Survey of local and regional design review panels, their location, type and impact
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This publication is available in alternative formats on request from the publisher.
Databuild conducted research into design review panels across England. The research had three objectives:

1. Mapping of panels in the nine regions of England
2. Exploration of panel operations and procedures
3. An explanation of where CABE and the design panel steering group could usefully provide further support to Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and design panels.

Interviews were conducted with 345 LPAs to identify panels, usually with the head of planning or head of development control. In stage 2, interviews were also conducted with 56 panel managers to explore operations.

1.1 Panel coverage

- Overall, 81 panels were identified through the research – 6 regional (covering 270 LPAs), 9 sub-regional (covering 74 LPAs), 3 shared local (covering 9 LPAs) and 63 local panels. 71 per cent had been established in the past five years.
- 341 authorities (88 per cent of all authorities in England) have panel review access at some level; 47 authorities have no coverage. 117 LPAs have multiple level panel access.
- Where there is one available, LPAs are more likely to use their local panel than a sub-regional or regional panel. Large, complex schemes or ones with cross-boundary issues tend to be referred to sub-regional or regional panels.
- Local panels are less common away from the South East, South West and London. Local panels are most common in London, where almost half of the boroughs have one.
- 21 LPAs have plans to establish panels whilst 31 LPAs knew of plans to establish sub-regional/shared local panels.
- Many LPAs have alternatives to local design review panels, including internal groups, private architect services and individual officer expertise. 63 per cent felt these provisions were sufficient.
- There are 18 Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) in England. These are more common in northern regions and have a design review function.
- 91 per cent of all LPAs feel there are benefits to including design review panels in the development control process.
1.2 Panel operations

- In terms of best practice in running a panel (set out in CABE publications), many panels have gaps in procedures and could be more robust. Regional and sub-regional panels tend to have more rigorous procedures in place than local panels.

- All panels have terms of reference and formalised objectives. However, these tend to be vague mission statements rather than tangible goals.

- 32 per cent of panels have a set budget ie a dedicated annual budget for running the panel. Levels of funding vary greatly, but tend to be higher for regional/sub-regional panels. More than half the panels do not remunerate their members.

- Average panel membership is just over 20 members, though average meeting attendance is around half of that. Recruitment generally takes place through invitation or nomination.

- Most members are architects or individuals with expertise in architecture and the built environment. Over a quarter of panels do not have one or more of the following skills represented on the panel – town planning, urban design, landscaping. Over half do not have members with engineering expertise.

- The number of schemes panels review varies greatly; some review less than 10, others over 100. There is also no discernible pattern as to which types of panel deal with different types of schemes (in terms of breakdown between residential/commercial or pre-application/live application). All panels have criteria for schemes they will or won’t review; these are usually small schemes such as refurbishments or any scheme covering less than 10 units.

- Most panels allow observers to attend discussions and around two thirds make panel comments publicly available. Only half of panel managers said they had experienced conflicts of interest in members reviewing schemes. Half of those that do experience conflicts of interest exclude the members in question from discussion of that particular scheme; half simply note the interest on the review report.

- Around half of panels are monitored and evaluated, usually on an annual basis. However, this is usually conducted by the panel manager; only 10 per cent undergo independent evaluation.

- 32 per cent of panel managers think their panel has the capacity to review more schemes each year than it currently does.

1.3 Support requirements

- 30 per cent of panel managers said that they had experienced (or knew of) difficulties in establishing panels – this was usually in terms of securing funding and corporate/developer acceptance of the panel’s value.

- Panel managers felt that further funding could improve the operations of the panel through enabling more frequent meetings, attracting a greater mix of skills, and sourcing training.

- There is a widespread requirement for best practice information. Many panels/LPAs are not clear what they should be expecting from panels and how they should be operating.

- Some managers felt that training delivered by an expert, nationally recognised agency would be useful in enhancing panel behaviour and design review expertise.

- Some LPA respondents said that the panel review process was slow and not well communicated to them. Panels need support with this.

- Many LPAs felt that they would benefit from more local panel reviews, where local context and knowledge could be applied to the assessment of schemes.

1.4 Implications for the steering group

- There is a requirement amongst some LPAs for support in establishing panels, through promotion of panels at a corporate level, provision of funding to enable LPAs to launch panels, or both.

- There is also a real need amongst LPAs and panels for the production of formal best practice guidance around establishing and operating design review panels. Panels with rigorous operations could also be championed through case studies. This would enable benchmarking and more rigorous procedures. In addition, the steering group could establish a forum for best practice to be exchanged or peer visits arranged.

- A small number of LPAs do not use panels and do not see the value in doing so. The steering group could consider some promotional work with these LPAs, highlighting the benefits of panel review through peer visits or case studies.
2 Methodology

2.1 Background

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) is the government’s advisor on architecture, urban design and public space in England. CABE’s function is to promote high-quality design in all aspects of the built environment. CABE is funded by both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG).

CABE also promotes and provides advice on the use of design review panels at a regional level and through this role CABE continues to support the development of new regional panels. With existing regional panels CABE offers support regarding issues of protocol, confidentiality, conflicts of interest and any other matters relating to process.

Increasingly there is interest in the management and quality of local design review panels, from local authorities, from the RIBA and RTPI and from government. Presently the RIBA and RTPI are exploring the establishment of a form of local panel organisation.

As the leading centre of excellence on design review, CABE wanted to establish a good evidence base about the current situation, looking at the national coverage of panels, the form they take, how well they are working, and for whom, and the panel’s relative resource requirements. From this evidence local and regional need for design review can be assessed, and ways of managing potential growth in demand can be developed, ensuring high quality design review is the norm.

2.2 Objectives

CABE commissioned research to answer three research objectives:

1. **Accurate assessment of the national spread of design review** Complete the mapping of panels at a local, sub-regional and regional level in England to ascertain the number of panels operating and set out where there are areas without access to a design review panel.

2. **Assessment of the panel types, output and impact** Once the number of panels has been established, explanation of how panels are operating in terms of membership and relationship to the local authority, their output and their impact.

3. **Recommendations on next steps** The survey findings will be used to inform decisions on the direction of CABE support for local and regional design review panels.
2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Approach
The following approach was taken to collect the required data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 – identification of design review panels</td>
<td>RTPI survey data and telephone interviews with 345 local planning authorities (LPAs)</td>
<td>150 directors/heads of planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>109 heads of development control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51 principal planners/team leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28 urban design officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 junior officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 – exploration of panel operations</td>
<td>Interviews with 56 panels</td>
<td>53 panel managers/administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 panel chairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Methodology
Data collection took place between the 23 September and 16 October 2008.

2.3.2 Limitations
- LPA respondents had very different perceptions about what constitutes a design review panel. Although the research revealed many panels in operation, only a proportion of these fitted the description agreed with steering group stakeholders. Definitions provided to respondents are outlined in section 3.
- County Councils often did not have an appropriate representative to conduct the survey. Respondents were asked about the existence of a county-run design review panel, but no further questions were asked if they did not have one.
This section presents the findings from stage 1 of the research and includes:

- extent of design review panels across the country
- mapping of each region, showing the presence of both local and sub-regional panels
- the extent of use of available panels
- alternative types of panel encountered through the research.

### 3.1 Panel definitions

Before presenting the extent of design review panels in England, it is important to clarify what was felt to constitute a ‘design review panel’. Following discussion with CABE, RIBA and the RTPI, it was agreed that panels would have the following criteria:

- non-commercial
- would review any scheme within a local authority boundary ie not just conservation areas
- membership consists of at least one LPA representative and one independent built environment professional ie not a private architects panel or internal LPA panel.

A ‘local’ design review panel is one which is managed by a single LPA and largely reviews schemes within the boundaries of that LPA.

A ‘shared local’ design review panel is one which may be managed by a number of different LPAs and reviews schemes for those LPAs.

A ‘sub-regional’ design review panel is one which may be managed by a number of different external organisations and reviews schemes for multiple LPAs.

‘Regional’ design review panel refers to the organisations which cover LPAs in six of England’s regions:

- South East – Kent Architecture Centre
- South West – Creating Excellence
- East of England – Inspire East
- East Midlands – Opun
- West Midlands – MADE
- North West – Places Matter.

### 3.2 Extent of panels across England

Overall, stage 1 of the research identified the following number of panels and the extent of their coverage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel type</th>
<th>No. identified</th>
<th>LPAs covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-regional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared local</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Breakdown of panel types and extent of coverage (n=345)

In line with the definitions set out in section 3.1, this shows that there were a total of 81 design review panels in England at the time data collection took place.

In total, it would seem that 341 authorities (88 per cent of all authorities in England) have panel review access at some level; 47 authorities have no coverage. 117 LPAs have multiple level panel access.

66 LPAs have both regional and sub-regional coverage. 49 LPAs have both regional and local coverage. 20 LPAs (all in the South West or South East) have sub-regional and local coverage.
3.3 Summary of mapping

- In most regions outside London, the South East and South West, there are fewer local panels and very little local panel activity aside from those in urban centres. Local panels are most common in London, where almost half of the boroughs have one, yet there is no sub-regional or regional coverage, and no Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs).

- There are few examples of LPAs with both local and sub-regional coverage.

- If regional panels are not counted, 11 counties in England do not have any panels in them at all. Two of these – Bedfordshire and Cheshire – are set to be split into unitary authorities and therefore design review panels are unlikely to be established before this restructuring.

- There are 18 URCs in England. These are more common in northern regions and have a design review function.

- Several respondents cited panels operated by other LPAs which they believed they could access. However, none of the LPAs operating the panels agreed with this eg Nottingham.

- Overall, 21 LPAs have plans to establish panels whilst 31 LPAs knew of plans to establish sub-regional panels. Where neighbouring LPAs knew of plans for sub-regional panels, it was not clear whether they were referring to the same plans.
3.3.2 South East

All LPAs and CCs within the South East can refer schemes to the Kent Architecture Centre. However, figure 1 shows that whilst there is almost complete coverage within Hampshire, elsewhere in the region panel coverage is patchy. There are plans to establish six local panels; Brighton and Hove, Gravesham, Isle of Wight, Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Windsor and Maidenhead.

In addition, there does not seem to be a common factor between those with local panel coverage and those without i.e. they are not all found in growth areas or urban centres, nor exclusively in larger LPAs which may have the resources to establish a panel.

Under the umbrella of the Hampshire County Panel, three shared local panels, seemingly unique, were identified in Hampshire:

1. Fareham, Gosport, Havant and Portsmouth
2. Basingstoke and Deane, Hart and Rushmoor
3. Eastleigh and Winchester

There are no URCs in the South East.
3.3.3 South West

All LPAs and CCs are covered by Creating Excellence. The western part of the region is also covered by the Devon and Cornwall Architecture Centre and CPR Regeneration, a URC covering a 5-mile urban stretch within Kerrier District Council.

There is very little local panel coverage in Dorset, Somerset or Wiltshire. In the north of the region there are two more URCs – Gloucester Heritage and The New Swindon Company – covering Gloucester and Swindon.

There are plans for the establishment of more local panels in East Devon, Kerrier, Poole and South Somerset.
3.3.4 London
There is no regional or sub-regional panel within London. In addition, there are no URCs.

However, there are numerous ways in which London is one of the best resourced regions for design review:

- a higher proportion of LPAs are covered by local panels than in any other region. This may be due to the influence of CABE as well as London Borough Councils (LBCs) being better resourced than many LPAs
- the London 2012 panel is coordinating the Olympic regeneration programme
- several LBCs also mentioned that they have used Design London – an international centre for design-led innovation – for advice
- there is a perception that LBCs are more likely to receive CABE design review than LPAs in other regions.

There are plans to establish local panels in Ealing and Harrow, as well as one in Lambeth.
3.3.5 East of England
Aside from Inspire East, the regional panel, the East of England has two sub-regional panels – BEAMS in Hertfordshire and the new Essex County panel – which cover a large number of authorities. However, beyond three local panels (two in the urban centres of Cambridge and Norwich) there is very little local panel coverage, and no LPA mentioned plans to establish one. Within Bedfordshire, planning departments are awaiting the formation of the two new unitary authorities before re-examining processes.

Aside from design review panels, there are four URCS; 1st East URC (for Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft), North Northants Development Company, Opportunity Peterborough, and Renaissance Southend.
3.3.6 East Midlands

The situation in the East Midlands is very similar to that in the East of England. Opun covers the entire region, there is a sub-regional panel covering part of Leicestershire, but there is no local coverage aside from the two urban centres of Nottingham and Lincoln. North Kesteven District Council is planning to establish a local panel.

Some Nottinghamshire LPAs said they could access the Nottingham panel but this was not felt to be the case by the Nottingham City Council respondent.

There are two URCs – Derby Cityscape and Leicester Regeneration Company – as well as a regeneration vehicle (not a URC) in Nottingham.
3.3.7 West Midlands

The West Midlands regional panel – MADE – is unique in that its remit does not cover the entire region. They do not review schemes arising within the boundaries of Urban Vision North Staffs, which operates for Stoke, Newcastle-under-Lyme, and Staffordshire Moorlands.

Like the South East, existing local panel representations do not show a clear pattern; whilst there is a panel in Birmingham and Shrewsbury, the only other local panel is hosted by the rural Malvern Hills authority.

As with the East Midlands, there are two URCs – RegenCo (Sandwell) and Walsall Regeneration Company – and one regeneration vehicle, Transforming Telford.

In terms of future development of panels, respondents in East Staffordshire, Lichfield and Walsall knew of plans to establish local panels. It was not clear whether this would be a sub-regional panel, as the three LPAs are connected.
3.3.8 Yorkshire and Humberside

Yorkshire and Humberside does not have a regional panel though plans to establish one are underway. Currently there are a number of local panels around major urban centres and the Humber ARC panel covering schemes in North Lincolnshire and Hull.

As well as the Bradford Centre Regeneration URC, there are two other regeneration vehicles in the region – Hull Forward and Creative Sheffield.

In much of North and West Yorkshire, mostly rural areas, there are no design review panels, and no plans to establish any.
3.3.9 North East

There is no regional panel in the North East, though much of the south of the region is covered by the recently established Tees Valley panel, covering six local authorities.

The Newcastle Conservation Panel has extended its remit to cover all design review within the city. Aside from this, no local panels were identified, leaving much of County Durham and the urban Tyne and Wear areas without panel coverage of any kind. There are plans to establish local panels for Durham City Council and South Tyneside.

There are two URCs – Sunderland ARC and Tees Valley Regeneration. The latter covers a similar area to the design review panel.

Figure 8: Design review panel coverage: North East
3.3.10 North West

Figure 9 shows very little local panel coverage in the North West. However, Places Matter provides a panel for the whole region, whilst the Elevate panel covers most of Lancashire and the Pennine area.

In addition, there are four URCs in the North West – New East Manchester, West Lakes Renaissance, ReBlackpool and Central Salford.

As with Bedfordshire, there are unlikely to be plans to establish panels in Cheshire until the new unitary authorities are established.

There are plans for local panels in Bolton and Eden district council.
3.4 Panel use

The mapping in section 3.3 indicates where LPAs have access to design review panels. However, some LPAs do not access the panel service available to them, and in some cases are not aware that it is available at all.

3.4.1 Extent of use

LPA respondents with access to a panel/panels were asked if they had referred schemes to the panel(s) in the last year:

- 100 per cent of LPAs with a local panel or shared local panel had used it in the last year.
- 72 per cent of LPAs with sub-regional panel coverage were aware of this; 58 per cent of those aware have accessed the sub-regional panel in the past year.

Where LPAs were covered by one of the regional panels, 80 per cent were aware of this whilst 41 per cent had used them (51 per cent of those aware of the panel).

Where LPAs had used a panel, the respondent was asked to estimate the number or proportion of schemes which were referred to the panel in the last year:

- For local panels, estimates varied from 4 to 75 per annum, and almost all respondents said it was less than 5 per cent of all applications. As might be expected, it tended to be the urban local panels which dealt with more applications.
- The number of schemes referred to sub-regional panels tended to be fewer, with two LPA respondents saying they forwarded only one application last year, and many saying less than 1 per cent of schemes are seen by the sub-regional panel.
- There is a similar situation with regional panels, where very few schemes are referred to the panel. More than half of LPAs which use their regional panel refer less than 1 per cent of schemes processed through their planning department.

3.4.2 Reasons for use

Where local panels have been established, they are more likely to be used more often than sub-regional or regional panels. There are several reasons for this:

1 Remit – where LPAs had access to a local panel and another type of panel, they were asked what the criteria were for accessing one or the other. The general response was that sub-regional or regional panels were only used where the scheme was very large and complex ie many hundreds of units on a mixed use site, of national importance eg airports, or included cross-boundary development. Criteria for local panels tended to be any major application. With this much wider remit, it is unsurprising that local panels are more frequently used.

2 Duplication of effort – where LPAs have access to a local panel, this is likely to have been established by the LPA to review schemes. It is therefore less likely that they will see the need to use other panels when they have set aside funding and resources for their own.

3 Awareness – as demonstrated above, many LPAs are not aware of their sub-regional or regional panels, and therefore all schemes sent for review in these areas will go through the local panel.

4 Preferences – a significant number of LPAs value panel members who can review a scheme, keeping local context and appreciation in mind. Some LPAs feel that sub-regional and regional panels do not provide such high quality reviews because their members lack local knowledge. Where LPAs only had sub-regional or regional panel access, many felt they would benefit from more local review options.

However, where a regional panel was available, LPAs with a local panel were no less likely to be aware of or have used their regional panel.
3.5 Future for design review panels

The fact that 71 per cent of panels found in the research were established in the past five years, and over 20 LPAs have plans in place to establish their own panels in the near future, demonstrates that panel review is a growing practice amongst LPAs in England. This section explores LPA attitudes towards, and highlights some of the perceptions of, design review panels.

3.5.1 Positive perceptions
All respondents were asked whether they felt design review provided benefits by improving schemes. 91 per cent of respondents felt that there were benefits. The two main benefits cited were:

1. panel objectivity/independence
2. panel knowledge/expertise.

These lead to the following benefits:

- **Reduces the likelihood of appeals** – because most panel members are independent of the scheme, good design is likely to be the main motivating factor behind recommendations. In addition, applicant agents are having their work reviewed by reputable peers rather than only the LPA officers. It is therefore less likely that developers will object to the recommendations and more likely that they will adhere to them. In addition, if the scheme is taken to appeal and design issues are discussed, panel comments can be called upon as an objective assessment of design on a scheme. Some LPA respondents stated that any locally controversial schemes get referred for panel review. However, it is not clear whether panel comments stretch to making recommendations on application decisions, nor the impact panel comments have. Therefore, without further research, it cannot be ascertained whether LPAs are using panels to make ‘difficult’ decisions, though their comments are certainly being used as a ‘back-up’ for some LPAs in negotiations with applicants.

- **Improves the quality of design for the public** – as design review panels often consist of members with a variety of expertise and experience that most individual planning departments do not have, some respondents felt that the recommendations coming from the panel would be very useful and help to create a higher quality of scheme.

Perceptions of panel benefits include:

- ‘We sometimes get into difficulties with developers not accepting our advice. We need independent advice from experts in the field to express a view that they [developers] are more likely to take notice of.’
- ‘I think it is important to get an objective review, particularly on controversial or problematic proposals.’
- ‘Panels give an objective assessment of the impact that developments may have on an area. Planning team members can get too close to a project or end up following design guidance too slavishly. It’s also important to get the input of people who are up to speed on contemporary urban design.’

3.5.2 Negative perceptions
9 per cent of respondents felt that panels have a negative rather than beneficial impact. 8 per cent of those with access to panels felt there were negative impacts, compared to 18 per cent of LPAs without access. Their misgivings were based largely around the fact that not all panels operate at a local level, that they are non-statutory, and that they can slow the application process. These features lead to the following difficulties:

- **Increases developer dissatisfaction and increases the chances of an appeal** – in contrast to those LPAs who saw the panel process as being more likely to engage and persuade developers, some felt that developers would simply see the panels as an unnecessary extra hurdle in the planning process. As the panels are non-statutory, developers may question the referral of their scheme to such a body. In addition, the pace at which some LPAs felt panels dealt with the applications (or indeed, unnecessary delay of any kind) may lead the developer to appeal against non-determination.

- **Could reduce the quality of design on the scheme** – again, in direct contrast to the arguments above, some LPA respondents felt that a panel consisting of members with few local interests or contextual knowledge could lead to inappropriate or damaging recommendations on schemes. In addition, some respondents cited panels with members that they felt had poor expertise, whilst one respondent pointed out that with rolling membership and ad hoc attendance, panel review recommendations were less consistent than those of planning departments.
- **No necessity** – a couple of LPA respondents felt that because they have in-house skills, or their caseload does not contain large or complex applications, there is very little need to invest time and resources in establishing a design review panel. This group did not see any real drawbacks, but did not see particular advantages either.

Perceptions of panel drawbacks include:

- ‘Because I try to train people internally to do the work, they know the area and know the feel of the locality. They are not isolated from the community’.
- ‘We find that using a private consultant architect is better than a review because sometimes you can get very mixed and confusing opinions at the panel’.
- ‘The region is very diverse and there is not enough of a local feel and understanding from the regional panel’.
- ‘The panel we used was very critical but didn’t lead to any changes. The scheme has to be within a budget; there is no point in the panel coming up with something outstanding when the money is not available for those changes’.

### 3.6 Alternative design review provisions

Around 300 LPAs have no local design review panel coverage whilst 47 have no panel coverage at all. However, many of these local authorities do have alternative mechanisms for design review of schemes. The different mechanisms cited by respondents include:

- **Internal panels** – some LPAs operate design review panels whose membership consists entirely of LPA officers and members. The type of internal panel itself can vary; some LPAs have large assemblies akin to ‘proper’ design review panels, whilst others have small groups of design officers or even just discuss complex applications at weekly team meetings. At Waltham Forest, the LPA has established a cross-departmental panel which examines schemes. Other examples include:
  - ‘Major schemes are put to a design team within the department that has a range of different skills, including a historic buildings officer and a conservation officer’.
  - ‘We meet the design and conservation team and local councillors together on a monthly basis and discuss various aspects of scheme design’.
  - ‘We have a team of urban designers whose input we seek when discussing pre-applications and applications’.
  - ‘We have a design surgery within the planning and control service. There are fortnightly meetings, it’s a team discussion’.

- **Private panels/consultants** – in contrast to the internal panels, some LPAs refer schemes to panels which consist entirely of external architects, whilst some outsource design review to private consultants. These services are usually paid for on a commercial basis by the LPA and therefore would not qualify as design review panels. Examples include:
  - ‘We have an external architect who we employ to look at designs on any scheme which any officer feels they need assistance on’.
  - ‘We have an urban designer employed under contract, who reviews all major schemes. If we need more urban design expertise, we go to BDP and speak to their consultants’.

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1 All LPAs can refer schemes to CABE, but not all schemes can be reviewed.
'We use outside consultants with specialists who comment on applications.'

- **Conservation panels** – there are many examples of conservation panels across the country. These were initially established to review schemes which affected conservation and heritage sites within the local authority boundaries. Some, such as those in Liverpool and Newcastle, have extended their remit to review design on any major scheme (these have been included in the maps). However, some eg Rochdale, continue to operate only on their original remit.

'We have a conservation and urban design team who scrutinise applications and pre-applications.'

- **Individual expertise** – a small number of LPAs rely solely upon the judgement of individual officers or in-house urban designers when assessing the quality of design on a scheme. These tend to be smaller LPAs, though in some cases the respondent seemed to imply design review through individuals was more a wish than a necessity. Examples include:

'We have the planning officer’s judgement.'

'Officers that are available deal with design as best they can but we don’t get many large schemes – over 90 per cent of our LPA area is green belt.'

'Design depends largely upon the judgement of the case officer.'

'At the moment we are reliant on individual officer experience.'

Where alternative design review provisions were mentioned, 63 per cent of respondents felt these were sufficient for their needs. This is surprising as most of those without panel access could see the potential benefits in panel review.
Following identification of panels through stage 1, 55 panel managers were then interviewed regarding the structure and procedures of their panel. In terms of panel scope, 42 local, 7 sub-regional and all 6 regional panels were interviewed.

4.1 Respondents

In 7 per cent of panels, the panel manager role is full-time. The part-time panel managers were generally from within the LPA, and varied in seniority from ‘planning services manager’ and ‘head of development control’ to ‘conservation officer’ and ‘urban design officer’. There were a small number of consultants and architects who also acted as panel managers.

The part-time managers spend anywhere between 1 per cent and 70 per cent of their working hours managing the panel.

- 35 per cent of part-time managers spend at least 10 per cent of their time running the panel
- 11 per cent spend more than a quarter of their working hours running the panel
- 4 per cent spend more than half their working hours doing so.

Regional and sub-regional panels tended to require a greater proportion of a manager’s time. Those in senior departmental positions tended to spend lower proportions of their time on panel management.

80 per cent of panel manager respondents had been managers for over a year. 7 per cent had been managing the panel for over 20 years.

The main areas explored with panel managers were:

- aims and objectives
- management and budgets/costs
- background and recruitment of panel membership
- extent of panel review and further capacity
- procedures for discussion of schemes
- Procedures for reporting decisions
- monitoring and evaluation of panel activities
- improvements to the panel process/further support required.

4.2 Panel aims and objectives

Although many panels do have formalised aims and objectives set out in their terms of reference, these do not set out targets. The sample of aims and objectives provided below are representative of the panels covered in stage 2:

- ‘The aim of [the panel] is to provide expert impartial design advice and guidance to [the LPAs] Planning Committee on significant development proposals and other design related matters.’
- ‘To consider emerging site development proposals and proposals for the public realm, and to make recommendations on design, architecture, urban design, landscape, access, ecological and sustainability implications, or to other aspects of a scheme, where there are implications for any of the above.’
- ‘The purpose of the design review service in [the sub-region] is to help raise the standard of architecture and urban design by commenting upon and influencing the proposals that are put before the panel.’
- ‘The purpose of [the panel] is to achieve high design quality in the built environment in the region by offering expert, constructive, impartial advice to developers, planning authorities, and regional agencies on the architectural, landscape and urban design aspects and on climate change impacts, of master plans and major development proposals.’
4.3 Management and budgets

Most local panels are managed and funded by the LPA which provides the panel. The larger panels (regional and sub-regional) tend to be managed and funded by a number of organisations, including CABE, RIBA, the RDA, county councils and the LPA which hosts the panel.

32 per cent of panel managers interviewed said that they had a set budget i.e. a dedicated annual budget for running the panel. Regional and sub-regional panels were much more likely to have a set budget than local panels; 64 per cent have, compared to 22 per cent of local panels.

Budgets for the local panels ranged between £50,000 (for a London Borough panel) and approximately £20,000 (for a large city panel) to less than £1,000 for three smaller panels in the South West.

Budgets for the sub-regional and regional panels tended to be higher on average, with two sub-regional panels quoting a budget of over £50,000 and three regional panels quoting a budget of around £100,000.

Where managers had a set budget to work with, 89 per cent said that the actual costs of running the panel worked within this budget. The remainder said that costs were slightly higher than the budget set aside for the running of the panel.

Amongst those panels that do not have set budgets, 65 per cent were able to estimate their costs, usually on a ‘per meeting’ basis. Estimates ranged from about £1,000 to £5,500 per annum.

Costs to panels included administration, venue hire, and member expenses. The extent to which panels reimburse members is shown below:

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Costs to panels included administration, venue hire, and member expenses. The extent to which panels reimburse members is shown below:

![Figure 10: Panel member reimbursement (n=56)](image)
As figure 10 shows, the majority of panel members work on an entirely voluntary basis. Where some panel members were remunerated and others weren’t, this was a split between LPA representatives (who are remunerated) and representatives of external bodies (who aren’t).

Where panels did provide some form of reimbursement, half provide an honorarium (a daily rate but not equivalent to the members’ typical salary) whilst half covered expenses only. Claiming and receipt of payments by panel members was often optional and some panel members choose not to claim as the fees are only nominal anyway.

Panels with a set budget were much more likely to reimburse members; 82 per cent of panels with a budget do so, compared to 21 per cent of those without.

However, provision of remuneration did not seem to impact upon membership or meeting attendance. Those panels offering remuneration did not have significantly higher attendance (proportionate to total membership) or a greater skills mix amongst panel members.

### 4.4 Panel membership

#### 4.4.1 Size

The size of panel membership varied between 4 and 43 members, with a median average of 23 and mean of 16.

- 20 per cent of panels had less than 10 members
- 55 per cent had between 10 and 20 members
- 25 per cent had over 20.

Although regional and sub-regional panels tended to be larger on average than local panels (a median of 25 members for the former group), there were still examples of local panels with large numbers of members eg Hackney LBC panel has 43 members.

Regardless of membership numbers, panel meetings rarely average more than 10 attendees. Indeed, only local panels have average attendances of more than 10.

#### 4.4.2 Background

Panel managers were asked to explain the breakdown of the panel membership, in terms of both professional background and panel expertise.

The following chart shows the proportion of panels which have representatives of different backgrounds:

![Figure 11: Professional background representation on panels (n=56)](chart.png)
Almost all local panels have some form of LPA representation, whilst regional and sub-regional panels are more likely to be made up of independent professionals and agency representatives.

Over half of design review panels had public representation through either elected members or community group representatives. In addition to being represented on every panel, independent professionals comprised the majority of each panel’s membership. This is shown in the following chart, which summarises the breakdown of backgrounds across all members in all the panels covered in stage 2 of the research.

**4.4.3 Skills base**
As well as professional backgrounds, panel managers were asked about the breakdown of skills within their panel. The chart below shows the proportion of panels with at least one member with the skills sets listed:

![Figure 12: per cent breakdown of panel membership by different backgrounds (n=842)](image1)

![Figure 13: Proportion of panels with different skills sets (n=56)](image2)
As figure 13 shows, although architecture and built environment skills are represented on all panels covered in stage 2, other important skills such as town planning, urban design and landscape architecture feature on less than three quarters of panels.

‘Other’ skills mentioned by respondents included:
- transport planner
- access consultant
- property developer
- surveyor/valuator
- conservation officer
- sustainability expert
- archaeologist
- community cohesion specialist
- public arts consultant.

The breakdown of those with different skills as a proportion of all panel members is as follows:

In addition to members of the panel, 82 per cent of panels also allow observers to be present at meetings. These observers are usually students/academics, LPA officers/managers, planning committee members or developers.

For the maintenance and encouragement of skills within panels, managers were asked whether panel members are given training. 37 per cent of panels do provide training for members, ranging from induction, panel operations, best practice observations and specialist skills development. Examples include:
- ‘We had CABE training on how to operate a panel. We carried out a dummy run of panel meetings and also observed how other local panels operate.’
- ‘We do have a training programme for members, covering design issues and teaching them about the principles of good design.’
- ‘Some panel members have attended short courses run by architecture centres. These provide training relating to urban design principles, context and local distinctiveness. It is broad training to give people the basics.’
- ‘The panel has had some training on sustainable construction and design.’

63 per cent of panels do not provide any training to members. The main reason was that the panel members were qualified professionals who did not require any training. A few respondents felt that they did not have the time or funding to organise panel training. Responses included:
- ‘They are just looking at architectural issues and we assume that they are all qualified to do so.’
- ‘They aren’t given any formal training because they have all had experience on other panels. We advise on how the panel members conduct themselves on the panel.’
- ‘We assume that they are experts in their fields.’
- ‘We have not seen the need to offer them training and they have not requested it. We created the panel so that we could use their guidance and expertise and we approach them as mentors.’
- ‘We don’t have the facility to provide training with the budget we have got.’

Despite the fact that most panels do not engage members in formal training, 52 per cent of panel managers (54 per cent of those that do not currently
provide training) felt that their members would benefit from extra training. Training requirements included:

- better understanding of LPA planning procedures and policies
- more training around negotiation and operating a panel process
- training on specialist areas such as Building For Life (BFL) standards, urban design and local context.

Managers did not seem to feel that there was a dearth of skills in landscaping, engineering or town planning, despite these skills sets not being present in many panels.

In addition to the panel managers and members themselves, 84 per cent of panels have full or part-time administrative support, covering venue hire, meeting/agenda preparation, minute taking/circulation, collating scheme information and preparing reports.

4.4.4 Recruitment
Panel managers were asked about the procedures for recruiting members to the panel. 22 per cent of panels advertise vacancies and require potential members to apply for a position. Vacancies are advertised in local newspapers, architectural journals, regional and national press, RDA and council websites. Regional and sub-regional panels are significantly more likely to advertise vacancies than local panels.

67 per cent of panels appoint members through nomination and invitation. Often the lead is other panel members, though panel members have been nominated by RIBA or the LPA. Panel chairs are usually appointed from within the panel by vote or brought in by the organisations managing/funding the panel.

11 per cent of panels advertise for members and then target certain groups with invitations if certain skills types are lacking.

70 per cent of panel managers do not have set tenures for their members, who are replaced when they choose to stand down. Where panel members do have set tenures, these vary between 2 and 6 years in length.

In addition, three quarters of panels do not have formal criteria for members to be accepted onto the panel. Some local panels do demand that members either live locally or are familiar with local planning operations. Three panels specify that any panel member must also be a member of RIBA.

4.5 Extent of panel review
The extent of panel operations varies greatly and there is little or no pattern to the number and type of schemes different types of panel review.

4.5.1 Number of schemes
The number of schemes reviewed by panels over the past year varied greatly, and there were often marked differences between different types of panel. Although the figures are an approximation only, they give some indication as to the current capacity of design review panels in England:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Range of scheme numbers reviewed</th>
<th>Mean number of schemes reviewed</th>
<th>Total number of schemes viewed annually</th>
<th>Potential further capacity for scheme review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local panels</td>
<td>2-120</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared local/ sub-regional panels</td>
<td>6-41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>21-72</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,657</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Number of schemes reviewed (and further capacity) by different panel types per annum (n=54)

2 All figures are ‘per annum’.
3 Extrapolated to the total number of each type of panel from information provided by those managers interviewed in the quantitative survey.
4 Extrapolated to the total number of each type of panel from information provided by those managers interviewed in the quantitative survey. Further capacity based upon similar levels of funding in the next year.
As the scheme range for local panels was very large, the following chart clarifies the clusters for the numbers of schemes reviewed by local panels per annum:

![Chart showing clusters of local panel case loads per annum (n=41)](image)

### 4.5.2 Types of scheme
There was also no clear pattern of certain types of panel mostly reviewing certain types of scheme over the past year. Pre-application schemes made up between 5 per cent and 80 per cent of those reviewed by individual panels. Furthermore, the residential/commercial scheme balance swung from 80 per cent residential and 20 per cent commercial in one local panel to 25 per cent housing and 75 per cent residential in another. In addition, schemes viewed by the panel vary year upon year.

The fact that some panel managers did not have accurate figures or annual reports to refer to makes any assessment of patterns more difficult.

Around half of the panels had reviewed a scheme more than once last year. Although figures provided were not very accurate, it seemed that where panels had reviewed a high proportion of pre-applications, they generally had a higher proportion of schemes which were revisited. Local panels seemed more likely to have revisited a large proportion of schemes.

### 4.5.3 Criteria for review
In certain cases, the panel membership may call in a scheme which is deemed to be sufficiently important. However, in most instances, LPA officers will forward a scheme and the panel manager will assess it against the panel’s terms of reference to decide whether it should be reviewed by their panel.

The main criteria dictating whether a panel will review a scheme is its size; most panels will only review major applications (any scheme over 10 units – though some terms of reference restricted the panel review to 50 units – or 1,000m² of commercial floor space). From a review of panel terms of reference, the most common criteria were:

- large or complex schemes
- infrastructure or public realm proposals
- schemes affecting conservation areas or listed buildings
- schemes which have a significant impact upon the character or people of the LPA area
- publicly controversial applications
- Pre-applications or applications, but not frameworks or strategies, and often not outline masterplans.

Overall, most panels would not view any scheme which covered less than 10 units ie ‘minor’ or ‘other’ applications. Some panels also had very specific criteria. For example, a small number would not view pre-applications whilst one panel would not review applications which had been rejected by the LPA but were going to appeal. Some panels reviewed design briefs as part of their remit.

29 per cent of panels have procedures for referral of schemes to other panels if they do not feel it is appropriate for them to review it.

### 4.5.4 Further capacity
32 per cent of panel managers agreed that their panel has the capacity to review more applications per year. The majority of these were local panels covering rural areas, where the number of schemes that fit panel criteria of size and impact are likely to be low.

Amongst the other 68 per cent of panel managers, all felt their panel was working at full capacity (several said they had to prioritise schemes because demand for services was too high) and could not review more without extra resources.
4.5.5 Promotion of panel activities
As most panels operate on a local basis for the benefit of the LPA, many have not engaged in any form of promotion of their activities. The LPA officers are aware that they can refer schemes to the panel, and that is deemed to be sufficient.

Panels on a regional or sub-regional level were much more likely to have engaged in promotional activities amongst LPAs under their remit. Different promotional activities included:

- the Essex County panel has promoted itself through the Essex branch of the POS
- Urban Vision produce a brochure setting out their purpose, which is sent to stakeholders and interested parties
- MADE make contacts through architecture events, RegenWM events and target their database of contacts in LPAs throughout the region
- some panels also advertise on council websites or through the organisations which manage/fund them.

4.6 Discussion of schemes
This section explores the way in which schemes are presented and discussed within the panels, taking account of attendees, conflicts of interest and reaching consensus on scheme decisions.

4.6.1 Meetings and attendance
70 per cent of design review panels meet at set intervals, usually around once a month. 15 per cent of panels (generally local panels) meet on an ad hoc basis only when a scheme is referred. The remaining 15 per cent have set meeting times but do call emergency meetings if the need arises.

On average, 7 panel members will be in attendance at any meeting. In 31 per cent of panels, members attend on set rotation, anywhere between 2 and 6 weeks depending upon meetings. When deciding rota, panel managers stated that they tried to select members who would be able to attend a certain location fairly easily, but also tried to achieve a balance of different interests and expertise. For certain schemes, specific panel members may still be brought in if they are felt to have knowledge or expertise pertaining to some nuance of the scheme.

Schemes are usually presented to the panel by the applicant or their agent. In less than 10 per cent of panels, the LPA case officer presents the scheme.

For certain schemes eg potentially controversial pre-application schemes, elected members on the panel are not allowed to be present.

4.6.2 In discussion
Some panel managers mentioned that the panel conducted a site visit before the scheme is presented, but it is difficult to establish the extent of this practice. When discussing the scheme, 41 per cent of panels allow only the LPA case officer to be present whilst 5 per cent allow only the agent to be present. 19 per cent of panels allow both applicant/agent and officer to be present whilst 34 per cent do not allow either.

Panel managers were asked about their awareness and use of BFL standards when discussing schemes. 90 per cent of panel managers are aware of the BFL standards, whilst 46 per cent (over half of those aware) agreed that BFL standards informed their assessment of schemes. Regional and sub-regional panel managers were more likely to be aware of and using the BFL guidance.

Panel managers were also asked about the potential for member conflicts of interest in assessment of schemes. 56 per cent said that their panel had encountered conflicts of interest. Most panels have procedures in place whereby members must declare potential conflicts of interest before they join the panel. In about half of panels which experience conflicts of interest, the interest is noted in the report but the member may still participate in discussion. In the other half of panels, the member(s) in question will be asked to leave the room or will not be invited to the assessment of that particular scheme.

46 per cent of panel managers said that the decision reached by their panel is always a consensus. In most cases where there are disputing voices, these will be recorded in the panel report. In some cases, the panel may vote, usually only if the disagreement is central to the overall assessment of the scheme. In a very few cases, the chair will have a casting decision as to how the panel decision is reported.

4.7 Reporting decisions
Panel decisions on schemes are written in the form of either letters or reports. In almost all panels, these are written by the panel manager and signed off by the panel chair.

36 per cent of panels report decisions to the LPA officers and/or planning committee only. 18 per cent of panels report decisions to the applicant/applicant’s
agent only. The remaining 46 per cent of panels report decisions to both the LPA and applicant.

66 per cent of panels make their comments on schemes available to the public, often through the LPA's on-line application information, though this is sometimes in a diluted/abridged form.

4.7.1 Decision impacts
The content of panel reporting was not explicitly discussed with panel members. There are several limitations in assessing the impact of panels through this research:

1 It is unclear as to whether panels recommend approval/refusal of schemes or restrict themselves to comments upon design quality.

2 The remit of panels is that they are advisory only. This means scheme decisions and outcomes cannot be accurately attributed to the panels without further investigation.

3 Many of the larger schemes reviewed by the panels have not yet reached the decision stage

4 The panel does not monitor the final outcome of schemes it reviews.

One of the few measurements of panel impact is through the perceptions of the impact panel decisions have upon LPA planning policy and development of management approaches. 80 per cent of panel managers felt that their panel’s decisions did have an influence, but most talked very specifically about the impact of individual panel decisions rather than the panel’s long term influence on changes in approach or LPA practice.

The 80 per cent contrasts sharply with the 38 per cent of LPA respondents who felt the panel had an influence when asked the same question. However, this 38 per cent were able to point to dissemination of panel ideas and comments through LPA teams and meetings which have then been used to inform decisions on schemes which do not reach the panels. In addition, LPA officers attending panel meetings as silent observers have picked up best practice in scheme negotiation and design review. Again, the impact of this learning has not been explored.

4.8 Monitoring and evaluation
The performance of 49 per cent of panels is evaluated. However, in 59 per cent of cases where the panel is evaluated, this is done by the panel manager themselves. 21 per cent of panels are evaluated by the local LPA, whilst only 19 per cent are subject to an independent evaluation. Most evaluations take place on an annual basis though 10 per cent of panels conduct six monthly evaluations.

The different evaluation criteria mentioned by respondents include:

- number and type of schemes reviewed
- quality of scheme outcomes/impact of the panel comments
- quality and clarity of minutes and reports
- user satisfaction
- panel conduct.

20 per cent of panels produce an annual report setting out the number and type of schemes reviewed, as well as performance against their terms of reference. Evaluation findings are generally passed to the organisations which fund and manage the panel, although in 7 per cent of panels, findings are only reported internally to panel members.

Amongst the panels that do not currently undergo evaluation, 56 per cent feel that there is a need for evaluation of the panel’s activities. Reasons included:

- maintaining sight of the panels goals and objectives
- ensuring the panel do not review irrelevant schemes
- to ensure the panel is working properly
- understand what the panel has achieved.

44 per cent of panel managers who do not evaluate did not feel that there was a need for this. Their reasons included:

- the minimal scale of the panel’s operations does not warrant investment in an evaluation of activities
- belief that the panel is running okay and there is no value in evaluating it
- unwillingness to monitor and assess the activity of ‘expert’ panel members who are providing a service on a voluntary basis
- evaluation could lead to interference with panel behaviour and approaches. The purpose of the panel is to remain entirely independent.
One of the key objectives of the design panel steering group is to understand where there are opportunities and requirements from LPAs and panels for support and guidance. The research explored challenges in establishing design review panels, challenges in managing design review panels, requirements for further support from panel managers, and suggested improvements to the panel process from the perspective of LPAs.

5.1 Establishing panels

30 per cent of panel managers said that they had experienced (or knew of) difficulties in establishing panels; 39 per cent did not know as they hadn’t been involved in the inception of the panel. The two main challenges were:

- Securing LPA support/funding for the panel:
  ‘There was scepticism from the local development community and local planners as to the value of it.’
  ‘Initially, there was resistance from our councillors. They wanted to know why we wanted the panel, why we couldn’t resolve schemes between officer and members.’

- Establishing the credibility of the panel within the planning process:
  ‘The biggest challenge was generating enough cases when the panel was first set up. People didn’t know what the panel was.’
  ‘Some residents associations didn’t like that they were not allowed to have a representative sit on the panel.’

The main challenge in establishing the panels was securing LPA support and reassuring a variety of stakeholders on their concerns about the panel.

5.2 Managing panels

54 per cent of panel managers have experienced challenges or difficulties in managing the panel. 64 per cent of this group felt they would benefit from support to overcome these issues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Support requirement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintaining panel independence</strong> – one panel manager said it was difficult to obtain funding without politicising the panel, whilst another said they sometimes came under pressure from the LPA to approve schemes which are important for delivery of LPA objectives. One manager also mentioned that the architects on their panel were wary of upsetting the work of colleagues which came before them.</td>
<td><strong>Funding</strong> – extra funding from independent bodies such as CABE or RIBA would help panels to avoid politicising themselves by seeking substantial LPA or developer contributions. <strong>Promotion</strong> – panel managers mentioned that it would be useful if guidance were provided to LPAs on the benefits of the panel process and the purpose of independent panel review of schemes. Alternatively, one manager said it would be helpful to receive best practice on how other panels have promoted their activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encouraging referral</strong> – either through LPA/applicant unwillingness, or a strict remit, some panel managers felt that the panel was not being provided with enough schemes to review. Managers of new panels have mentioned that it is very difficult to embed the panel in development control processes.</td>
<td><strong>Funding</strong> – panel managers with recruitment issues felt that with further funding they could attract more skilled personnel to the panel through offers of remuneration. <strong>Training and guidance</strong> – several managers felt it would be useful if CABE or other bodies could deliver training or best practice guidance on how best to run a panel and the skills that would be required. In addition, managers felt it would be useful for best practice guidance to be produced on reviewing and reporting on schemes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ensuring a good skills mix</strong> – some panel managers talked about the difficulties of ensuring their panel has expertise in important areas, not only specialist design skills, but basic planning training for elected members and training for panel chairs as well.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Improvements to the panel process: LPA perspective
LPA respondents were also asked about the ways in which they felt design review panel processes and delivery could be improved. 59 per cent of LPA respondents with access to a panel felt that the panel process could work more effectively. The main ideas were:

- the panel should meet more frequently and deal with more applications to ensure better alignment with development control requirements
- better communication from panels as to their remit and progress on specific schemes
- panel comments should show more appreciation of existing LPA planning policy
- there needs to be provision of more local panels with members who have an understanding of local issues and context
- expansion of panel remits into more strategic areas such as frameworks and core strategies.

LPA respondents felt CABE could help to overcome some of these issues by:

- publishing standard national guidance on establishing and running panels. Although a small number of respondents mentioned that they had read CABE’s guidance, levels of awareness of this guidance is unclear
- providing training on specific design skills and panel operations
- securing or providing funding to panels so panels could operate more frequently and attract a wider skills set.
6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Panel coverage

- Attitudes towards, and prospects for the growth of, design review panels are generally very positive. The vast majority of LPAs and CCs have access to a design review panel at some level. Most LPAs acknowledge the benefits of independent panel review, and some LPAs are planning to establish local or sub-regional panels in the near future. Almost three quarters of panels identified in the research have been established in the past five years, which demonstrates the acceleration in growth. Furthermore, the fact that three quarters of LPA respondents to the research were either directors/heads of planning or heads of development control, demonstrates the importance which is attached to design review by LPAs across the country.

- There are many different types of design panel/review, and there are few set templates. As well as design review panels as the steering group would understand them, this research has highlighted a variety of other forms of panel and ad hoc design review.

- There are obstacles to establishing design review panels. There seems to be a preference amongst some LPAs for local panel review. However, many managers of local panels have mentioned that there are issues around achieving stakeholder buy-in and sourcing appropriate expertise.

- Some regional and sub-regional panels could be better promoted. 62 per cent of LPAs covered by sub-regional panels and 80 per cent of LPAs covered by regional panels were not aware of this. Whilst some panels do engage in promotional activities with LPAs under their remit, there is clearly scope to do this more effectively.

6.2 Panel operations

- Regional and sub-regional panels tend to have more rigorous and robust procedures. These panels are more likely to have open recruitment practices, a mix of skills on the panel, evaluation of panel activities, and set budgets to work to.

- The research has identified some panel procedures that could lead to panels not being fully effective. These are described in more detail in sections 3 and 4, but the main issues are:
  
  i. vague objectives/terms of reference
  
  ii. the majority of panels have no secured budget
  
  iii. recruitment of panel members and panel chairs is often not an open process
  
  iv. skills gaps on the panels (in terms of both panel running and specific design expertise)
  
  v. compared to the size of their membership, many panels are poorly attended and the right skills mix is not always guaranteed
  
  vi. there is a lack of transparency in terms of how schemes are assessed, coupled with an LPA perception of poor communication from the panel regarding their progress in assessing schemes
  
  vii. despite some safeguards, it seems that conflicts of interest often go unrecognised or are not properly managed
  
  viii. there is little independent evaluation or monitoring of panel activity and most panels do not produce annual reports; as a result panel impacts and benefits are not clear.

- Importance of evaluation. Two of the main issues for panel managers were funding and a shortage of schemes being referred from the LPAs. However, at the root of these obstacles is a lack of clarity as to tangible panel benefits and objectives. Many panels had very vague objectives and almost none had targets set out in their terms of reference. This not only means that stakeholders are unclear as to what the panel should be achieving (and may therefore be unwilling to cooperate as much with the panel), the lack of clear goals also means the panel managers themselves may not be able to conduct a rigorous evaluation of panel impact. By demonstrating the beneficial impact of the panel, through rigorous evaluation, panel managers could obtain the funding that they require for improvements to panel operations. However, many did not see the value of evaluation.

- Engaging developers. Some panel managers said it was very difficult to engage with developers and get their ‘buy-in’ to the process. However, examination of review and reporting procedures shows that the LPA case officer is more often allowed to sit in on discussions whilst the applicant cannot. In addition, more panels send reports to LPAs in the first instance rather than the developer. This is unlikely to make some developers feel that the process is valuable for them.
Although most panel managers do not see some of the issues above as a problem, they can make the panel less effective/reduce its value in the eyes of stakeholders.

64 per cent of panel managers felt that they would benefit from further training and best practice advice on running a panel.

6.3 Support requirements

- Panel perspective
  i The panel managers have identified many ways in which funding could improve the operations of the panel (more frequent meetings, attracting a greater mix of skills, sourcing training). However, there is no evidence to suggest that those panels with set budgets (or those that provide member remuneration) are any more likely to have more frequent meetings, achieve better attendance, or attract a wider skills set to the panel.

  ii There is also a widespread requirement for best practice information. As highlighted in section 6.1, the growth in design review panels has been sudden and many LPAs are not clear about what they should be expecting from panels and how they should be operating.

  iii In addition to these, some managers felt that training delivered by an expert, nationally recognised agency would be useful in enhancing panel behaviour and design review expertise.

- LPA perspective
  i Some LPA respondents said that the panel review process was slow and not well communicated to them.

  ii Many LPAs felt that they would benefit from more local panel review, where local context and knowledge could be applied to the assessment of schemes. The ways in which they could be assisted to establish a local panel are shown in section 6.4.

  iii There is also a fear amongst some respondents that panel reviews may undermine their status as planning authority, and some cited experience of panels not taking account of local planning policy in their recommendations.

6.4 Implications for the steering group

One of the key objectives of the research into design review panels was to inform decisions on the direction of steering group support to LPAs and panels. From the summary of findings above, three separate opportunities can be identified:

1 Promoting panels – some LPAs do not see the value in design review panels and many of those that do not use panels are content with the provisions they have eg internal team meetings and ad hoc consultancy support. In addition, despite the fact that 91 per cent of LPAs feel there are significant benefits from design panel review, less than 60 have established local panels. Not only is funding difficult to source, but panel managers have complained about the difficulty of gaining credibility amongst both developers and the LPAs. The steering group could target LPAs and developers with materials that promote design review panels and explain the benefits that embedding independent design review can bring. This message could be disseminated through case studies and LPA/developer observations of successful panels in operation. In addition, better promotion of the benefits of using regional panels may encourage more LPAs to use them.

2 Establishing panels – the steering group can help LPAs to establish panels through advising them on best practice and signposting potential members in their local areas or sub-regions. Small amounts of funding could also be provided to help LPAs launch a panel or carry out promotional activities. Another way in which the steering group can ensure more schemes in England are reviewed by panels is to encourage LPAs to share resources. Almost a third of panel managers said that they had capacity to review more schemes. In these instances, they could offer services to areas where demand for review outstrips provision, or to LPAs which do not currently have panel access. Availability could be advertised through the aforementioned community of practice. The drawback of this would be a lack of local knowledge on the panel (something quite important to many LPAs), though panel members could be seconded to other panels to provide this.

3 Improving panels – interviews with panel managers and LPAs have highlighted many ways in which panel processes could be improved and tightened to be more rigorous and effective. There are several
ways in which the steering group can help panels to become more effective and robust:

i  In line with many requests from respondents, the steering group should consider updating and relaunching nationally recognised guidance on operating a design review panel. This should cover appropriate recruitment practices, terms of reference, management of conflicts of interest, management of panel dispute, the importance of evaluation, and engaging with developers. It would enable panels to benchmark themselves against a clear set of requirements; many currently exist in a vacuum.

ii The regional panels (which tended to have very robust procedures) could be championed as examples of best practice. Furthermore, the steering group could consider establishing an on-line community of best practice for panels and LPAs, where different approaches and best practice could be shared and discussed.

iii The steering group could also provide, or help LPAs to fund, training on specific skills such as chairing panels or urban design. It could also help panels to attract individuals who would bring a wider skills set to the panel. However, the success of achieving this through extra funding is not clear. Alternatively, individual steering group stakeholders could second staff to assist panels in certain areas of design review.
During the last five years there has been a massive expansion in the number of organisations operating design review, at local, sub-regional and regional level. To help present a national picture, CABE commissioned research into the types of panel and the other forms of design review now operating across England. This report offers a summary of that research. It found that nearly nine in 10 local authorities now have some form of panel review, although their ways of working and impact can be very different. The report offers suggestions for how design review can become more effective and how to make the most from the process in future. It provides background to CABE’s guidance, Design review: principles and practice.