

To: Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7th September 2017

Report of: Head of Planning, Sustainable Development & Regulatory Services

Title of Report: Update on the operation of the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP)

Summary

Purpose of report: To update the Scrutiny Committee on the current operation of the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP)

Key Decision: No

Executive lead member: Cllr Hollingsworth

Report author: Patsy Dell

Policy Framework: Strong, Active Communities; Vibrant, Sustainable Economy; Cleaner, Greener Oxford City Council.

NPPF – paras. 9; 17; 28; section 7 (in particular paras 58 and **62**); section 12 (in particular paras. 126 and 137).

Appendices to report – *none*

Background

- 1 The Scrutiny Committee requested a report to update them on the operation of the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP). Design review has been operating formally through the Oxford Design Review Panel in association with Design Council CaBE (DC & Commission for Excellence in the Built Environment) since 2014.

What is Design Review?

- 2 Design Review works within the application of national and local planning policy but is an independent and impartial evaluation process in which a panel of built environment experts assesses the design of a proposal. The projects that go to Design Review are usually of public significance and have a high degree of public significance. Design in the context of the Panel's remit is broader than simply architecture and encompasses all aspects of urban design and planning, looking at places as well as buildings.
- 3 Design review looks at place-making, making the built-environment of our towns and cities work better. Design Review encourages responsibly designed developments that help to create better places for people to live, work and enjoy thus avoiding the huge costs of poor design. There has been extensive, published research that provides an insight into the correlation between poorly designed places and reduced well-being, quality of life and educational attainment in addition to the visual consequences of poor placemaking.
- 4 The nationally published guidance on design review makes some key points about the benefits of the process and how it:
 - gives decision makers confidence that they have had the best possible independent advice on design quality
 - offers support and encouragement for good design
 - identifies weak and inappropriate schemes early on, enabling design changes to be made with relatively little waste of time and effort
 - can bring a breadth and depth of experience wider than that of the project team or planning authority
 - offers expert views on complex issues such as low carbon design and sustainable transport options
 - can constructively question the design brief or site assumptions
 - offers opportunities to those observing design reviews for continued learning, particularly on how to assess schemes for good design.

The Principles of Design Review

- 5 National guidance on design review identifies ten core principles for the operation of an effective design review process:
 - *Expert*: the review is undertaken by leading designers who have an acknowledged standing and expertise.
 - *Multidisciplinary*: the panel combines the different perspectives of architects, urban designers, planners, landscape architects, engineers, and other specialist experts to provide a complete, rounded assessment.
 - *Accountable*: the panel and its advice must be clearly seen to work for the benefit of the public. The panel reports will be published and publicly available where the scheme is the subject of a planning application.

- *Transparent*: the panel's remit, membership, governance processes and funding are in the public domain.
- *Proportionate*: Design Review will be used for major projects and projects whose significance warrants the investment needed to provide the service.
- *Timely*: it should take place as early as possible in the design process, because this can avoid wasted time. It also costs less to make changes at an early stage.
- *Advisory*: the panel does not take planning decisions, but it offers impartial advice for the Local Planning Authority, which does.
- *Objective*: the panel appraises schemes according to reasoned, objective criteria rather than the stylistic tastes of individual panel members.
- *Accessible*: the findings and advice are clearly expressed in terms that design teams, decision makers and clients can all understand and make use of.

National Planning Policy objectives for the delivery of good quality design in new development

- 6 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places a strong emphasis on good design. The aspirations are set out in the Ministerial forward which includes the statements;

“Our standards of design can be so much higher”, and;

“Planning must be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which we live our lives”

The body of the document sets out further objectives including;

“Always seek to secure high quality design and a good standard of amenity...” Core Principles, paragraph 17

“Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development is indivisible from good planning and should contribute positively to making places better for people.” Section 7, paragraph 56

“Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions” Section 7, paragraph 64
And

“Local planning authorities should have local design review arrangements in place to provide assessment and support to ensure high standards of design.” Section 7, paragraph 62.

- 7 Local policies that promote the delivery of good design are present in current and emerging planning policy documents.

What is the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP)?

- 8 The ODRP was set up in 2014 with Design Council CaBE (DC & Commission for Excellence in the Built Environment) to provide design review feedback and advice on substantial, important and sensitive schemes within Oxford. Guidance about how the ODRP operates and previous annual reports can be found on the council's website.

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/3412/odrp_guide_10_2017

- 9 The Design Review service continues to be provided by DCC and operates on a twice-monthly cycle of reviews to which new development schemes are targeted both at pre-application and submission stages of consideration by the council.
- 10 The panel has consistency through a body of accumulated experience retaining its two original chairs, Keith Bradley and Joanna Van Heyningen supported by specific panellists who bring a range of skills and are drawn from DCC's national list of Built Environment Experts (BEE's). On occasion, where considered appropriate, these national experts are supported by local BEE's from Oxford/Oxfordshire.
- 11 Developers submit schemes for panel consideration and a fee is paid by the developer for the design review service. As the design of schemes is often an iterative process, most of the eligible schemes will be reviewed by the ODRP a number of times throughout their development. The panel's letter of advice remains confidential at pre-application stage but after a planning application is submitted the panel's advice is made public as part of the officer's report to the planning committee.
- 12 The council's original contract with DCC has been reviewed and is about to be re-let. A new review panel report covering the period 2015 to 2017 will be produced following completion of the new contract. The cost of the reviews will be increased to reflect changes that have occurred in the cost of providing the service contract since it was originally let. These changes include covering the Council's costs of facilitating the design review process which are not included in the fees paid for planning applications. A number of improvements to the administration and operation of the ODRP process have been implemented as a result of the contract review process.
- 13 Design review is now a mainstream and familiar part of the development management process operated by Oxford City Council. The benefits of independent design advice in supporting the delivery of high quality new development in the city are valued by both members and officers. This process is now seen as a normal step in the process of bringing forward high quality new development in Oxford.

Some of the typical schemes reviewed by the ODRP 2016/2017

Session type	Scheme name
Design Workshop	Littlemore Park
Design Review	Barton Park Primary School
Design Review	St Catherine's College
Design Workshop	Oxpens masterplan
Design Workshop	JR Hospital
Design Workshop	Wadham College
Design Workshop	Jack Straws Lane
Design Review Returning	St Hilda's College II
Design Review Returning	Northern Gateway ii
Design Review Returning	Northern Gateway ii
Design Workshop	Dragon School
Design Workshop	Northgate house, Jesus College
Design Workshop	The Girls' Day School Trust - Oxford High School
Design Workshop	25 Wellington Square
Design Review	Wadham College II

- 14 It is not always possible to quantify the value of design review or to specifically identify the panel's contribution to improving design quality or speeding the process. However there are many examples where it can be seen that design review has helped to improve the design of schemes to a point where both planning officers and the planning committee are satisfied that a sufficiently high quality of design has been reached. In this respect, engagement in the process can also be seen as a form of de-risking some aspects of the development for applicants.
- 15 One scheme, the development of new speculative student accommodation at Manor Place on land owned by Merton College has been through the ODRP process a number of times but did not reach the standards of design quality that the Council expects and was recommended for refusal by officers and ultimately refused by the West Area Planning Committee. The refusal has been the subject of an appeal and is currently in recess from a public inquiry process. This has been the only case since the panel was set up where the views of the panel and the local planning authority have fundamentally diverged.
- 16 In Planning Advisory Service (PAS) commissioned research on the value of design review panels, evidence was put forward that indicated that: "The panel's views are taken seriously by planning committees and aid decision-making about particular schemes. The panel may also have an indirect influence on the quality of applications...*The fact that a panel exists sends a signal to the development community. This is at least an important role as a review of the detail of a scheme.*"

Design challenges for Oxford now and in future

- 17 The panel is overseeing a range of schemes coming forward under the policies of the current development plan but there a number of strategic and local design Issues that will be highly relevant to Oxford over coming years. The Council will need to plan for and consider these issues, supported by the design review process where appropriate:
- Planning for growth in the city that respects its heritage but facilitates and enables quality new development and innovation to enable the city's needs to be met
 - The challenges that new higher density development in the city might pose and the need to respond appropriately to these and the related consideration of taller buildings
 - Ensuring there are good connections between new development and neighbouring communities in the new growth being planned around the expanding city
 - Managing the demands/needs of cars, bins and bikes with imagination and sensitivity in new development
 - Accommodation of the car in a changing world of SMART technologies and good designs for parking; this extends to understanding the impact of broadband and 'the internet of things'
 - The need to reduce energy demand and meeting rising standards and the likelihood of future over-heating, anticipating the need for adaptation as the temperature rises, requires differing designs according to the actual development orientation
 - Outdoor and Indoor air quality is a rapidly growing issue nationally
 - The difficult question of defining and delivering local character and designing to respond well to it
 - The temptation of the development industry to cheapen the details and materials following planning permission. Holding on to the hard won high quality design through the implementation stages of development.
 - Long-term stewardship of strategic sites by the site developer/College or institution through ambitious masterplanning. The absence of an ambitious masterplan can make delivery and securing design quality and coherence over time very difficult. Recognising and encouraging owners to recognise the importance and value of imaginative and robust masterplans and importantly of adherence to the ambitions set out in these documents.
 - The need for new public spaces and enhanced public realm in Oxford city centre to help accommodate local population and visitor growth

How are we preparing for these future Design challenges?

- 18 The new local plan has provided an opportunity to review the development plan policy context and to see how our planning policies can support how we address the key challenges around securing high quality growth and appropriate new development in the city.
- 19 We continue to use and value a design review service and recent revisions to the ODRP contract have included formally planning, design and heritage officers' observations on scheme designs in the briefing of the panel thus providing opportunity for consideration of the city's key design challenges up-front as part of the panel's review of schemes. Other changes will be introduced as part of the contract review process.
- 20 Increased urban design resources in-house is enabling more effective participation and contribution to development and strategic planning initiatives across the council and allow the identified challenges to be given appropriate weight in these projects.
- 20 Urban design training is planned this autumn and will support member development in dealing with the above challenges and of the tools available to respond to these. Urban design skills improvements for officers are dealt with in-house through close working with the urban design specialists.

Next steps

- 21 The report has set out to given an update on how the ODRP process is currently working. The Committee is asked to note the report and provide any feedback.

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List of background papers: none , Version number 3

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