability over preparation costs given the varying practices adopted by panels. As one commented: “it could be standardised across the board and we know we have to do it, and then we could incorporate the work at a very early stage when preparing the brief for the consultant. That way we wouldn’t see it as an additional cost”.

**Post-review costs:** Further costs are almost inevitably associated with the post-review period. These are inevitably inconsistent and depend on the nature of the scheme and how well the design was resolved before going into review.

The introduction of Building Information Modelling (BIM) across the development industry is leading to the production of more information increasingly early on in the development process with many specialists inputting simultaneously into the design of projects. One implication of this is that the cost of abortive work can be far higher, emphasising the need for early review. A designer well used to using BIM commented: “if the design review panels haven’t happened in the first six weeks/two months of a planning process, then the whole concept and narrative of the project is too far down the line”. Unless design review can react to the speed of design information production, the hidden costs of design review (and opposition to the very process) may rise.

“The planning process has not caught up with the speed of the way we’re working and it’s going to get worse”

There are three types of post-review cost that vary significantly from scheme to scheme:

- **Design costs:** associated with making changes to the design / development concept in order to address the concerns of a design review panel. These can be more or less substantial depending on how well the project fared during the review and how seriously the applicant takes the advice.

- **Development costs:** associated with any delays caused by a bad design review and the need to rethink a proposal in order to take it forward: “if they ask for something completely different, it will put you back two months”.

- **On-going dialogue costs:** both keeping the planners informed about how the design team is responding to the review and to ensure they are happy with that response, and the costs associated with any follow-up design review that may be required.
Costs to the public purse

The costs of design review to the public purse also vary significantly, depending on how it is delivered. Just like the cost to developers, the headline charges levied for design review are only part of the story:

Free to applicants: For panels that are free to applicants there is no ring-fenced funding coming in for design review and so all funding is seen as a cost. This cost relates largely to the time spent by officers organising and conducting design review. One panel manager from a Borough that offers free design review suggested: “If it was more explicitly staffed and maybe we charged for it, then we would have more resources, 1) to do it more often, and 2) to put more time and research in. For example, to see if there are other applications out there which should come in because we miss a lot at the pre-app stage”.

TfL offers a free service for public realm schemes, but this represents a benefit from one public sector organisation to others (the Boroughs), so arguably the costs are internalised within the public sector. It is also paid for in part through the Borough’s subscriptions to Urban Design London who manage the service. Boroughs certainly seem to appreciate the support. As one public realm project manager stated: “for us, as a free service, it’s amazing. Our urban designer takes his stuff to them for crit sessions, so he’s getting free advice, which is great. The only other way we could do that is by paying a consultant to advise us, so it’s a very cost-effective way to do things”. For these sorts of reviews, there also seems to be less of an emphasis on producing drawings specially for the review which represents a saving in preparation costs.

“We didn’t spend a lot of time putting the presentation together, so I just had someone in my team spend a day using the information we had already”

Paid for review: Many interviewees argued that for local authorities, design review should be self-financing, effectively allowing them to garner significant extra expert design advice for free. The exception to this was for schemes with a high social value (e.g. for affordable housing only schemes) where, it was felt, local authorities might wish to waive fees.

Even if panels are fully paid for by the applicant, there are still likely to be hidden costs for the public sector. As one case officer argued: “a lot of my time is spent on design review (preparing for it, attending, and dealing with the implications of its recommendations) which is not costed as part of that service”. Yet, as another commented: “design review is often the tip of the iceberg in work terms. A huge amount of work goes into pre-application advice on design”, and this would most likely be even greater if design review was not there to assist.

“Always get the developers to pay up front, so if they get a negative review, they don’t get the opportunity to renege on their commitment to pay”.

Funding design review (and more besides)

The staff time required to support a design review service varies significantly, from as little as three days a month to as much as three days a week. It was equally clear that the level of service was not always the same and, to a significant degree, you get what you pay for as is revealed in the levels of professionalism and general satisfaction with which a service is delivered and received. It was also clear that external panels are very adept at predicting and managing their costs, with the economic model adopted for each determining the time available to spend setting up and writing up reviews.
Typically design review fees are set either internally (within the local authority) or externally at the level required to support design review, and nothing else. But the manager of one in-house service confirmed that the funding raised through design review is being used to support additional in-house design capacity that otherwise would not be funded.

At least one external provider is actively exploring a new model with its local authority clients through which “the developer over pays”. This, they argue, “enables local authorities to put together a pot which they can then use for any other design services they want to buy from us, whether it’s capacity training, masterplanning, or a broader review of an area, they can choose any service they want”. Design review is clearly seen by some as an area with revenue-raising potential beyond that needed to deliver the reviews alone.

“From the developer’s perspective, it’s simply the cost of getting their planning permission”.

**Panellists pay and benefits**

Whilst there has been a general move across London towards paying members of design review panels, there are still panels for which design review is seen as a pro bono activity and panellists are not paid. The latter included at least one panel for which applicants pay a charge, via respective Planning Performance Agreements, for the design review service. This state of affairs divided opinion. Some felt that the non-financial benefits of being on a panel outweighed the financial costs. Others felt that not paying reflected a general attitude that persisted in some quarters that good design was a luxury and didn’t really matter.

“Would lawyers do this, or accountants, just give a whole afternoon for nothing and actually pay to go there? I thought ‘what an attitude, they just don’t appreciate what they’re getting’”.

Amongst those involved in reviewing and organising panels, there is a strong sense that for a very small (or no) cost, huge value is being delivered by London’s design review community. Even when paid, few panel members get what they could get given an equivalent amount of time spent at a full consultancy rate. Pay, when available, ranges from £200 to £400 per half a day, with an average of £300 across panels. Chairs generally get paid more, in the region of a third again to cover the extra work involved. In general, the fee includes any time on the panel and any preparation time, including the site visit, although one panel pays an additional supplement to panellists to visit the site and a separate small allowance for preparation time.

“The panel is paid, but it’s not a full consultancy rate, it’s slightly goodwill. You really wouldn’t make a living at it”

Some felt that “the pool of potential good people to serve on panels is not large and competition for them would inevitably push up rates”, but there was no sign of this happening. The latest panels to set up in London have had no shortage of high calibre applicants from which to choose.

**8.3 Value for money**

When asked about whether the costs of design review represented value for money, overwhelmingly interviewees felt they did, particularly if it led to a smoother and more streamlined route through the planning process.

“It’s a few grand, it’s not cheap, but in this case, it was good value for money because it got us through planning, it really did”
“You’re more likely to get a good scheme out of it, more likely to get through any approvals, or consents much easier, all for minimal outlay of time and expense”

**Adding value:** Developers were clear that design review needed to demonstrate that it was adding value in order to justify its continuing role, and this meant economic as well as social value. As one developer commented: “The process of design review is not cheap, not to mention the expense of preparing for the presentation, so it has to provide value for money by ‘adding value’, both for the community, but also for the applicant’s profitability. It should not just add cost or reduce viability. Otherwise it becomes a form of masochism”.

Design review can certainly sometimes work against maximising the development potential on sites, but even developers felt it was “a necessary evil to get planning permission in a timely manner”.

**Programme is really critical to us, so to spend a few thousand pounds on a design review panel to get the buy in and feedback is a really good thing. We don’t mind paying for things, in fact, we’d probably pay more, if we could get that process expedited”.

“Clients would kill me for saying it, but developers should be paying far more. I’m absolutely convinced that the best way to go is to have the planning officer supported by formalised, regular design review panels”.

Panel managers and members were (unsurprisingly) particularly supportive, arguing that: “When done well, design review is highly efficient, and it often saves time and money. The cost of the service is never more than a small proportion of the total development budget and is massively outweighed by the value it adds”; in effect ensuring that projects meet the public interest as well as the private one. As one long-serving manager of a panel confided: “No-one has ever, in all my roles, ever quibbled about the cost of a design review – it’s not a problem”.

**But a continuing blindness:** Despite this, there was a sense that the public sector remained to be convinced about the importance of design locally, and this lay behind the general unwillingness to pay for such services. As one interviewee suggested: “if the nation thinks that design reviews are valuable, it has to pay for it and if it doesn’t want to pay for it, that’s a commentary on its views about the importance of design”. Some argue that the insistence on delivering design review at no cost to councils is a reflection of this, others that the unwillingness of some authorities to pay panel members represented a continuing blindness to the value of design.

“I have been in meetings with very senior people in the council that really do not understand why you would pay people ... ‘if they do it for free, why start paying, they ask’”

“Something you don’t pay for doesn’t really have a value and I think it’s important that they pay for it because then people are much more attentive”.
8.4 The limitations of design review

“When people go in thinking that design review is going to have all the answers, I’m not sure, it’s just part of the process”

Whilst the range of positive impacts from design review are potentially clear and significant, as an approach to improving design quality it has its limitations. Foremost amongst these seem to be the potential for design review to undermine the development process if:

i) Panel members are poorly briefed
ii) Panels are too dogmatic and fail to consider reasonable contextual and viability limitations on projects
iii) Panels are poorly timed and managed and / or panel members are poorly selected.

Most also agreed there is a limit to what can be achieved through design review, and ultimately a judgement needs to be made about whether improved schemes are good enough. As one councillor admitted: “When residents still come up to me and say: ‘look at that monstrosity’, I somewhat facetiously say ‘you should have seen the earlier versions’”. Panels can’t force applicants to ditch their architect, and can’t change the aspirations of some developers, which may be fundamentally mismatched with the context. They can, however, challenge the best to do better and encourage others to do the best they can.

Without certain preconditions in place (see box below), design review is unlikely to be effective. As one case officer admitted: “sometimes they take on board what the panel has said and make changes and they get a better review second time around. Sometimes they don’t make any changes at all and they’ll just use the second review as a rebuttal and the scheme doesn’t move on”.

Some felt that the spread of design review at this moment in time was a reflection of wider trends in the public sector. Voicing this view, one interviewee argued: “This, essentially, is privatisation of the planning system by the back door and it’s being used to justify more austerity ... ‘we don’t need to appoint design officers, we’ll just bring in the review panel’”. Whether or not that is the case, certainly a report from design review can only ever represent a critique performed at a particular moment in time.

The success of design review is also dependent on:

- **The potential to deliver good design**: Ultimately good design in the built environment is dependent on the employment of a high quality design team by an enlightened developer / or a public sector client who sees their project as delivering lasting value for society
- **Positive engagement**: An applicant and design team willing to engage positively with the process and address the concerns of the panel
- **A steadfast public sector**: A public sector willing to deny the necessary permissions (or funding) unless and until the concerns of the panel have been addressed.
- **An on-going focus on design**: The continuation of the focus on delivering design quality even after the necessary regulatory hurdles have been crossed.
Even if a number of design reviews are conducted on a project, it can never replace the sort of on-going dialogue that it is possible to have with a permanent design advisor within a planning authority. In-house design advice and independent design review work most effectively together.

8.5 A positive assessment

Overwhelmingly those interviewed, from both sides, were positive about the purpose and value of design review, although to varying degrees.

“I see them as positive and a very, very good process, particularly as we’ve got such a massive shortage of design officers. I see it as a really positive thing”

“On balance, they’re a mild and gentle help to the whole system”.

Developers were the most sceptical about the process and one admitted: “it fills you with fear that you are going to go through that process”. All accepted that design was important, but some would prefer the certainty of a properly resourced and staffed design capacity within local authorities instead of reference to a design review panel. For others the different voices on a design review panel combined to give a more considered response to development propositions. All accepted that the process did improve design, albeit at a cost.

“Purely from a developer’s point of view, you want certainty and I’d much rather have a very strong urban design officer, saying ‘look, you need to do this, and we’ll support that at committee’”.

“From our side, we like design review panels because they tend to give you a slightly more rational response to what they’re seeing than perhaps the design officers within a local authority”.

Most recognised that design review had been on a journey: coming out of the days (pre-2011) when design review was a state-led, state funded, but also somewhat exceptional activity, into an environment in which the new market in design review services was making the activity both more widespread, but also more varied in its practices. Most felt that this journey had been a positive thing, and that the greater innovation in the sector and less paternalistic character of panels was to be welcomed.

“This new generation of panels, particularly the professionalised, paid for, tailored, borough or authority specific panels, is becoming a very good model, which I think has been much better received than the old style ‘let’s parachute in a bunch of experts’ who will pontificate and then they’ll clear off”.

All interviewees could criticise certain practices and some panels seemed to be consistently less well regarded than others. Perhaps because of this some interviewees pleaded: “At the very least there should be a consistent approach to design review across the London boroughs”.

Whether total consistency would undermine the innovation that the sector has been showing, or indeed is even possible, is unknown. What is clear is that there is no single panel or set of practices that can be pointed to as ‘the’ exemplar to which all others should look. Instead, as the sector develops, there is a need to be a little less secretive and a little better at sharing the experiences and practices of design review in London (as this report attempts to do). Ultimately this will benefit all the protagonists in the design review field, no matter whether consumers or suppliers of the service.
URBAN DESIGN LONDON (UDL)
DESIGN SURGERY

PROJECT
Narrow Way Hackney public realm scheme

LOCAL AUTHORITY
London Borough of Hackney

APPLICANT & DESIGN TEAM
Applicant and Designer: London Borough of Hackney

PANEL MANAGEMENT
Urban Design London managed design surgery

PROJECT BACKGROUND
Narrow Way is the retail heart of Hackney Central. It is widely used by the community and has a rich cultural and architectural identity. The planned improvements cover the full length of the Narrow Way, from the Graham Road / Mare Street junction in the south, to Clarence Road in the north.

The proposals sought to redevelop the existing street and public realm, making it more pedestrian friendly, and providing a new public square by the Grade I listed St Augustine’s Tower, the oldest building in Hackney. New landscaping was proposed with a focus on de-cluttering the area, provision of seating, cycle parking, and CCTV for improved safety.

THE DESIGN REVIEW JOURNEY
The scheme was reviewed twice in 2015. The original proposals were developed by a consultant working with the council, but at the first design review in February 2015 the panel felt that the initial concept was not appropriate for the site. They argued that it seemed to impose a new and over-dominant ‘scheme identity’ on the area rather than enhancing the existing historical and neighbourhood qualities. In addition, the materials and colour palette appeared to be overly complicated.

The panel’s recommendations included widening the improvement area to include the triangle of roads intersecting Narrow Way, thereby knitting all the junctions together using a consistent design approach. Informal segregation of pedestrians, drivers and cyclists was also suggested, with simplification of the paving design, and greater attention to lighting.

The initial proposals, criticised as overly complex, here at St Augustine’s Square towards the southern end of the scheme
Following the review, the council continued the development of the proposals in-house along the lines suggested by the panel. A second design surgery in April revisited the scheme. At this stage the new proposals prepared by the council were considered including a range of detailed options for the space on which feedback was given. At the conclusion of the second design surgery the panel were confident that the design concept was more in tune with the character of the area and was progressing in a positive direction.

OUTCOMES FROM THE DESIGN SURGERIES

The value of the design surgeries were initially in highlighting the need for a completely new approach to the scheme, with a stronger reference to the historical and cultural assets of the area. This eventually led to a more subtle series of interventions that enhanced the public realm and provided new community spaces for this important area in central Hackney.

In this case the process of design review was important as it gave the Council the confidence to think again about the original proposals which, whilst innovative, were ultimately overly complex and inappropriate in the given context. The panel provided a role as a vital sounding board at key points in the scheme development and at each stage the council continued to develop the scheme based on suggestions from the panel.

The successful second review and follow up also led to TfL funding being released for the proposals. The council designers further simplified the palette of materials and colours, and finalised a scheme that was then implemented, commencing on site in 2016.
9. **THE RESEARCH**

9.1 **The research methodology**

The research was conducted over a ten-month period from March to December 2017. The aim was to explore the new landscape for design review in London, its practices and impacts and the perceptions held by service providers and users. The methodology was qualitative incorporating interviews with 40 key individuals across six main categories:

i) Design review service providers
ii) Local planning authority officers and councillors
iii) Panel chairs and other design review panellists
iv) Highways authority project officers
v) Applicants for planning permission (developers)
vi) Architects and other designers (working for applicants)

The research examined the practices of twelve design review panels across London encompassing seven boroughs, one development corporation, a utilities provider, the Greater London Authority (GLA) London-wide panel (formally the Mayor’s Design Advisory Group), and the panels of Urban Design London / Transport for London (TfL) focusing on public realm schemes. The practices of a number of other panels were discussed in less detail as many interviewees had experienced a range of panels.

12 projects that had been reviewed between January 2014 and December 2015 were chosen across eight of these panels. For each the experience of passing through the design review process was traced with the different parties that had been involved in the process. Projects were chosen by the research team from data provided by the various panel managers covering the range of schemes that had passed through the various panels during the period. Inevitably this data, and the research, had a bias towards the predominant types of project that were being reviewed at the time, notably residential schemes and public realm projects. Panel Managers were consulted on the final choice to ensure that the chosen projects were reflective of the typical sorts of projects seen by each panel.

Documentation was gathered, as far as possible, on each scheme and its journey through the design review process was traced. Semi-structured interviews were conducted (one for the first three groups listed above and a second for the last three). Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were transcribed before a comparative analysis was conducted against the framework used to structure the interviews. The resulting analysis was written up into this report.

9.2 **Some research challenges**

The research proved difficult to conduct primarily for three reasons:

i) **Poor record keeping:** The poor record keeping practices of some panels represented a barrier to conducting the research as the records held on past reviews were often remarkably sparse or absent. In such cases information was gathered online and directly from design teams and applicants. Given that this is a formal process that feeds into other regulatory responsibilities (highways and planning), this oversight is remiss. It also makes it difficult for panels to systematically assess the impact their work is having on design quality.

ii) **Secretive practices:** Some panels seem unduly secretive about their work. This extends beyond the management of panels to the local planning authorities for whom design review is often ultimately being conducted. In a context where some of London’s large residential projects are proving controversial, many councils seem reluctant to expose their processes to scrutiny. For example, it was often not clear who was responsible for giving permission to conduct research on design review: the panel managers (who run the panel), the Borough (who commissions it), or the applicants (who pay for it). This complexity means it is all too easy to hide from the public gaze.

iii) **Unwillingness to engage:** Some applicants and design teams who had had a difficult time in...
design review were, perhaps understandably, reluctant to revisit such episodes. Whilst, given enough time, it was generally possible to persuade reluctant parties to take part, like the other research challenges, this meant that the research programme was significantly longer and more complex than had been envisaged.

9.3 A final conclusion – the need to be transparent and accessible

The research challenges reflect a larger reality. As design review has evolved in recent years, it has moved away from some of the founding principles that since the days of ‘statutory’ CABE have been laid down to govern its practices and which the Mayor has reinforced in the Design Review Charter. These are currently summarised in the ten principles of design review encompassed in Design Review, Principles and Practice⁴. This states that design review should be: independent, expert, multi-disciplinary, accountable, transparent, proportionate, timely, advisory, objective and accessible.

Whilst the research confirmed that eight of these principles are routinely being delivered by panels (or it is the aspiration to do so), on two of them there is little or no attempt to comply. This is because the large majority of panels are patently not ‘transparent’ or ‘accessible’ by any standard that would be recognised as acceptable to meet the 7 Nolan Principles on Public Life⁵. Regardless of the sensitivities that are often attributed to the conduct of design review at the pre-application stage of the planning process, if design review is to be seen to be conducted in the public interest, then this is something that needs to be rectified.

4 https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/DC%20Cabe%20Design%20Review%202013_W_0.pdf
Place Alliance campaigns for place quality. It is founded on the idea that through better collaboration and knowledge we can establish a culture whereby the quality of place becomes an everyday national and local priority. Place Alliance is open to all and brings together organisations and individuals who share the belief that the quality of our built environment has a profound influence on people’s lives.

The success of Place Alliance depends on the support of its supporters and volunteers. We welcome all organisations and local groups as well as individuals, town and parish councils, local authorities and businesses as supporters of Place Alliance.

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Become a Core Supporter, join an existing Working Group, or suggest another group or initiative by emailing your ideas to us.
Just complete the Supporter Form online at http://bit.ly/JoinPlaceAlliance
You can sign up to receive our Newsletter, info on our Working Groups and more!

Donate
Place Alliance is an independent not-for-profit movement. We operate on a tight budget and rely on sponsorship and the generosity of our supporters.
For those who wish to make a donation to help grow Place Alliance network visit our website or Donate Now at http://bitly.com/PlaceAlliance-donate

Volunteer
If you want to help Place Alliance email us at placealliance@ucl.ac.uk
There is plenty going on – from managing our supporters list and organising meetings and events, to keeping the website up to date and researching for new initiatives.

Follow Us
Join our social networks including Twitter @PlaceAllianceUK, Facebook, LinkedIn and explore our website at www.placealliance.org