



HARLOW AND
GILSTON / EPPING
FOREST DISTRICT
QUALITY
REVIEW PANEL

ANNUAL
REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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HGGT
HARLOW & GILSTON
GARDEN TOWN



INTRODUCTION

The Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel was set up in 2017 by Frame Projects on behalf of the collaborative HGGT partnership between East Hertfordshire, Epping Forest and Harlow District Councils, and Essex and Hertfordshire County Councils. It is chaired by Peter Maxwell and includes 23 professional experts, selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with officers from the Councils. The panel also reviews proposals in the EFDC area, outside of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, as the Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel.

Terms of reference, available on the planning authorities' web sites, set out the role and remit of the panel, and the way in which it supports the planning process. Schemes requiring design advice are identified by planning officers and referred to the panel for a review. Officers provide a briefing on planning context and key issues, both in writing for the meeting agendas, and in person at the panel meeting. Advice given by the panel is recorded in a report, to assist with continuing pre-application negotiations, or to advise the planning committee on submitted schemes.

The Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel has advised on 16 schemes in the year from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. Six of these schemes have been reviewed on more than one occasion. First reviews usually take place at a stage when a client and design team have decided their preferred option for development of a site, and have sufficient drawings, models, etc. for a comprehensive discussion. There will often be a second pre-application review, to provide advice on more detailed design matters, before planning submission.

Frame Projects has developed a process for monitoring and evaluating the impact of quality review panels. This process allows us to obtain insight into the effectiveness and performance of each of our panels, as well as valuable information on the significant emerging issues from panel reviews. It also provides public transparency and allows for continual improvement of our services. This process includes collecting quantitative information based on the reviews carried out from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. It also includes feedback from panel members, applicants and local planning authority representatives gathered through anonymous surveys.

This framework builds on the initial work done by Public Practice to develop a monitoring tool for design review.

Quantitative data was gathered from reviews that took place from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Due to government restrictions relating to Covid-19, all review meetings managed by Frame Projects were conducted online via video conference from 16 March 2020 to 15 October 2021, and from 12 November 2021 to 18 February 2022.

PANEL

Authority

Harlow Council, East Hertfordshire District Council, and Epping Forest District Council

Review Panel name

Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel / Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel

Panel management

Externally managed, Frame Projects

Contact name for panel

Lucy Block, Frame Projects

Contact email address

lucy@frame-projects.co.uk

Report produced by

Marina Stuart, Frame Projects

Image: Newhall Be, Harlow, Alison Brooks Architects © Paul Riddle
RIBA National Award 2013 - Housing Design Awards 2013



REVIEW TOTALS

Total number of reviews

20

Number of follow up reviews

10

Number of site visits (in person)

3

Number of site visits (virtual)

14

Number of formal reviews
(chair plus 4 panel members)

14

Chair's reviews
(chair plus 1 panel member)

6

PANEL COMPOSITION

PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel members used

17

Male panel members

59%

Female panel members

41%

BAME panel members
(based on 17 diversity forms)

29%

PANEL EXPERTISE USED

Architecture

24

Urban design / town planning

10

Sustainability

8

Landscape

8

Transport

4

Inclusive design

2

Social infrastructure

1

Development delivery

0

PROPOSALS REVIEWED

APPLICANT TYPE

Private developer

15

Local authority

3

Public Private Partnership

2

STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre application

17

Planning application submitted

1

Draft document approved for consultation

1

PPA Masterplan

1

TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan

7

Mixed use

5

Policy or strategic document

1

Education

1

Residential (1-50 units)

1

Residential (50+ units)

3

Public realm

1

Extra care residential

1

Frame Projects has worked with the local planning authority to identify schemes to assess as part of the monitoring and evaluation process. These consist of schemes that have been reviewed by the Quality Review Panel, and where a planning decision has been determined between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

The schemes used for feedback in this evaluation are:

- Harlow Town Centre Masterplan Framework
- HGGT Transport Strategy
- HGGT Sustainability Guidance
- EFDC Green Infrastructure Strategy
- Gilston Neighbourhood Plan
- Central Stort River Crossings 3/19/1051/FUL
- 4 Wych Elm HW/FUL/21/00181
- Nazeing Glasswork EPF/2712/19
- Epping Sports Centre/ Hemnall Street EPF/0918/21
- Epping Civic Offices EPF/0919/21
- St John's Road EPF/0917/21
- Cottis Lane EPF/2925/20
- Bakers Lane EPF/2924/20
- 287-291 High Street, Epping EPF/1080/19

Image: Panel site visit © Ione Braddick

Anonymous survey responses were collected from the applicants (planning agent and lead architects), panel members who attended the reviews, and local authority representatives (planning officers) who were leading on the schemes. Surveys took the format of yes / no questions with options to provide further specific feedback. Participants were sent an e-mail inviting them to take part in the survey and given two weeks to provide feedback, with one follow-up reminder.

Image: Harlow and Gilston Garden Town



APPLICANT QUESTIONNAIRE

17 applicants were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire.

5 out of 17 applicants responded to the following questions:

1. Did you find the review sessions were conducted in a constructive manner?
2. Were you clear about the information you needed to provide prior to the review?
3. Did you consider that the advice from the panel helped to improve the proposal?
4. Did you feel that the panel reports accurately captured review discussions?
5. Did you think that the panel's advice assisted with officer and council discussions?
6. Would you recommend using the Quality Review Panel?
7. Any other comments?

APPLICANT FEEDBACK

All applicants who completed the survey thought that review sessions were conducted in a constructive manner, and agreed that they were clear about the information they needed to provide prior to the review. While most found that the panel's comments helped to improve proposals, some respondents felt that the advice was outside of the team's remit. All applicants agreed that the panel reports accurately captured advice from the panel, that the review sessions assisted with officer and Council discussions, and that they would recommend using the quality review panel.

Image: Harlow and Gilston Garden Town



LOCAL AUTHORITY QUESTIONNAIRE

9 local planning authority representatives were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire. 3 out of 9 local authority representatives responded to the following questions:

1. Were you clear about the information you needed to provide and your role in the review process?
2. Did you find the panel's comments during the review clear and constructive?
3. Did you find the review session and report clear and useful?
4. Did you find the panel's advice helped support negotiations on design quality?
5. Did you incorporate the panel's comments into a delegated planning report or reported to committee?
6. Did you feel that the planning committee gave weight to the design review advice during decision making?
7. Any other comments?

LOCAL AUTHORITY FEEDBACK

The majority of local authority officers who responded to the questionnaire agreed that they were clear about their role in the review process, and that they generally found the panel's comments to be constructive. One officer did, however, feel that, on occasion, advice provided by the panel was contrary to established objectives, and that the report consequently cut across agreed principles and procedures. All officers incorporated the panel's comments into a planning report and, while most agreed that the panel's advice helped to support negotiations on design quality, some felt it was too early to tell.

PANEL QUESTIONNAIRE

16 panel members were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire. 9 out of 16 panel members responded.

1. Did you feel that the level of information provided prior to the review session was appropriate?
2. Did you consider the site visits a benefit to the review session?
3. Did you consider the information presented at the review to be sufficient to enable a thorough review?
4. Did you consider planning officer written and verbal briefings provided clarity on design and policy issues?
5. Did you feel that panel reports accurately captured review discussions?
6. Did you feel that you could contribute your advice fully?
7. Any other comments?

PANEL FEEDBACK

Overall, panel members who responded to the survey were happy with the review process and found the sessions to be well-organised. Most considered that site visits – both virtual and physical – were beneficial to the review meetings, with one respondent suggesting that a general tour of the town, guided by planning officers, could also be helpful. All panel members agreed that the officer briefings provided clarity on design policy issues, and that the reports accurately captured review discussions.

While the majority felt that they were able to contribute their advice fully, one panel member commented that, due to the length of applicant presentations, there was not always time to provide detailed feedback. The panel had mixed feelings as to whether the information presented by the applicants before and during the meeting was sufficient to enable a thorough review, particularly in relation to information concerning the public realm and site sections.



EMERGING ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS

This annual report covers the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, during which time the Quality Review Panel has returned to in-person meetings following the easing of Covid restrictions. This has been well received, particularly the benefit of in-person site visits.

A number of large, masterplan and strategic documents have been brought to the panel. Given limited time, the panel and applicants have suggested on a number of occasions that it could be helpful to provide the panel with the applicant's presentation ahead of time. Alongside this, the review format could be tailored to allow for multiple review sessions. Chair reviews have also been offered to focus on specific issues, such as sustainability, and will continue to be offered going forwards.

To ensure that the panel's feedback is appropriate to the design teams' resources and the project programme, it was agreed at the progress meeting that Council officers would ensure that they give a clear briefing to the panel, highlighting salient questions for the scheme, as well as identifying teams that may need clearer advice.

The panel membership is working well, but as more of the Garden Town strategic sites come forward it could be beneficial to appoint more sustainability and transport experts.

Image: The Clock House © Harlow District Council

EMERGING ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS

Sustainability

Frame Projects also ran a climate emergency training session for panel members and planning officers in April 2021. This was developed in collaboration with Architects Declare and the London Energy Transformation Initiative (LETI). As an output of this session, the guidance notes sent to presenting teams in advance of a review are being updated, to give more clarity about the information required.

Image: A view East from Gibberd Garden, Essex © Acabashi, Wikimedia Commons

