

Note: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the [PAS website](#).

Epping Forest District Council – Quality Review Panel

Summary  	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve quality of new schemes – particularly within the context of strategic growth agenda • Ensure decisions are in line with national policy and guidance
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Quality Review Panel • Create guidance and policy to support its implementation • Employ staff to project manage the Panel
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated urban design advice for applications of a certain type / size • Generates income to support a better service overall
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusses on design but could be used in other areas • Internal and external resource models exist • Outsourced models require some internal management of the panel • Early engagement is key – these schemes will generate ‘push-back’ from some applicants

Introduction

Epping Forest District Council is planning for significant growth, particularly as part of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, but also with several large strategic masterplans coming forward as allocated in the emerging local plan. Due to the scale of growth across the district, it is a priority for the council to ensure that the design and delivery of these key developments is of the highest quality. High quality design has therefore been given renewed attention and resources.

Additional technical resource is needed to help drive forward a strong design agenda, underpinned by the creation of ‘Quality Review Panel’ for larger or contentious schemes, and for

the proposed development within Harlow and Gilston Garden Town.

What they did

Prior to the new approach, there was of course ‘standard’ consideration of proposals against design policies through the normal planning process, but there was no specific process set up for a design review. So the council invested in bolstering its design expertise by appointing an Urban Design Officer, who was an associate from “Public Practice” – a social enterprise ‘job matching’ company.

The creation of the Quality Review Panel is in line with national policy and guidance. Design reviews are also supported as good practice by the Design Council and professional

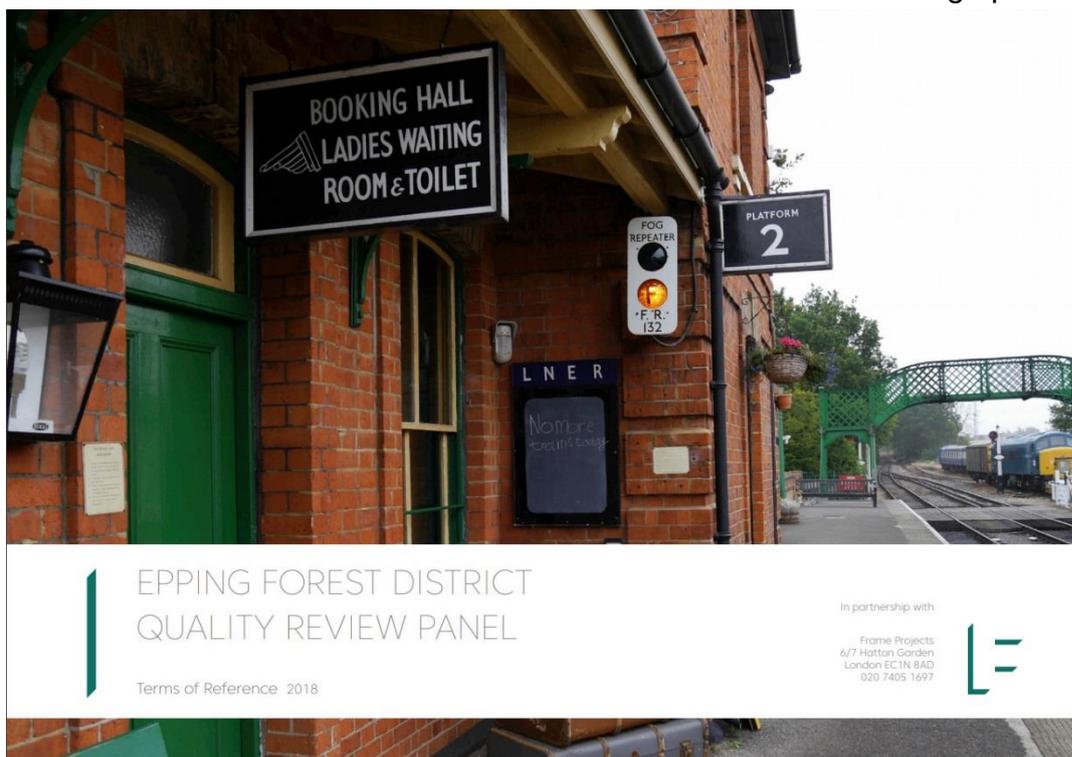
bodies such as the RTPI, Landscape Institute and RIBA. When establishing the panel, the Council evaluated existing good practice guidance in the form of CABE's 2013 'Design Review' guidance note as well as a range of local authority-based design review services to assess their governance arrangements, funding provision, and terms of reference.

The Council commissioned Frame Projects (a design-focused consultancy) to assemble and manage the panel. Consideration was given to setting up an in-house managed panel (like LB Hackney and LB Croydon), but resource requirements and access to in-house expertise made an external arrangement the most effective route. Frame Projects' design panel review is paid for directly by clients. It has a roster of 18 built environment experts across a range of disciplines including

master planning, sustainability, architecture, transport and landscape.

The Quality Review Panel has an advisory rather than decision making role. It reviews the scheme and provides advice for both the applicant and case officer on how the scheme (or any conditions that might be considered) should be changed. Importantly, the objective is not for the panel to make a recommendation and then for the applicant to automatically change the scheme in line with this. Rather, the objective is for discussions between the planning officer and the applicant to continue with the advice of the panel in mind. This recognises the often-subjective nature of design advice.

It is obviously more beneficial for schemes to go to the panel at pre-application stage so that the recommendations and comments from the panel can influence the scheme earlier on in the design process.



The panel set-up is formalised by standard terms of reference which set out the different types of review session, the costs, the process, panel members and their expertise. The Panel produces a report with 10 working days following the panel session. This is signed off by the chair of the panel and can be used as a material consideration in the planning application decision. The fee for the first formal design review costs up to £6,600. Repeat reviews of the same scheme come at a reduced cost, and there are also options for a chair of the panel review and a surgery review (the latter is the cheapest option, at £1,560). These other review services are often recommended to provide further advice and the scale of the review broadly corresponds to the scale of the scheme.

The emerging Epping Forest District Council Local Plan has strong design policies which include policies specifically relating to the Quality Review to ensure its effectiveness and to create 'triggers' for its use for: (a) contentious sites, (b) sites of 50 or more residential units, or (c) 5,000 sqm of over of floorspace. This is felt to be important in creating consistency across applications and schemes. A planning officer will identify when a review is necessary and an officer acts as the point of contact with the Panel Managers. Integrating the role of the panel into the work of the wider planning department is also crucial to its success. To support this the team are producing an internal protocol note, and have undertaken officer training, to help manage the process internally and raise awareness of the Panel and what it can be used for.

Results and Learning

The Quality Review Panel is a relatively new process within Epping

Forest District Council and is still being improved and developed. There are of course challenges; it takes investment – even outsourcing the project management required some internal management of the panel.

The introduction of a formal design review service can also generate push back from some applicants. To counter this, the Council found that early engagement is key, allowing quality and design issues to be ironed out with key officers, avoiding having to alter designs and / or re-consult at application stage, and so avoid the abortive work and costs associated with this. The Council have used developer forums to keep applicants up to speed with the process of the Quality Review Panel, and to encourage this early engagement