

# Research findings back design review on all major schemes

3 July 2018 by Bryan Johnston

**Councils and developers alike can benefit from independent design reviews to improve building design and the quality of places, a research report has concluded.**



*Development: report calls for more design review panels*

The report, published last week, is based on a study carried out last year by a team of researchers at University College London's Bartlett School of Planning and commissioned by the mayor of London and professional groupings Place Alliance and Urban Design London.

Place Alliance said the report, based on a detailed study of seven design review processes across the capital, provides "convincing evidence" that design review delivers real benefits in raising the quality of new developments and "changes the culture locally" to prioritise better places.

According to the group, the research results support its recommendation to ministers that the current review of the National Planning Policy Framework should endorse the design review process more strongly and apply it to all major developments.

Professor Matthew Carmona, who led the research team and chairs Place Alliance, said: "Professionally-run, independent design review improves the design of development and brings clear benefits to the quality of places. It is a no-brainer that local authorities across England should adopt it as a standard practice for all major developments."

The research was based on in-depth interviews with applicants, designers and design panel members and managers. The report says: "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."

It adds: "Developers tend to be more circumspect about design review, but also accepted that the process is a necessary means to raise the standard of design."

It also records that interviewees "overwhelmingly" 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".

"While 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."

However, the report also recognises that design review has "limitations" and should "never be seen as the sole means to achieve design quality".

It says: "Even if a number of design reviews are conducted on a project, it can never replace the ongoing dialogue that it is possible to have with a permanent design adviser within a planning or highways authority."

The report acknowledges that the "large majority" of design review panels are not transparent or accessible. "If design review is to be seen to be conducted in the public interest, then this is something that needs to be rectified," it concludes.

The research team found that while most respondents felt there was no substitute for London boroughs having dedicated in-house design capacity, "the provision of design review was sometimes seen as the next best thing" if a lack of resources means that internal design capacity is limited or absent.

It also notes: "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."

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