


Design Review

**A Guide for
Developers,
Consultants and
Designers**

A photograph showing three people from a side profile, looking at a large map or plan spread out on a surface. The person in the foreground is a woman with blonde hair, wearing a white top and a patterned skirt. The person in the middle is a man with dark hair, wearing a red shirt. The person in the background is a woman with grey hair, wearing a patterned top. They are standing in a grassy field with trees and a blue sky in the background. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

***Early engagement
on design
produces the
greatest benefits.
In assessing
applications,
local planning
authorities should
have regard to the
recommendations
from the design
review panel.***

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This document is for all those on the 'applicant' side of the development and planning process; landowners, developers, consultants, architects and other designers. It explains how design review works and how to get the most from it.

Design review is a simple process that has been around for nearly 100 years. Designs for new developments are presented to a mixed panel of experts, who discuss the project and give feedback on how it could be improved. The recommendations are incorporated into a report for the applicant and the local authority.

Design review is referred to in paragraph 62 of the National Planning Policy Framework. This says that local authorities should have local design review arrangements and that they should give weight to the findings of design review panels. Where a planning application goes to appeal and there are design issues involved, the inspector may well refer to the findings of the design review.

The value of design review

The aim of design review is to improve design quality in the built environment. Its role is to review development proposals and provide feedback to developers, clients and local authorities. Design review is a very valuable opportunity to get additional expert help with your project. You will be presenting to a panel with at least 50 years combined experience in all aspects of design and built environment. We want to work with you to make your project as good as it possibly can be, for the benefit of you, your clients, the future users of the project and the public at large. Design review is not a test; we aim to have a constructive conversation about the project, the result of which is better design. The overwhelming majority of people who present to design review find it a positive and immensely useful experience.

Speed Tapping into high level expertise at the right time can help unlock potential issues before they occur. This can help save time, overcome unnecessary conflict and build confidence around a proposed project or development. It helps to progress a site through the planning process. An endorsement from design review or evidence that a promoter has responded to the Panel's suggestions adds weight to decision making.

Quality For many local authorities design review has become an integral part of the development control process. Design review can ensure design quality, raising the quality of life for local people. Design review can identify ways to make a project function better and be more user-friendly.

Consensus The process facilitates collaboration to achieve consensus around design objectives, and offers ways of engaging with interested parties such as highways departments, politicians and communities. Design review can help build consensus when projects span planning authority boundaries or have multiple statutory consultees.

Value Design review offers a fresh perspective, providing solutions to seemingly intractable design issues. Design review can help to address the viability question, and in some cases projects can be simplified through efficient design solutions identified by design review. Advice from the Design Review Panel can unlock higher sale or rental values



**Before
your
review**

When to come to design review

It is best to bring your project to design review as early as possible. That way you can derive maximum benefit from the advice on offer before your designs become too advanced. Obviously some designing needs to have happened before we can review it, but design teams have sometimes come to us to discuss a brief and some very early concept sketches (RIBA stage 1) and gained a lot from the process. For these very early reviews the discussion focusses on establishing design principles and objectives and exploring a range of design options.

Most design teams come to us when the first draft of their proposals have been complete (RIBA stage 2) but before they have done so much detailed work that it is difficult to make changes.

Many projects come to us once public consultation and discussions with key statutory consultees have been completed. This is not ideal as aspects of the design can become fixed as a result of these consultations. We suggest it is best to come for your first design review before, or around the same time as these early discussions.

This is not to say that design review is not useful at a later stage – shortly before or after a planning submission. If you retain an open mind about making revisions to your application to address the Panel's comments, design review can still improve the project and help it through planning.

You should not feel that you need to make extensive preparations for a design review or that you need to postpone a design review because you are not ready. We want to see your work in progress and you can certainly carry on working while waiting for the design review meeting.

Key steps in the process

Initial enquiry	At least 1 month before	Telephone or email our office to get booked into the system and discuss possible dates. We will send you a Project Submission Form and a Contract.
Confirm review	At least 3 weeks before	Return the Submission Form and Contract and we can confirm your design review date.
Book venue	As soon as possible	We need you to locate and book a venue for the review (this could be a site office, a local village hall, or the local authority's offices).
Submit plans	At least 7 days before	Submit the documents to Design South East
Pay the invoice*	<i>Before the review</i>	<i>*For reviews of single private houses we require that the invoice is paid before the review goes ahead.</i>
Design Review	On the day	Make sure you bring all the technology you need to make your presentation and provide additional copies of key documents for the Panel.
Report	Within 10 working days	You will receive our report. Consider carefully how you will respond to its recommendations. Consider whether you will need a second review.



Booking

Booking a review

It is best to email sarah@designsoutheast.org or telephone our office on 01634 401166 to discuss dates for a review. We operate a system whereby a number of Panel meetings are scheduled in advance and if you can slot into one of these dates it will make all our lives easier.

However, if those dates do not suit you or are already booked up we can be flexible and arrange additional Panel meetings. After this initial discussion we will send you a Project Submission Form and Contract. Return these as soon as possible to confirm the review date.

Booking a venue

The review needs to take place at a venue no more than 30 minutes from the site (preferably less). We need you to locate and book the venue. The Design South East team can help you with this if you are having problems.

We need a room, preferably laid out 'board room' style, which can accommodate at least twelve people. Site offices, village halls or meeting rooms at the local authority offices are often used for design reviews. It is your responsibility to organise any technology you need for your presentation.



Costs

Design review costs are typically met by the project promoter.
Our charges are as follows (plus VAT and expenses):

Half day meeting to review one project	£4,500
Full day meeting to review a large or complex project which requires an extended site visit and discussion	£6,000
Follow-up review (without site visit)	£3,000

Normally fees will be invoiced from Design South East but in some areas we have arrangements where the local authority invoices and we recoup our fees from them. For reviews of single private houses, we require the fee to be paid in advance of the review.

Documents to submit

At least seven days before the design review we need you to send us the documents related to your proposal. These and any additional documents should be submitted by email or some other system such as Dropbox or WeSendit.

We want you to come to design review as early as possible in the design process. So the list below is a guide and we would rather you come to design review than wait until everything was ready.

- The story of how the chosen design was arrived at; what options were rejected.
- Contextual analysis showing the site in relation to adjoining properties and its wider context.
- Aerial photographs of the site and its surroundings.
- Illustrations of the historical development of the urban form over time, listed buildings and conservation area boundaries.
- Site plans clearly showing land ownership. Indicate specific areas that are to be built on, buildings for demolition, retention and/or refurbishment.
- Landscape analysis and details of the landscape design approach.
- Plans, sections and elevations of proposed buildings. Street sections and sections through buildings which also show the wider topography.
- Photomontages and visualisations demonstrating the development in its context.
- Detailed drawings communicating the architectural approach and materials.

3-D illustrations are particularly welcome to demonstrate a variety of user experiences, such as pedestrian or vehicle approaches, sense of arrival, internal and external orientation etc.

We send this information out to the Panel members attending the design review session at least one week before the meeting takes place. You can still continue to work on your designs and present additional or more detailed information at the Panel meeting.

**On
the day**



The meeting

There are **four** parts to the design review session:

1 Site visit

The Panel will go out on site with the design team/client and a local authority representative. The objective is to get a thorough feel for the site and the opportunities and challenges it presents. We would suggest that the group of people accompanying the Panel on site should not be too large (four at most). We will want to walk round within the site but also view the site from outside of its boundary and get a feel for the wider context. On very large sites we may need you to provide a minibus to enable this.

2 Local authority briefing

Once we return to the venue the Chair will ask the local authority to explain the planning context to the project and what they are looking for from the review. This should take no more than 10 minutes.

It is important that this briefing comes from the local authority as we need to hear directly from them about the policy considerations and local sensitivities. It underlines the impartiality of design review.



3 Presentation

You now have up to 30 minutes to present your project. A good way to break this up is to begin with the client explaining their vision, objectives, or brief for no more than 10 minutes and then the architect to present the project for no more than 20.

Do not waste time establishing your credentials as a developer or architect by talking about your portfolio or how many awards you have won. We are reviewing the current project. We are not interested in what you have done in the past unless you want to tell us about the lessons you have learnt that are relevant to this project.

Remember the Panel will have had an opportunity to view the documents you presented so it is not necessary to discuss every detail of the project. It is best to concentrate on the story of how you have arrived at those particular designs, how you are responding to the brief and the context and what you are trying to achieve.

4 Questions, discussion and feedback

The Chair will begin by inviting Panel members to ask questions to clarify any issues with the project presenter(s). They will then give you their feedback on the designs. At the end of the review process, the Chair will conclude the discussion with a verbal summary of the advice offered.

Who should attend

At each Panel meeting, there will be at least five panel members including the Chair and a Panel manager from Design South East who will take notes and draft the report.

As a minimum, the architect/lead designer and client should attend. Other members of the project team such as planning consultants and other design or technical consultants, may also attend. If there is a landscape architect on the team it is very helpful for them to attend.

We will encourage relevant local authority officers to attend the meeting; these may include planning, conservation and highways officers. If there has been involvement from another part of the council please let us know. If there is involvement from another agency, such as Historic England or the county highways team, we will invite them to design review. If they cannot attend we may ask for their views in advance.

We also encourage a range of people to come and observe design review. This might include additional local authority officers, students, other professionals, elected members, etc. In all cases observers agree to maintain the confidentiality of design review.

Sometimes we get requests to conduct a design review without the local authority present. On other occasions local authority officers are unable to be present because a formal pre-application process has not begun and it is their policy not to invest staff time at such an early stage. We will always insist that the local authority is invited and we will always send the design review report to the local authority. We do not undertake private design reviews. This is because design review has to be seen to be independent and neutral in the planning process. Without this independence its findings will not carry weight at planning.

Presentation methods

There are different ways to approach presenting to the Panel. Design South East does not insist that you use one method or another.

1 Paper plans and drawings

It is perfectly acceptable to conduct a design review by tabling a set of plans, drawings and visualisations. Please bring these along at sufficient scale that they can be easily viewed around the table.

2 PowerPoint

You might choose to use a PowerPoint presentation to outline the project and how you have arrived at the current design. It is up to you to ensure that you have the appropriate technology to make your presentation.

3 Display boards

You may prefer to use display boards. This may be helpful if you have already produced boards for a client meeting or public consultation. We suggest you use six A1 boards, and certainly no more than ten.

4 Models

Models are one of the best ways of communicating the concept and design of a project and their use is encouraged wherever possible. Even rough cardboard models can be useful.



A scenic view of a residential neighborhood with a large body of water in the background, overlaid with the text "Following your review". The foreground is filled with lush green and brown vegetation, including tall grasses and flowering plants. The middle ground shows a dense residential area with numerous houses and trees. In the background, a large body of water stretches across the horizon under a clear, light blue sky. The text "Following your review" is written in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, centered in the lower half of the image.

**Following
your review**

The report

After the design review session, a written report will be issued summarising the views of the Panel. As a guide we aim to email out the report within 10 working days. If you need the report earlier, to meet a planning or funding deadline, we will do our best to oblige, but please give us advanced notice.

This report will be a concise written summary and may also include suggestions and recommendations. The aim of the design review report is to assist and encourage developers/advisors in achieving better quality development proposals. In the case of current planning applications, the contents of the design review report will become a public document and are expected to be considered as a material planning consideration.

We are happy to amend the report if we make a factual error. However, we cannot change the advice or opinions contained in the report.

Responding to the review

Please consider each point made in the design review report. It may be helpful to annotate in your final design and access statement how you have responded to each point. This will demonstrate your commitment to design quality by showing you have positively engaged with design review.

Remember that the National Planning Policy Framework gives the opinions of design review panels weight in planning decisions. Where design review opinion differs from that of statutory consultees it is important to remember that in most cases the advice of statutory consultees is not mandatory.

More than one review?

Larger, more complex or sensitive projects may benefit from more than one design review, for example a first review at the concept stage and another when more detailed designs have been developed. When a project is reviewed more than once we will try to ensure that the same panel members are involved, or at least that a majority of the Panel are the same. This removes the need for a full site visit.

For private houses hoping to gain planning permission via paragraph 55 of the NPPF we often have a number of reviews until the Panel are satisfied that the 'test' under paragraph 55 has been passed. Where we undertake multiple reviews the latter ones may be conducted with a smaller panel, perhaps just the chair and one panel member. In these cases the fee will be reduced.

Design workshops

For larger complex sites which are being considered at an early stage we often undertake design workshops in partnership with the landowners and the local authority. These still make use of our expert Panel but in a more 'hands-on' role. Such workshops are useful to develop design principles and objectives for the site, establish a broad framework for the lay-out and strategies for dealing with key opportunities and constraints. A design review might follow a workshop once early designs have emerged.

The fine print

Design South East is the region's leading source of built environment support and one of the most experienced design review providers in the UK. Local authorities, the development sector and communities trust us to provide impartial and constructive design advice and assistance. We are independent and offer an unrivalled quality of service to support design quality and help transform places of all shapes and sizes. In offering design review, we pledge that:

- we will deal with your enquiry efficiently and flexibly to ensure we do not delay the development of your project.
- we will ensure that there is a suitable panel for your project. Our panels always consist of experts with a range of skills including architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, engineering. When you book a review, even in one of our pre-arranged review meetings, we carefully consider the composition of the panel to ensure it has the right range of expertise for your project.
- we will draw up an agenda for the design review allowing sufficient time for the site visit, travel between site and venue, presentation and discussion.
- our Chairs will ensure that the design review meeting is conducted in a polite and constructive manner and is as helpful as it can be to all parties.
- we will maintain an appropriate level of confidentiality, depending on the stage your project has reached.
- we will ensure that our panel members do not have conflicts of interest.
- we will produce reports which are succinct and useful, explaining clearly what you need to do to improve the design of your project. Reports will be issued within 10 working days of the review meeting, unless agreed otherwise.
- we will seek your feedback on the design review process within three months of the meeting.
- we will deal with any comments and complaints through a professional complaints procedure and act quickly to address any issues identified.

Confidentiality

All information submitted to Design South East for design review will be treated as confidential.

If a planning application has not yet been submitted our report will be confidential and only released to the parties attending the review meeting and the local authority. Once a planning application is submitted the local authority may choose to make the review report public with the other planning documents. Even if they do not do this they may be subject to a Freedom of Information request.

If the project is being reviewed after a planning application has been submitted our report will become one of the planning documents and will be publicly accessible.

If you have a particularly sensitive project and there is a need for additional measures to ensure confidentiality, please discuss those with our Head of Design Advice.

Conflicts and declarations of interest

Design South East has a conflicts of interest policy which includes a protocol for design review panel members. Panel members are excluded from reviewing projects where they may be exposed to conflicts of interest.

Sometimes there are indirect connections between panel members and parties to the project which are not sufficiently strong to constitute a conflict of interest. Declarations of interest are made where no conflict of interest arises but clarity and openness in the process requires this information to be declared for the avoidance of any doubt or misconceptions.

If you believe there is a conflict of interest which we have not been made aware of please ask to speak in private to a member of the Design South East team at the earliest opportunity

How we deal with complaints

Design South East is committed to delivering an efficient, high quality service. We aim to provide prompt, courteous, helpful and informative advice in response to all who approach us. We are always keen to hear the views of our customers and partners about our performance.

As with all organisations, from time to time things can go wrong, and we may not provide the standard of service that we have set ourselves. We are keen to hear about such instances, so that we can learn from our mistakes and get it right next time.

We aim to handle complaints quickly, fairly and helpfully. When dealing with complaints Design South East endeavours to:

- ensure that making a complaint is as easy as possible
- treat a complaint seriously whether it is made by telephone, letter or e-mail
- deal with it promptly, politely and, where appropriate, informally
- include in our response an apology where we have got things wrong, an explanation of the position, or information on any actions taken, etc
- learn from complaints and use them to improve our service

We will do our best to:

- treat complaints thoroughly, fairly and politely, and investigate them sensitively;
- respond promptly. Your complaint will be acknowledged within 5 days and a response given within 18 working days from the date of receipt. If it is not possible to give you a full reply within this time - for instance because a detailed investigation is required - we will give you an interim response
- tell you what is being done to deal with your complaint, when you can expect the full reply and from whom.

