



City of Westminster

Planning & City Development Committee

Date: 27 April 2023

Classification: General Release

Title: Westminster Design Review Panel

Report of: Director of Town Planning and Building Control

Financial Summary: The costs of the panel are to be met through fee income received by the authority. The DRP will be administered through existing staff resources in the Town Planning service.

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on progress in establishing a Design Review Panel for Westminster.

2. Recommendation

2.1 Members are asked to note the content of this report.

3. Introduction

3.1 At the last meeting of Planning and City Development Committee, members were advised that officers had begun work to set-up a Design Review Panel for Westminster. This report provides more detail on the how the panel will operate and progress and timelines for its establishment.

3.2 Role and Operation of the Panel

3.3 As noted previously, the Westminster Design Review Panel (DRP) is being established to provide an expert, independent voice on design which will support internal decision makers to promote exemplary, sustainable design standards and negotiate design improvements. The establishment of a Design Review Panel was a manifesto commitment and responds to both the National Planning Policy Framework and London Plan policy, which require local planning authorities to have design review processes in place.

3.4 The Panel will follow established best practice and will provide independent, constructive review of major development proposals and projects from a design perspective. It is to be made up of a pool of external, independent, multidisciplinary built environment experts (including architects, place-making, sustainability and planning professionals). The purpose of the DRP is not to duplicate or replace

existing mechanisms for securing high quality design, but to provide additional expert advice to inform the planning process. By offering advice and review during the pre-application process and on planning applications, the DRP's role should support planning officers, the planning committee and the community in securing high quality development.

- 3.5 Officers have undertaken research into different models for delivery and best practice in design review. Visits were made to observe other panels in operation, a workshop was held with officers and presentation made to the local amenity societies and forums earlier this year. Following on from this, an operating model and Terms of Reference for the Westminster Design Review panel has been developed. This will adhere to the principles set out in the London Design Review Charter, which is published by the Mayor of London and supports the London Plan policy on Design Review.
- 3.6 The panel will initially provide a core service focused on independent review of major development proposals at pre-application stage. It will be administered by officers in-house and the Town Planning service will identify schemes that are most likely to benefit from independent design review - typically major strategic proposals and council-own development.
- 3.7 The Panel itself will be formed of a pool of around 20-30 members (including more than one Chair) with a broad range of design expertise and wide skill set, which will complement those of our in-house design specialists. Full panel meetings will typically involve a chair and four or five panel members taken from the wider pool of experts, selected according to the nature of the scheme being considered and types of expertise required.
- 3.8 Following panel meetings, the Panel's observations and recommendations will be signed off by the Chair and panel members and then provided to the applicant as impartial advice. These comments and recommendations will also be noted in any pre-application response and in the Planning Officer's report to the Planning Sub Committee should proposals become the subject of a planning application.
- 3.9 A draft Terms of Reference for the panel has been prepared and sets out detail of working arrangements, as well as a code of conduct for members and the process for managing conflicts of interest. This will be published with details of all panel members in the pool, following conclusion of the recruitment process.
- 3.10 Panel membership and Recruitment
- 3.11 A recruitment process for members of the design review panel was launched in February and closed on 13 March 2023. This was widely advertised including in architectural and professional press, and across a wide range of networks and forums.
- 3.12 Through this recruitment we have sought to attract a diverse and multidisciplinary group of built environment professionals to provide access to a wide skill set to inform the design process. While there will not be specific resident representatives on the panel, Westminster residents can also join the panel as long as they have relevant built environment expertise and demonstrate they meet the selection criteria.

- 3.13 All applicants were asked to fill in an online form and explain their experience and how they are able to contribute positively to the role and meet the selection criteria. The recruitment process has resulted in around 250 applications to join the panel, including 49 applicants for chair.
- 3.14 Interviews are to be held for the positions of Chair and officers are working through all applications using the selection criteria to create a shortlist and final panel membership will be agreed with appointed chairs. As noted above, we aim to recruit around 20-30 members to the pool for the panel, plus two to three chairs.
- 3.15 Next steps
- 3.16 Once final panel membership has been agreed, a training and induction event for panel members will be held to which all committee chairs will be invited. All panel members will be asked to sign and agree to the terms of reference and code of conduct, including rules in relation to confidentiality and conflicts of interest.
- 3.17 Given the significant interest in joining the panel, the selection process will take longer than originally anticipated. It is now proposed the first meeting of the panel can be held in early summer and the Design Review Panel will then be programmed to meet monthly, depending on demand.
- 3.18 Once established, the impact and success of the panel will be monitored and evolve in response to demand and feedback from internal and external stakeholders and any changes in priorities and policies. A review of effectiveness of process will be undertaken after six months and an annual report published which considers the impact of the panel.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 The design review panel will be a discretionary service and cost will be borne by applicants and the fee income received by the authority would cover costs to ensure the panel is cost neutral. Administering the panel at this stage is to be met through existing staff resources in the Town Planning service.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 Design Review is an independent and impartial evaluation process and carried out by expert practitioners with current experience in design and development. To ensure impartiality and confidence in the DRP, its work and members, consideration should be given in the terms of reference to securing the following:
- a) Independence – the review must be conducted by panel members who are unconnected with the scheme’s promoters and decision makers and mechanisms should be in place to ensure that conflicts of interest do not arise. Each panel member must be required to register and declare any interests and/or conflict of interest and the register should be maintained and kept up to date;
 - b) Expertise and suitably trained people who are experienced in design and know how to criticise constructively. Panel members must be required to provide evidence of expertise and membership of a recognised professional body;
 - c) Accountability – the DRP and its advice must be clearly seen to work for the benefit of the public. This should be ingrained within the terms of reference;
 - d) Transparency - the DPR’s remit, membership, governance processes and funding should always be in the public domain.

- e) Confidentiality – to encourage open engagement DRP members should be required to agree and enter into a confidentiality agreement. DRP discussions should be kept confidential before information is in the public domain.
- f) Recruitment should be based on agreed selection criteria, undertaken through an open transparent process with assessment of performance on an annual basis. The performance referenced refers to professional performance and expertise.
- g) The DRP members should be required to adhere to the Nolan Principles of Public Life. In other words, the principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- h) Within reason, the DRP panel should include a range of knowledge and skills appropriate to the project under review. Consideration should be given as to whether some panels may find the attendance of the local ward members on behalf of amenity societies and residents as beneficial to the objective of the review.
- i) Equalities – DPR members should understand and be required to apply the Council's public sector equality duty when carrying out their advisory functions.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 Members are asked to note the content of this report and provide any feedback they may have which will inform the final Terms of Reference document.

<p>If you have any questions about this report, or wish to inspect one of the background papers, please contact: Jane Hamilton (jhamilton@westminster.gov.uk)</p>

Background Papers

[London Design Review Charter](#)