

DESIGN REVIEW

Client Guidance Notes

Design Review is an impartial evaluation process where experts assess proposals to enhance the quality of places, buildings and public spaces. Design Review seeks to contribute to sustainable development by improving the quality of the built environment, addressing and improving the social, economic and environmental value of projects. As a charity, Design West serves as an independent, non-statutory consultee, offering expert guidance in plan making and development management.

The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) encourages Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to use Design Review Panels to uphold high urban design standards (Paragraph 138). Design Review is also a useful tool where there are no development plan policies in place (Paragraph 11d).

Best Practice Principles

Design West follows the nine principles set out in the [National Design Review Charter](#) (Design Network, 2025).

Design Review is:

- **Independent:** Operates free from vested interest.
- **Expert:** Conducted by expert practitioners and thought leaders.
- **Collaborative:** Promotes shared aspirations for good design.
- **Multidisciplinary:** Draws on combined perspectives of built & natural environment experts.
- **Local:** Rooted in essential local knowledge and understanding.
- **Representative & Inclusive:** Reflective of the communities the Panels serve.
- **Allied & Timely:** Embedded early in planning processes.
- **Consistent & Accountable:** Provides non-binding yet constructive feedback.
- **Regularly Evaluated:** Seeks constant feedback to inform improvement.

Design West Panel Members

Design West draws from a pool of around 200 regionally based members from built and natural environment professions, such as architects, landscape architects, urban designers, engineers and ecologists. Panellists act as independent experts rather than representing stakeholder groups, and must adhere to the [Nolan Principles of Public Life](#). Membership is reviewed regularly, with new members appointed based on merit and equal opportunity. Selection of new members is undertaken on the basis of an open and transparent interview process. Panellists are listed on our [Design West Review website](#). If a specialist is needed, we may draw from the wider national pool of Panel members available through the [Design Network](#).

Panel Selection

Panels are selected based on required expertise for each review. Typically, a panel consists of a Chair and two to four members. Any conflicts of interest must be declared and addressed before participation. Applicants are not involved in the process of selecting a panel; this is the responsibility of Design West Panel Managers and Design Officers.

Selection of Schemes

Projects that are suitable for design review include:

- Strategic sites, Sustainable Urban Extension and reserved matters parcels
- Landmark buildings and projects that introduce novel design/architectural approaches
- Schemes which impact on sensitive views or areas
- Schemes which impact on the historic environment
- Schemes that are likely to establish a precedent for future development
- LPA schemes
- Policy documents
- Housing schemes from 10 units upwards

Projects of significance and major scale schemes are expected to return to Design Review at appropriate stages.

The Design Review Process

Design West schedules annual review timetables in coordination with Local Planning Authorities. Reviews may be initiated by LPAs or developers and can be held in-person or online.

Once a booking form is submitted to Design West, a Panel Manager or Design Officer will contact the applicant and proceed to assemble a Panel, confirm a date for the session to take place, and invite the relevant LPA Officers to attend.

The Design Reviews involve structured meetings that start with the Panel and the applicants meeting for a site visit (not included in Standard Review), followed by a presentation where the developers present their schemes.

This then followed by discussions and recommendations from Panellists. The discussions cover design principles, site context and planning considerations, and help identify key design strengths and weaknesses. The LPA is also asked to provide comments ahead and during the session.

The Chair ensures discussions remain professional, constructive, and solution focused.

The Chair summarises findings into clear and actionable recommendations at the end of the session, which are documented in more detail in a review report, in letter form. This letter is drafted by a Panel Chair or Secretary before being circulated to Panellists for comments. The letter will not differ from the points raised at the review.

Finally, the Design West Panel Manager issues the letter to the applicant, copying in the LPA. The final report is issued within ten working days of the session, subject to Design Review fees being settled beforehand.

If schemes are returning for subsequent sessions, a site visit may not be needed, and online sessions may be appropriate – this is agreed case by case. All sessions are attended by Design West.

Design Review Format and Costs

Standard: £2,500* + VAT

1.5 Hours, including a Chair and 2 Panellists

Medium: £3,950* + VAT

Up to 4 Hours, including a site visit, a Chair and 3 Panellists

Large: £4,950* + VAT

Up to 6 Hours, including a site visit, a Chair and 4 Panellists

*Contribution towards room booking, travel and refreshments may apply.

Information required for Design Review

Applicants must submit relevant project details, including:

- Location and site context analysis, including topography
- Status within the planning process
- Design plans, sections, and elevations
- Environmental impact and sustainability strategies
- Traffic and movement analysis
- Visual representations of the project

In addition to the above information, this should include supporting reports and assessments (e.g. LVIA, FRA, Heritage Report etc.), and LPA feedback if applicable.

Submission Deadlines

Design West will request background information and the draft presentation five working days before Design Review. A final copy of the presentation will be requested 24 hours before the Design Review.

Confidentiality & Public Access

The design review process is confidential. All correspondence between Design West, applicants and participating LPA is treated as such.

Design Review meetings are attended only by invitation. Participants will include Panel Members, LPA Officers, and applicants. Statutory bodies, clients, and their design teams may also attend. Design West staff observe all sessions but do not participate. Attendance must be confirmed in advance.

Review attendees will receive background material from the applicant/ developer on the scheme to be reviewed in advance. This will be sent via the Panel Manager and must be kept confidential, even if the review is on a 'live' planning application.

A Panel Member will not enter into dialogue with any of the applicant's team before or after the review – all communication should be through the Panel Manager. This is to ensure that the Chair and Panel are kept clean of any conflict and can remain impartial.

A copy of the report will be provided to all attendees. Its confidential status will be made clear on the letter. Only if factual errors (such as place name spelling) occur will a letter be amended, and it will be re-sent to all attendees, making clear what the error was. If the review is provided at the pre-application stage, then the report is not to be made public (unless agreed by the applicant and LPA in consultation). If the review is provided when the application is submitted for planning, then the report may become a public document and can be published on the planning portal.

The previous background 'working drawings' will not be released, just the review letter.

The developer is encouraged to refer to the review panel recommendations and any previous letters in the Design & Access Statement submitted with the planning application. This tells the story of the scheme's design evolution and will help justify the approach taken.

Repeat Reviews

Applicants are expected to bring significant or major scale schemes back for additional reviews as they progress. Design West will maintain Panel continuity for subsequent reviews. The size of the review will be agreed with Design West on a case-by-case basis; typically, a Large (6h) review will be followed by a Medium (4h), and a Medium by a Standard (1.5h).

Fees and Cancellations

Design Review fees must be paid by a single invoice to the lead partner. Where costs are to be shared, this must be done between partners.

A £500 fee applies for rescheduling within two weeks of the review date, while cancellations or changes within one week incur a 50% charge + VAT.

Strategy Reviews

Design West also conducts Strategy Reviews for local authorities to provide design guidance on policies, masterplans, and regeneration projects. These are structured similarly to design reviews and include a written follow-up report.

For further information, contact us at review@designwest.org.uk.