

# UDL Design Review Seminar Note

11<sup>th</sup> September 2019

This session looked at how Design Review works from the development team perspective. It discussed how practice might be improved to ensure reviews worked as best they can for all. This note does not attribute any comment or idea to any individual or organisation. To the best of our ability we have recorded ideas shared by speakers and audience at the event

---

## **From the Development Teams Perspective**

Developers and applicants will consider the set up and quality of individual panels and tailor their approach accordingly. For example they may think a panel will be listened to as the chair of the planning committee has regular contact with the panel chair, while another panel may appear to be ignored by the authority it serves. The development team may take more notice of what the first panel says than the second.

Panels should understand that they are part of a powerful and expensive process and the development team will want consistent advice. Development teams will prepare well for a review. They may ask 'who is on the panel?' research what each panel member is likely to be looking for, and tailor their presentation accordingly.

For the development team the review will be one of many meetings and events in the developments' time-line. They will be seeing it as such while the panel may think they are the only ones influencing the proposal.

Some development teams may question the whole premise of reviews as see them as old fashioned and adversarial, asking is it really possible for a panel to sum up their comments on a large scheme within 20-30 mins (normal practice).

The first panel session is the most important. It is better for the development team (and everyone else) to say clearly that a scheme is a non-starter at this point than try to be kind and give non-committal responses. Sometimes obvious things are not said and if the first session does not go well further reviews can feel like falling down a rabbit hole, looking at more and more detail when the fundamentals are still not agreed.

It can be hard for development teams to pull back from a poor scheme if it seems to get lukewarm support at the first session. They may keep spending time and money on it making it harder and harder to step away from it. How do they tell their board they have spent the budget but now need to start again?

Panels have power and should recognise and respect this by offering pragmatic and informed thoughts. For example the development team might think that if they get a positive note from the panel it will help them when talking to stakeholders – saying 'the Design Review Panel liked this'. Panels should focus on where they can have most effect and understand commercial reality. Understanding how their thoughts will be taken forward will help them achieve this. Development teams are looking for panels to provide nuance and judgment as to how design and other relevant planning policies should be applied for a particular scheme. Sometimes there is little time or money to change a scheme, or little room for negotiation because policies are weak.

Although the panel, panel manager and local authority might appreciate a beautifully crafted review note, the design team is more like to dissect it and pull out a list of actions they need to complete to

get to the next application stage successfully. If the note is not specific the panel will have less impact, making it hard to explain what is needed and get agreement for changes within the wider development team.

The attitude of the development team is important to the usefulness of the review. Some may be trying to get a poor scheme through; others may not be open to comments and act defensively. Reviews work best when presenters listen, think and respond positively to panel considerations.

For some, success is when the panel, development team and council all think of the scheme as 'theirs' - feeling they have influenced and feeling proud of it. It is felt DR helps nurture response to innovation and helps to navigate difficult issues, giving design team time to step back and reflect.

### **Procurement, setting up panels and panel management**

When deciding to have a review panel, or updating/altering one it was suggested that we should ask - why we are doing this? that is, go back to basics rather than simply accept that Design Review is the best way/use of time and resources to support design quality? It was felt that many do this, hence there being a variety of types of reviews, which can be connected to community panels, workshops and other design quality tools.

To work well, panels need a good balance of technical expertise and local knowledge. Panels should include different professional skills, but also various outlooks and experiences, reflecting wider society. The panel will require different skills for different parts of the design process and scheme types, adapting session formats as required.

Different ways of providing Design review services may effect how they work. For example external providers may be able to develop particular relationships and influence the authority they support than internal panel management staff.

### **Panel members and session management**

Pragmatism often influences the way individual sessions are set up. For example sometimes it is just who is available, not if their specific skills relate to the scheme that determines who reviews a scheme. Panel managers need to consider if this is good enough and does justice to the process.

Although there will be greater choice if you have bigger pool of people, in such cases it can be difficult to ensure all individuals get an opportunity to attend panels. It can be helpful to have local knowledge and general background of area, but also valuable to have fresh eyes without local connections.

It was difficult to define an optimum number of panel members, this could be 4 plus chair max, or no less than 3, but would depend on the size and complexity of the scheme being reviewed.

It was acknowledged the difficulty of comparing reviewing towers to suburban developments and the need to reflect the different skills required within any panel.

It was also noted that public realm schemes do not tend to go to local authority panels, although UDL does review highway schemes for boroughs and TfL.

The use of panels to support the development of policy and guidance was touched on. For example, the Harlow and Gildstone Garden settlement project in Essex/Hertfordshire reviewed policy before seeing individual schemes so fully understood the policies and could form part of the process of ensuring they are appropriately applied.

Development teams should understand that the panel is 'thinking aloud in public' which is not an easy thing to do and requires care and courage and those responding to their words should bear this in mind. Panel members should speak with honesty, openness and integrity. The practice of design teams being 'sent out of the room during panel process' gives panel members some private time to consider their thoughts and is used by some panels. But many consider it to be stressful and unproductive.

All participants need to have empathy for others involved in the reviews, including panel members, the development team and the local authority. Thinking about others points of view, objectives and constraints should lead to pragmatic and realistic comments.

Although described as a small % of overall scheme costs, reviews do cost a significant amount of money and panel managers should think about ensuring follow on sessions are affordable, for example using chair only reviews to look at details and loose ends.

### **Ensuring Design Reviews have influence**

It is important to ensure planning decision makers (generally councillors) understand what Design Review is, how it works and the help panels can provide. Some have suggested that review outcomes should be included in all planning committee reports.

Design review is one of many processes within our planning system. It should sit alongside community engagement and should not replace this; combining both into one process may be problematic.

A question was asked about who is responsible for flushing out bad design – with the suggestion that a panel say some things officers cannot and as such can have significant influence.

A basic but essential requirement to having impact is ensure panel advice, and information about what version of the scheme this relates to, is sent to all relevant people.

### **Monitoring**

It can be difficult to get feedback from applicants following a review; it is hard to know as a reviewer if you had any influence on the scheme if you don't see it again or have a process of monitoring changes.

However some panel managers do provide annual reports on what their panel has seen and the impact it has had and Epping and Croydon hold an annual meeting of panel members. They also survey both development teams and panel members to collect ideas on best/worse practice and ideas for improvements. These reports are rarely shared across the Design Review community.

Unless changes to a scheme are captured in a consistent manner, no one knows if the review/s made a difference.

Without a good understanding of impact, and feedback on the experiences of those involved, it will be hard for Design Review to evolve and respond to emerging challenges.

To help, Cambridgeshire has recently set up a new system called HUDDLE to provide access to previous reviews including scheme information and letters. UDL is preparing a proposal for information sharing, monitoring and support for London panels and plan to share this with our networks later this year.

### **The Future**

We discussed the following:

- With the greater emphasis put on design scrutiny in the emerging London Plan, and the particular role it places on Design Review, will there be capacity to meet review demand? For example, will there be enough planning officers to manage reviews or people to sit on panels?
- Do we need a Design Review Award help to highlight good practice? There were suggestions that RIBA and or RTPI could organise this, or in London the Mayors Planning awards could include a category based on how well panels adhere to the GLAs quality review Charter and best practice note.
- No records are kept on costs and how much is being spent on DR in London every year; would record keeping of changes and costs assist in providing evidence of the value of Design Review?