

Newham Design Review Panel

Report after two years of operation – February 2010

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 4 development proposals. 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 are 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 addition, in 2009, it was decided that the panel should expand their remit and review other design projects, not just planning proposals or masterplans. Thus, over the past year the design review panel has also reviewed various design guidance documents and public realm strategies.

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, 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 of each year. Additionally, extra meetings were held in February 2008, June 2008, May 2009, and September 2009 in order to accommodate second reviews and the February 2009 meeting had to be cancelled due to a lack of schemes to be brought forward at that time.

In these meetings, the panel has reviewed 48 schemes predominantly at pre-application stage. Please refer to **Figure 1** for the location of these schemes. Of the reviewed proposals, 18 have been brought back to the panel for a second review and 2 have been brought back for a third review. Details on the schemes reviewed and the summary of the panel's advice is shown in **Appendix B**.

In 2009, the panel reviewed 31 projects, of which 21 were first reviews and 10 were follow up reviews. Following last year's annual report, it was decided that the panel should expand

their remit and review other design projects, not just planning proposals or masterplans. Thus, in 2009, of the 21 newly reviewed schemes, 3 were design guidance documents and 3 were public realm 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 can be found in **Appendix C**.

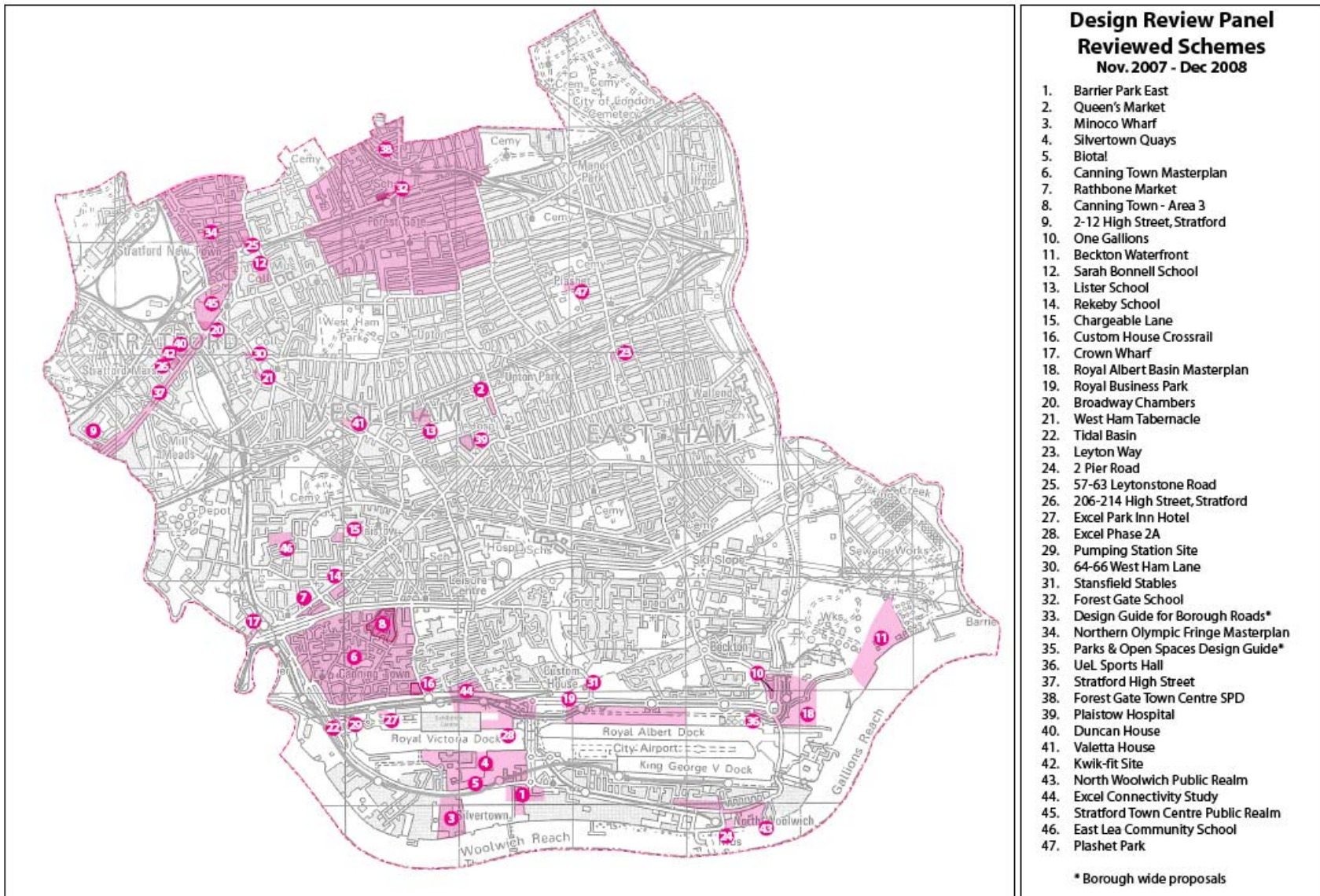
Progress over 2 years

The panel was previously reviewed after both six months and one year of operations. In both instances, 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. A number of important and high profile proposals have undergone significant, if not radical design change. Due to such, 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 also 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 has generated extensive external interest. Design officers from other local authorities have attended meetings in an observer capacity. Additionally, Newham's panel was highlighted as a case study in various publications and reports on the benefits of design review panels, including CABE's recent design review best practice guide.

After two years of operations, 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.

Figure 1



JC/GST/01/10

Operational Review

Panel's operations

Operationally, the panel is working well under the guidance of the Chair, Peter Ahrends. During the meetings, the panel members have reached agreement on the major design issues present in the proposals. The reports have thus been able to provide clear and effective guidance to developers and architects.

During the two years of the DRP's operations, several changes were made to improve the functioning of the panel, including, but not limited to:

- appointing a dedicated panel coordinator
- formalising the site visits
- allowing for longer reviews
- streamlining the distribution of pre-meeting information

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

Panel membership

Under the panel's original formation, panel members were appointed for two year terms, with the possibility to renew their membership for an additional term. At the end of October 2009, the two year term ended. Out of the original 33 members, 30 renewed their membership. Due to the large percentage of renewals, it was felt that no new panel members needed to be appointed. As part of the renewal procedure, the Borough Planning Officer reviewed the panel members' remuneration and approved a pay increase of 5% to be effective in November 2009.

Panel's remit

Following previous reviews of the panel, it was decided that the panel should expand their remit and review other design projects, not just planning proposals. Thus, over the past year the panel has reviewed other projects from other council services, including 3 design guidance documents and 3 public realm projects.

In addition, previously it was determined that there was a possibility to set up sub panels of the DRP that would focus on large individual projects which would need to come before the panel several times. A subpanel has already been set up to review the Royal Albert Basin Masterplan and there is a possibility that one would be set up to cover the wider Royal Docks framework.

Feedback

As part of the annual review of the panel, in January 2010, 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 D**.

In total, 31 questionnaires were sent out and we received 9 responses (4 architects, 4 clients and 1 agent). This is an improved response rate from the previous year, however last year we did not survey both clients or agents.

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.

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 2008 feedback survey are summarized in **Figure 2**. In most areas, there is an improvement from the previous year, with the exception of “communication with Newham prior to the meeting” and “usefulness of the panel’s report”. It should be noted that due to the small number of respondents, the “usefulness of the panel’s report” question was brought down by one negative score.

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: 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent	Average Score	2008 Average score
Information sent prior to the meeting	3.9	3.6
Communication w/ Newham prior to the meeting	3.8	4.0
Notice for premeeting information submission	3.9	3.8
Presentation facilities	3.9	3.0
Format of the review	4.0	3.4
Usefulness of the panel's report	3.8	4.0
Communication w/ Newham following the meeting	4.1	3.7

Figure 3

Concern raised	Action taken
The project should have been brought to the panel earlier for the panel to have had a more involved engagement.	The council agrees that schemes should be presented at an early stage in order for the panel to be most effective. Schemes are now brought to the panel as soon as Newham's planning service is made aware of the proposals.
The meeting went on too long	Every effort is made to keep to the proposed agenda for the meeting.
The biographies of the panel members should be made available prior to the meeting	A way to provide this is presently under review. It may be possible to include biographies on the council's Design Review Panel webpage, similar to CABE's webpage.
A list of all meeting attendees, including council officers should be provided.	Beginning with the March 2009 meeting, a list of meeting attendees will be provided to all presenting teams.
Better information should be provided regarding the technology to be used at the meeting.	Prior to a DRP meeting, the design teams should be notified of the available technology. They are also welcome to bring their own equipment, however we cannot guarantee that it will be compatible with the technology provided.
The reports were issued late	The panel aims to issue the reports within 10 working days of the meeting. In almost all situations, this deadline has been achieved. We apologise for any delay due to unforeseen circumstances.
More feedback received on the day would be useful	The council and the Design Review Panel members have reviewed this in the past and it is felt that the final report should be the only feedback from the panel.
A map of the location should be sent out prior to the meeting	When meetings are held at Stratford Town Hall, a map has been provided. However maps will be produced of the other meeting locations in order to distribute prior to the meeting.
Reducing the time period before review when premeeting information needs to be issued would increase the quality of presentation material.	The time period for distributing premeeting information has been carefully considered to allow enough time for not only postal delivery, but also the opportunity for full consideration of the material by panel members prior to the meeting day.
Panel should be more focused on raising general design quality, not engage in theoretical architectural debate or focus on specific details	We feel that given the nature of the proposals under review, the panel should comment on all aspects of a scheme's design
Smaller presentations to deal with initial design concepts should be accommodated	It is felt that the general structure of the DRP meetings allows for schemes to be assessed at any stage of design, including initial design concepts.
A follow-up statement is needed from the council to the DRP report confirming what specific elements of the DRP opinions they feel need to be addressed	When issuing the report, architects and developers are asked to continue their conversations with the relevant case officer. It is expected that through ongoing dialogue design concerns, including those raised by the panel, should be addressed.

Issues Arising

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

- Since the DRP's inception, there has been an emphasis to review proposals as early as possible, thus enabling the panel to have an influence from the beginning stages of the design process. Since the panel is embedded within the pre-application procedure, this has largely been achieved with planning proposals. However, some other projects have been seen at rather late design stages, thus limiting the influence of the panel.
- For Council projects there is often a lack of sufficient design consideration at the early stages of design team procurement. Where Newham is the developer or a regeneration partner, it should satisfy itself about the design capabilities of the architects under consideration as an essential factor in the procurement of design teams. This issue has been raised before, however has not always been fully addressed.
- Due to the panel rotation, panellists are unaware of the full extent of the panel's activities. Furthermore, panellists are not often updated on the outcome of schemes following review. Thus, there is a need to better disseminate information on reviewed schemes and share the experiences of the panel. In order to address this, the Design Review Panel Coordinator will now issue a report quarterly which will provide updates on all schemes that have been reviewed by the panel.
- On one occasion, the confidentiality of a final report was breached by a panel member. As part of the annual review, the confidentiality briefing that was issued to members in May 2009 was reviewed and updated. The new briefing was circulated to all panel members in March 2010. It is expected that panel members will abide by this confidentiality briefing as part of their membership terms and conditions
- Although the panel has played a key role in raising design standards for major projects, there needs to be further integration of the panel into the council's workings. The DRP should be a fundamental tool to engage and aide Newham's regeneration agenda. Over the coming year, the council will consider how closer integration of the Design Review Panel into the council's operations can be achieved.

Conclusions

It is believed that the Design Review Panel has raised the quality of design in development proposals. Over the course of the two 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. However, further improvements can be undertaken to help the panel achieve significant results on more schemes. Finally, the panel has also brought positive attention to Newham.

APPENDIX A

Newham Design Review Panel Members

Chair: Peter Ahrends

ABK Architects

Amanda Baillieu
Philip Cave
Simon Child
Alessandra Cianchetta
Tom Coward
Robin Cross
Tina Frost
Daisy Froud
Susannah Hagan
Olaf Kneer
David Kohn
Alistair Lathe
Julian Lewis
CJ Lim
Jane McCarthy
Claire McDonald
Tom Muirhead
Richard Partington
Richard Portchmouth
Anthony Rifkin
Tim Ronalds
Robert Sakula
Amir Sanei
Theresa Smith
Signy Svalastoga
Andrew Taylor
Ken Taylor
Stephen Taylor
Chris Williamson

Building Design Magazine
Philip Cave Associates
Child Graddon Lewis
AWP
The AOC
Lewisham Design Panel
Jestico + Whiles
Open House / The AOC
Brighton School of Architecture
Mueller Kneer
David Kohn Architects
SOM
East
The Bartlett / Studio 8 Architects
Mouchel Parkman Services
DSDHA
Thomas Muirhead Architects
Richards Partington Architects
Birds Portchmouth Russum Architects
Urban Practitioners
Tim Ronalds Architects
Ash Sakula Architects
Sanei Hopkins Architects
Mooch Design
London Metropolitan School of Architecture
Patel Taylor
Quay2c
Stephen Taylor Architects
Weston Williamson

**Appendix D
Newham Design Review Panel Annual Report
Developer and Architect Survey**

At which monthly meeting was your scheme reviewed? _____

You are the scheme's (please circle) Architect / Developer / Agent / Client

How would you rate the following?
(Please circle, 1= very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent)

Information sent to you prior to the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Communication with Newham Staff prior to the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Notice for the submission of premeeting information	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Was there any information you did not receive prior to the meeting, but you feel would have helped you prepare for or present at the review?

Any further comments on the premeeting procedure?

Presentation facilities (room, technology, etc)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Format of the review	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Any further comments on the meeting procedure?

Usefulness of the panel's report	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Communication with Newham staff following the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Any further comments on the panel report?

What improvements do you feel could be made to the Design Review Panel?

Any additional comments?

Would you be willing to be contacted for any further follow up questions? Y / N

If so, please leave your contact details below.

Name:

Company:

Address:

Email:

Phone Number: