

Newham Design Review Panel 2010 Annual Report

Background

The Newham Design Review Panel (DRP) was set up in October 2007 to help improve the quality of design through the borough's planning process.

Newham DRP is an external advisory panel that reviews major applications and pre-application plans and provides design advice to Newham's Council Land Panel and Development Control Committee. The panel cannot make decisions on planning applications, but advises those that do – Newham Members and development control officers. The panel members have been appointed by Newham Council, and the panel exists to serve Newham Council, but it will offer independent design advice.

The panel meets monthly and reviews between 1 to 5 development proposals per meeting. Each meeting comprises the chair and a group of 6 independent experts in the field of built environment and design, invited from a pool of 30 professionals who were appointed following a selection process. A list of the current panel members can be found in **Appendix A**. Planning officers and representatives of external agencies including Design for London and the LTGDC may be invited to attend as observers.

The Panel evaluates developments boroughwide, excluding Olympic applications and Stratford City, which have their own design panels. With particular focus on Canning Town, the Royal Docks, the Lower Lea Valley and the rest of Stratford, the panel largely reviews designs at the planning applications and pre-application stage for major schemes within the borough. In 2009, the remit of the panel was expanded and it now also reviews other design projects, such as design guidance documents and public realm strategies, not just planning proposals or masterplans.

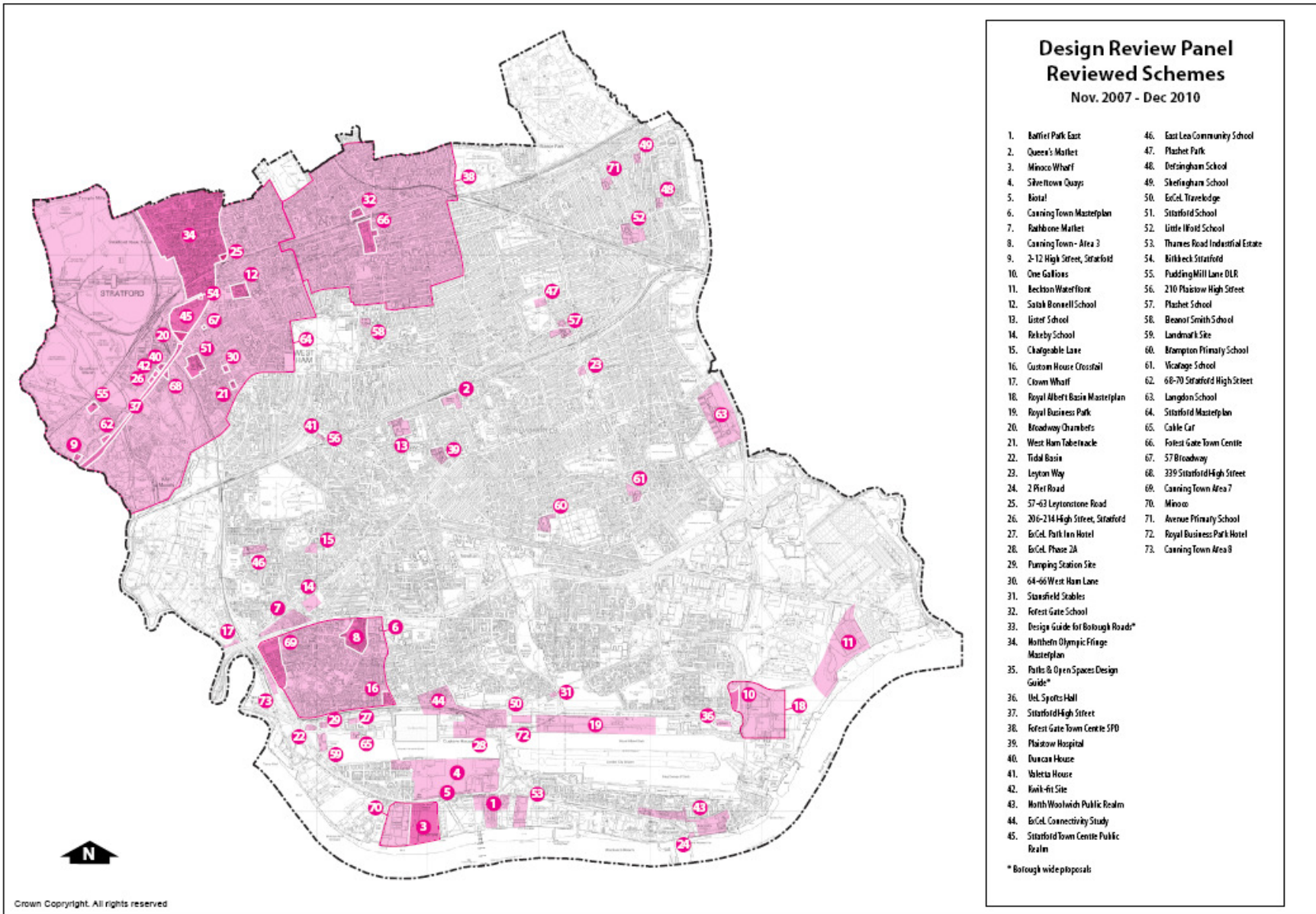
In the majority of cases the panel is commenting on pre-application proposals and thus, the reports issued are confidential. The reports are circulated to the developer and design team, who is encouraged to address the panel's views when developing the designs to the next stage. In the case of schemes which are already submitted as a planning application, the panel's report becomes a public document and is included in the application file.

Reviewed schemes

Since formation, the panel has held monthly meetings, with the exception of August in 2008 and 2009. Occasionally extra meetings are held in order to accommodate all the schemes that need to be brought to the panel. In 2010, 17 meetings were held - more than either of the previous two years. Not only was an August meeting held, but also special meetings were called in March, May, July, November and December.

In these meetings, the panel has reviewed 76 schemes in total predominantly at pre-application stage. Please refer to **Figure 1** for the location of these schemes. Of the reviewed proposals, 27 have been brought back to the panel for a second review, 2 have been brought back for a third review, and 1 has been brought back for a fourth review. Details on the schemes reviewed and the summary of the panel's advice is shown in **Appendix B**.

Figure 1



In 2010, the panel held 63 reviews, of which 34 were first reviews and 29 were follow up reviews. There were 29 new schemes reviewed, of which, 10 were development proposals, 6 were masterplans, 10 were schools and 3 were transportation projects.

Following each meeting a report is written by the Chair, circulated in draft to the attending panel members for their comments and then sent to Newham to circulate to the developer and their design teams. Newham's planning officers then ensure that any criticism of a reviewed scheme is addressed by developers and their architects and, where appropriate, scheme redesigns can be taken back to the DRP. The full reports from each of the panel meetings in 2010 can be found in **Appendix C**.

Overall progress

The panel has previously been reviewed after each year of operations and after the original six months. In all these reviews, it was concluded that the panel was achieving its objectives for the following reasons.

- In many cases, the reviews led the developers and their architects to improve the scheme's design.
- The panel has played a key role in raising design standards on major schemes, which has positively impacted the borough's ambitious regeneration agenda.
- The panel has generated extensive external interest. The panel was highlighted as a case study in various publications and reports on the benefits of design review panels, including CABE's design review best practice guide. In addition, officers from other local authorities and other public bodies have attended meetings in an observer capacity.
- The panel has proved a valuable asset to Newham's Planning staff. Development Control officers have found design reports helpful to secure changes in their negotiations with developers. Furthermore, staff have been encouraged to attend the panel meetings as a useful design training exercise.

The panel is still felt to be a positive contribution to the workings of the council. For major schemes, the DRP has become integral to the council's planning process and its remit has successfully expanded to review other council design projects and documents. The panel has also continued to bring positive publicity to Newham's planning service.

Yearly operational progress - 2010

Operationally, it is felt that the panel is still working well under the guidance of the chair, Peter Ahrends and through the organisation of the Design Review Panel Coordinator.

Although, in general, it is felt that the panel is working well, several concerns or issues were raised through the feedback from both the 2009 Annual Report and the 2010 Annual Review Gathering for panel members.

To address these concerns, a Design Review Panel Action Plan 2010 was developed. The action plan is included in **Appendix D**. Some of the changes that have been brought about by the action plan include:

- The chair of the panel now serves as a design advisor to the Development Control Strategic Committee in order to answer design questions and comment on the panel's views of schemes coming forward.
- The webpage of the Design Review Panel has been updated, to include member biographies
- Yearly regeneration information sessions are being held for panel members.
- More information is now sent to presenters prior to the meeting.

Following feedback from presenters (see section below), as well as the 2011 Annual Review Gathering, it is expected that there will be further improvements to the panel's operations.

Feedback

As part of the annual review of the panel, in February 2011, a feedback survey was sent to all architects, developers, clients and agents who had schemes presented to the panel. A copy of the survey is included in **Appendix E**.

In total, 56 questionnaires were sent out and we received 9 responses. Although a low response rate, this is similar to previous years.

Following the surveys, follow-up phone interviews were conducted on a random sampling of the respondents. During the phone interviews, respondents were asked to elaborate on any low scores given on the survey and to discuss ways in which the panel could improve.

Most of the responses were positive, with a few even commending the use of the panel in the planning process. This positive response can be seen in a new question this year, "Do you feel your scheme has improved as a result of the Design Review Panel", where 8 out of the 9 respondents felt that their scheme had improved.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate various aspects of the review format and procedure. The results of these questions, as well as the scores from the 2009 and 2008 feedback survey are summarized in **Figure 2**. In most areas, scores from this year are similar to those of the previous years. It should be noted, however, that due to the small number of respondents, all the scores were brought down by negative responses given by one individual, who did not appreciate the panel's involvement at all.

The questionnaire also asked more open ended questions and offered an opportunity to add any additional comments. Concerns that were raised in both this section and the phone interviews, as well as any actions that will be undertaken to address the comments are detailed in **Figure 3**.

Figure 2

Questions used the following ranking system: <i>1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent</i>	Average Score	2009 Average Score	2008 Average Score
Information sent prior to the meeting	3.7	3.8	3.6
Communication w/ Newham prior to the meeting	4.1	3.8	4
Notice for premeeting information submission	3.7	3.9	3.8
Presentation facilities	4.3	4.0	3
Format of the review	3.6	4.0	3.4
Usefulness of the discussion with the panel	3.4		
Usefulness of the panel's report	3.6	3.8	4
Communication w/ Newham following the meeting	4	4.1	3.7

Figure 3

Concern raised	Action taken
There needs to be more consistency of panel comments from the first review to any subsequent reviews.	Consistency between subsequent reviews is considered fundamental to the structure of Newham's Design Review Panel. For this reason, only members who attended the first review are able to attend subsequent reviews. In addition, the previous final reports are issued prior to any follow up reviews, with panel members often referring to previous reports throughout the process. It is thus felt that a significant level of consistency is being achieved.
The panel needs to have more of a focus on the end user and specific community needs.	Local community needs should be included in the officer's briefing note provided to panel members. In addition, the applicant is able to highlight the needs of the end user in both their premeeting information and their presentation. The panel will consider it as part of the wider proposal.
Schemes should not be brought to the panel when it is at application stage.	The council disagrees with this position. Often application stage is the only time when a scheme can be brought. In addition, applicants sometimes submit without fully addressing all the panel's concerns from a previous review. In this situation, it is felt that the panel should be given another opportunity to review the proposal.
More synergy is required between the DRP and all Newham officers - planning, highways, etc.	The Design Review Panel is an independent body from the council and is meant to express its views freely. However the DRP should still be made aware of council positions. The template for the officers briefing note is presently being reviewed to ensure that thoughts and concerns previously raised by the council are made known to the panel members.
Longer reviews for larger projects.	This is possible and has been accommodated on several occasions. More work should be done to ensure this occurs for the appropriate schemes in the future.
The DRP should accommodate other presentation methods and not solely a formal presentation.	This is possible and the council is able to be flexible, with discussion and planning. It is expected that the method of presentation is up to the presenter. However the developer briefing should be reviewed to reflect this position. In addition, the method of presentation will now be discussed with the DRP coordinator prior to the meeting.
The report did not reflect all the comments raised during the discussion.	Following the meeting, the report is written by the chair and commented on by all panel members that were present. While the final report might not replicate all of the discussion that takes place, it is felt to be an accurate reflection of the panel's views on a proposal.

<p>The design team and/or developer should be able to attend the panel members' site visit.</p>	<p>This possibility has been discussed, however it is felt that a site visit with the developer and/or the design team present would not allow the panel members to discuss freely and speak openly about the site and area.</p>
<p>The panel members should better reflect the type of proposal that is being reviewed.</p>	<p>In general, we feel that the variety of experience reflected in the panel is sufficient to review all design proposals. Considering both that multiple schemes are reviewed in a given day and that meeting attendance is organized in advance of when schemes are confirmed, the council feels that it is not feasible or even desirable, to tailor panel members to every single review.</p>
<p>A smaller review panel could be more efficient.</p>	<p>The current term for panel members will expire in October 2011. Newham is presently reviewing options for renewal/application of new members. As part of this review the number of panel members requested at each meeting will also be reviewed.</p>
<p>There should be panel members with a background in economic assessment, engineering or construction.</p>	<p>The current term for panel members will expire in October 2011. Newham is presently reviewing options for renewal/application of new members. As part of this review and through the application process, the backgrounds of panel members will also be considered. However it is to be remembered that this is a <i>design</i> review panel.</p>
<p>The format of the DRP is too open ended and it operates without sufficient attention to the financial, political or regeneration context of the scheme.</p>	<p>The purpose of the Design Review Panel is to focus on the design of the scheme. Obviously the design of a proposal is often the direct result of economic or political issues and panel members will be briefed on such situations by both council officers and the applicant's team; however their main concern is still the quality of the architectural and urban design that is being proposed.</p>
<p>There needs to be a stronger structure to the DRP process, for instance meetings could be distinguished as 'briefing meetings', 'design reviews', and 'sign off meetings'. Each meeting would have a tighter agenda and have key questions outlined in advance.</p>	<p>While this formal approach is often pursued by planning officers, it is felt to be inappropriate for the Design Review Panel. As independent advisors to the council, the panel is meant to freely comment on proposals and not be bounded by a rigid structure. In addition, as a panel with no statutory authority, they will not "sign off" a proposal.</p>
<p>A representative from Newham should sit on the DRP to help with continuity and balance.</p>	<p>The council disagrees with this suggestion. The Design Review Panel is meant to be independent from council views and needs to remain so, in order to provide impartial, professional advice.</p>

Issues Arising

Although the panel is deemed successful, its operations have highlighted a number of issues worthy of consideration:

- The current term for panel members will expire in October 2011. The panel's terms of reference state that panel members serve for two years, with the possibility to renew membership. At the end of this term, the council wishes to attract new expertise to the panel, while still maintaining a level of consistency from the existing panel. Thus, this year's selection of members will include new applications in addition to opportunities for renewal. Information on the renewal/application procedure will be disseminated to panel members in late summer.
- Due to some concerns raised from the feedback survey, the template for the officers' briefing needs to be reviewed. Changes should include:
 - A better description of the council's views on a proposal
 - An indication of the current stage of the proposal (preapplication, application, etc)
 - More information on the regeneration or known community aspirations of an area
- Due to the difficult financial situation of the public sector, Newham's finance team is now more stringent on the invoices they will accept. Panel members should now invoice the council within six months of serving at a meeting and ideally within the same financial year.

Conclusions

It is believed that the Design Review Panel has raised the quality of design in development proposals. Over the past few years, the panel has become effectively embedded as part of the planning application process and it has helped achieve significant design improvements to some schemes. It has also helped bring positive attention to Newham. However, further improvements can be undertaken to help ensure the panel achieves significant results on more schemes.