

Community Review Panels

Briefing note

Executive summary

- The National Planning Policy Framework places new emphasis on involving local communities with development decisions, to help increase design quality and benefit to their place.
- While the mechanisms for achieving this are not identified in the NPPF, an approach currently gaining popularity among local authorities provides a promising option.
- Community review panels are groups of 10 or more local people, appointed to reflect the demography of the areas and chaired by a professional engagement expert.
- They review development proposals at confidential, pre-application stage, when there is still a real opportunity to influence their final form. They operate in the same way as professional design review panels, with members offering expertise based on the experience of living in their local area.
- Six panels are currently operating in around London. The model has proved successful in providing design teams with feedback they would not otherwise have received, and provides local people with genuine influence over development decisions, with impacts ranging from significant, beneficial design adjustments to the complete withdrawal of schemes criticised as inappropriate.
- The community review model has the potential to expand significantly, helping to deliver meaningful community engagement with design.

Introduction

The revised National Planning Policy Framework places the community at the heart of decision making. The consultation draft makes clear that early discussion between applicants, the local planning authority and the local community about the design of emerging schemes is vital, and that applications that can “*demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot.*”¹ This direction of travel is laudable: local communities are often best placed to know what development is appropriate for their area. However, identifying an effective and proportionate mechanism for giving voice to local communities on design is a challenge. Community review panels offer one route to achieving this.

¹ New paragraph 131, National Planning Policy Framework: Draft text for consultation

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What is community review?

Community review is a relatively new concept, which enables panels of local volunteers to make detailed comments on the design quality of proposals in their area at pre-application stage, and on local authority design strategies of various types. The key principle of the community review concept is that these panels operate in a similar manner to professional design review panels (which are already part of the NPPF), with their views given equal weight in the planning process.

Community review panel members are not appointed to represent any wider group of people, or any local organisation. Their role is to represent themselves by giving their views on how development can provide local benefit. Their qualification is their experience of living in the area affected, and the expertise they offer is based on their understanding of what works and what does not about their place.

How does it work?

Community panels are not intended for those who already have a strong voice or position of influence in their area. The emphasis is on selecting members who would not otherwise have the opportunity to comment on developments, or to have their views heard. Each panel is balanced to reflect the demographic and geographic spread of the area, and to include individuals with experience in civic engagement. However, panels also include members who may not have experience of engaging in built environment issues, but nevertheless have valuable contributions to make. Community panels provide scope for individual growth, and those who are given the opportunity to be heard can grow in confidence and expertise as a result.

Applicants who are built environment professionals are not considered for appointment to community panels. They are more likely to have other routes to communicate their views on development including, potentially, serving on a professional panel. The role of a community panels is to give views and advice that complement those provided by professionals.

A professional engagement expert is appointed to chair the panel through an interview process conducted with the local authority. The role of the chair is to ensure that every panel member has the chance to express their views, and that these are communicated clearly and unambiguously.

Panel members are also given access to development and training sessions as part of their involvement with the panel. These are held either as short sessions before the start of a meeting, or as full evening sessions in place of a review meeting. Subjects for development are chosen by panel members, and have included sessions on reading plans, on understanding what presenters may not be saying as well as what they are, and on sustainability.

Review meetings are held once a month on a weekday evening to enable those who work to attend. Dates are chosen for the full year ahead, so members can book time in advance. Panel members are sent agenda information and drawings before each meeting, and are asked to read this in advance of the review. They are also asked, if



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they are able, to visit the site in question before the meeting and, to enable this, information is usually sent out two weekends in advance.

The format of reviews is very similar to that used for professional design review. The relevant case officer provides an introduction from the planning authority summarising discussions about the scheme for review, and highlighting areas where the panel's advice would be particularly valuable. The applicant then conducts a virtual site tour, using Google Earth, Street View and photographs, and presents the proposed scheme. The panel chair then asks for questions from the panel to clarify what they have heard, followed by comments on what they like and do not like about the proposals. At the end of the meeting, the chair summarises the views expressed, and a formal report is then produced, which is signed off by the panel chair and distributed to all attendees.

Unlike professional reviews, where relevant expertise is selected from a pool of panel members for each meeting, all panel members are invited to each review because their expertise is always applicable.

Review meetings are normally held in person at a local venue convenient for members. However, meetings have been held online during the pandemic, via Zoom, and have continued without interruption. Three community review panels have been established during 2020 and 2021 and to date have only met online, which has proved a successful model.

Review meetings are funded by the developer presenting to each meeting: applicants pay a charge for a review as they do for professional panels.

Community review in action

In 2018, the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) worked with Frame Projects to set up what is thought to be the UK's first community review panel. Its perceived success has led to its growth as a model for delivering effective local engagement in development proposals and planning policy.

Current community review panels that follow this model include:

Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation Community Review Group
Operating since November 2018, the group covers the Mayoral Development Corporation area around the new HS2 and Crossrail stations at Old Oak where a new neighbourhood is planned over a 30-year period. Full information [can be found here](#).

Dacorum Borough Council Community Review Panel
The panel was set up in January 2020 to review schemes across the borough, much of which involves significant housebuilding in the borough, which includes Hemel Hempstead, which has been awarded garden town status. Full information [can be found here](#).



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London Borough of Ealing Community Review Panel

Set up in July 2021, this is the first borough-wide community review panel, looking at development of all types and scales across Ealing. Full information [can be found here](#).

Isle of Dogs and South Poplar Community Development Panel – London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Set up in April 2021, the panel was commissioned by LB Tower Hamlets, to cover the developments coming forward in the Isle of Dogs and South Poplar Opportunity Area. Full information [can be found here](#).

Old Kent Road Community Review Panel – London Borough of Southwark

The panel was set up in March 2020, and covers the opportunity area that stretches the length of the Old Kent Road, where 20,000 new homes are planned, along with 10,000 new jobs and a potential Bakerloo Line extension over the next 20 years. Full information [can be found here](#).

London Borough of Redbridge Community Review Panel

Set up in August 2020, the panel specifically reviews proposals from the borough, which is building 600 new council homes by 2022. Full information [can be found here](#).

Lessons from community review

The community review model has grown since Frame Projects set up its first panel in 2018, because local authority officers have attended meetings as observers and decided that a community review panel would work for them too. Clients, observers and applicant teams have all provided positive feedback on the quality of the comments they have received from panels, and on their value to the design process. It is notable that community review panels provide comments that are often complementary to those made by professional panels. The experiential perspectives of local people encompass different aspects of the proposals they review from the skills-based input provided by professionals. Their perspective often provides input and ideas that prove equally valuable to the success of development proposals.

There is particular value in linking professional and community panels. In situations where a local authority has both a design review and community review panel, both can review the same schemes within a single timeframe, and each is informed of the other's views. The review process is presented to applicants as a package, with schemes required to seek a review meeting with both panels, rather than choosing to present only to the professional panel. There are further benefits in linking the two panels, with professional panel members available to deliver development sessions for the community panel.

The recruitment process is an important element of a successful community panel. Initial advertising for members needs to be as widely distributed as possible, using local authority resources and contacts to reach out to community organisations, schools, resident's associations and other bodies able to contact those who would not otherwise become aware of what was happening. Different forms of advertisement



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can be used to reach different audiences, for example video for distribution via social media.

Selection criteria are also a tool for ensuring a panel is representative of its area. Frame Projects uses seven criteria:

1. A strong understanding of the area and its communities.
2. Ability to absorb information and provide balanced insight from a community perspective into proposals for development and change in the area.
3. Ability to make confident contributions in review meetings.
4. Ability to collaborate and respect the contribution of others to the panel's deliberations.
5. Awareness of the challenges and opportunities faced by different stakeholders.
6. Team diversity, to provide an overall balance of diversity among panel members similar to the demographic profile of the area.
7. Team fit, to help ensure the panel includes members reflecting the current and demographic of those living or working in the area.

Decisions on panel membership are made across all these categories. For example, someone could be selected with a low score on confidence, but a higher score on team fit, to create a panel with a balanced membership that includes contrasting backgrounds and levels of experience.

It is important that the membership of community review panels is as diverse as the areas they represent, to ensure they can play a role in delivering inclusive design for their neighbourhoods. It has proved possible to ensure that each of the community review panels set up to date has a diverse membership. For example, 50% of Old Kent Road Community Review Panel members identify themselves as being from a black and minority ethnic (BAME) background. This compares favourably to the diversity of the built environment professions, with only 10% of architects describing themselves as from a BAME background.

The value of appointing a professional engagement expert as chair has been demonstrated on community review panels. Each panel chair has a built environment background, but with particular expertise in community planning, design and consultation. This allows them to lead conversations effectively without dominating discussion, preventing community panel members from missing significant issues while giving them the time they need to say what they want to. Professional chairs were initially expected to be a temporary measure, with panels in time electing a chair from among their own number. However, to date this has not taken place because each panel values its existing chair and has asked that they remain in post.



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Community panels must be run by their members. Annual meetings are held with each panel to allow members to talk about what they would like to change, and to hear from the local authority about subsequent progress with schemes they have reviewed. Decisions about the future running of the panel and its meetings are taken by the panel.

Benefits of community review panels

Since 2018, community review panels have reviewed and commented on a wide range of development types. These have included complex mixed-use developments, urban extensions, tall buildings, and new parks and public realm improvements. Panels have also reviewed transport projects and local authority design and place strategies.

Community panels can have real influence, and it has become clear that panel recommendations have a significant impact on development proposals. This has ranged from serious, justified criticisms that led to the withdrawal of a scheme, to valuable endorsement of design strategies and multiple design improvements, both large and small, made by architects who accepted the validity of the advice they received. These contributions are often highly nuanced and detailed, and overwhelmingly constructive. The nature of the discussion at a community review meeting is very different to the standard models of developer engagement and local consultation, which are often oppositional.

Community review is also an effective way to inform local policy, such as a landscape strategy encompassing several wards, or shorter-term decisions such as Covid-related public realm management. Community panels provide local planning authorities with a valuable resource to test and refine their approach to public realm and public benefit.

The appointment process for community panels allows a panel to be established, with committed members who reflect the demographic character of their local area. This provides assurance of a broad reach for engagement through a panel that can be hard to achieve through wider consultation, and therefore provides a valuable complementary method.

As community panels mature, they experience some turnover with small numbers of members choosing to step down, and membership being refreshed. This provides an opportunity to interview departing members on their experiences of serving on panels. Two former members of the OPDC Community Review Group provided encouraging feedback, which they are happy to be used publicly.

Carola Addington commented:

"It's been a privilege to be a member of the Community Review group for the last two years. I've welcomed the opportunity to look at plans for developing places that I know well and to ask questions and contribute to the discussions. Not only did I gain insights into the design process, but I also began to view familiar places with a new perspective. I discovered things about my neighbourhood that I hadn't known before!"



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Celia Toler commented:

“I have learnt a lot from being a member of the Community Review Group. It has helped me to understand what I have to offer, and I would recommend this experience to anyone who feels responsibility and a desire to engage in what happens to our neighbourhood.”

Next steps for community review

The model is still seen as an innovative process by many, although several councils have expressed interest in it and the approach is developing and expanding. The first borough-wide community review panel has recently been set up in London, for Ealing. As it progresses, the community review model has the potential to help disseminate best practice across the sector.

The model is beginning to be referred to in local policy e.g. Tower Hamlets, but it is not yet referenced in the NPPF, whereas professional design review is. While the NPPF puts community engagement at its heart, it presents no mechanisms to achieve this. Community review panels could support the expansion of meaningful community involvement in design decisions envisaged by the new NPPF.

