



IHBC GUIDANCE NOTES

Seven Tips to Help You Present to Design Review Panels

*GN 2014/6,
May 2014*

This is one of a series of occasional Guidance Notes published by The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). IHBC Guidance Notes offer current and recent guidance into topics that we consider crucial to the promotion of good built and historic environment conservation policy and practice. The Notes necessarily reflect knowledge and practice at the time they were developed, while the IHBC always welcomes new case examples, feedback and comment to research@ihbc.org.uk for future revisions and updates.

Executive Summary

1. The following guidance is offered to enable more productive outcomes in consultation with Design Panels, to assist in the articulation of design issues and help with the simplification of explanation and analysis.
2. Conservation Area Advisory Committees (CAACs) and more latterly local Design and Conservation Panels and/or regional Design Panels have proved to be a useful vehicle for local planning authorities to obtain independent, impartial expert professional and lay informed advice on draft development proposals. Their shared objective is to improve schemes, not redesign them. Panels try to support innovative, high quality designs and encourage the rejection of poorly designed proposals.
3. Some panels have been established by the local authority and are administered by a Council officer 'in-house'. Others operate externally and charge a fee to cover the administration. Many long-standing CAACs have latterly extended their remit beyond the impact on heritage assets alone.

4. The use of such expertise has been encouraged in recent years by the National Planning Policy Framework [\[1\]](#), the RIBA (which has published recent detailed guidance on the benefits and operation of Design Panels) [\[2\]](#) and the Farrell Review [\[3\]](#). The benefits of Design Review Panels are not iterated in this Note, but they are now seen as acting more in an enabling and collaborative capacity and being less judgmental about unsatisfactory proposals [\[4\]](#).

5. Presentation to Design Reviews by local authority officers differs from the practice of presentation to Planning Committees. The former are primarily concerned with aesthetic matters or questions of heritage impact. By contrast, the focus of the latter is diffuse, usually on a much wider range of planning policy issues where questions of design are likely to be only one of many material considerations, notwithstanding the encouragement of design quality in the NPPF [\[5\]](#).

6. The aesthetic merits of almost all proposals are of importance, sometimes considerably so. The physical presence of completed developments will be in situ for decades (or longer) with a significant impact on the local community, townscape or landscape, or the setting of heritage assets long after other planning considerations may have become obsolete.

7. Planning Officers and Conservation Officers without architectural or urban design training often struggle to explain development schemes to Design Panels in a way that benefits understanding by all parties. Equally it has to be said that many applicants and their agents, including some distinguished architects, also struggle to express the merits of their own proposals in a clear and succinct manner.

8. Consultation with Panels can appear to be an unnecessarily daunting experience with even experienced local authority officers sometimes struggling to articulate design issues with demonstrable nervousness. This can lead to an over-explanation of the issues (such as describing in detail a local site already thoroughly familiar to the Panel) or over-analysis - in what is predominantly a visual medium. Presentations can then become muddled and rushed especially then Panels have other proposals to review at the same meeting.

Know Your Audience

9. If possible, establish in advance the composition of the Design Review Panel as participants may vary from meeting to meeting. Where this is not possible, and if the Chair has not already effected introductions, you

should not be afraid to ask the panellists to introduce themselves and briefly explain their professional background. The composition of the panel may well alter the way you approach making your presentation.

10. A holistic presentation may be useful, but you should concentrate on the key aspects of design or significance and have a clear idea of the impact of policy and the main issues such as of context; setting; special interest (if the scheme involves a heritage asset); prevailing scale; materials *etc.*

11. Outline the past site history only if it is directly relevant to the design; and explain the origins of the design only where significant modifications have already been negotiated in pre-application discussions. Sticking to key points is essential if your presentation is not to become too long or risk being unfocussed.

Be the Expert

12. Be thoroughly familiar with the design, however adequate (or otherwise) are the submitted drawings [\[6\]](#). Consider in advance how the drawings will be displayed (for example, pinned up or digitally scanned and data-projected – always try to avoid holding drawings up); and how clearly the details can be seen from where the panel is sitting. Determine how many drawings are required (ideally the minimum) to fully convey the design issues. Accompanying photographs, if not provided by the applicant, may also help.

13. For aesthetic reasons, many scheme presentation drawings contain no notes, and computer generated images (CGIs) almost never do. Nevertheless, panellists will expect to gain a thorough understanding of the details including of facing materials and external site works, either from the drawings or from your exposition.

14. Be confident. You should be more familiar with the actual scheme in question than the Panel – but anticipate that panellists may sometimes know the site just as well. If there is a query by a member of the review panel that cannot be quickly answered by recourse to the files and may unduly delay the panel's deliberations or conclusions, it is best to offer to supply this information quickly in writing via the Panel Chairman.

Prepare

15. Applicants for large and/or complex schemes may have already have incurred substantial expenditure at the point where the scheme is submitted for design review. It is incumbent on you to present the design

issues clearly and unambiguously and it is a wise precaution to run through the issues in advance. This may be necessary in any case if the scheme is later presented to a Planning Committee.

16. Be wary of the complacency that can develop as a result of regular presentations to Planning Committees. The composition of a panel will often vary from one meeting to the next (and will be strongly focused on design or heritage matters), whereas the fixed membership of Planning Committees will not.

17. If you have not presented schemes to a panel before, or have done so only infrequently, consider a dry run with colleagues who are unfamiliar with the proposals. They will be able to point out any aspect of your presentation that is potentially ambiguous or unclear. Until you gain confidence in mastering explanations of key design or heritage aspects, gaining feedback on general presentational techniques, such as the pacing, clarity, and projection of your speech, can be invaluable.

Visual aids – 3-D Models

18. Good presentation material – clear drawings, CGIs (possibly the use of animated fly-through) and appropriate photographs should obviously counterpoint your commentary, but the best medium for conveying the key elements of large schemes is the scaled 3-D model. This has the advantage of enabling the proposal to be easily viewed in the round. The scale, elaboration and inclusion of the adjacent setting may have been predetermined before design review has been proposed, but it is worth considering raising the question with an applicant at the inception of pre-application discussion. The potential presentational powers and scope of a 3-D model can aid understanding. Visual aids should be seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

19. Models can potentially be very expensive but architects sometimes produce them to develop or articulate the design concepts, massing *etc.* Sometimes models are used to explain the proposals to clients whose understanding of spatial relationships may be no better than that of planning officers or planning committee members. Models may also be produced for funding or marketing purposes. A disadvantage of 3-D models, especially elaborate ones, is that they can imply that a predetermined design solution has been adopted before the review process is undertaken.

20. Design Panel members should generally have spatial awareness skills enabling the fundamentals incorporated into 3-D models to be appreciated clearly and quickly which may obviate the need for much

detailed verbal explanation.

Don't Be Intimidated

21. Do not be daunted when facing a panel of experts with a wide range of expertise and/or local knowledge. You are an expert yourself, particularly in matters of heritage significance, if not necessarily in all matters of architectural design.

22. Bear in mind that although the outcome may be critical of the scheme, it is not intended to be critical of you (unless you have failed to do your presentational homework). As stated in the Summary above, the aim is primarily to achieve a better outcome, that is, not necessarily to be too judgmental about unsatisfactory proposals but rather to enable and facilitate collaboration [\[7\]](#).

Keep Hold Of The Positives

23. Methods of presentation to Design Review Panels vary. In some case the applicant will make the presentation, in others you (the relevant local authority officer(s)) will do so. Sometimes there is a joint presentation - in which case it is advisable to determine in advance who will do what. Regrettably this does not happen frequently. The method of presentation is often at the discretion of the Panel Chair.

24. Panels typically receive information and seek clarification (but do not usually debate) in public, and then deliberate in private. After a short discussion in camera a verdict is delivered. Usually this is shortly after the end of the presentation. Some panels prefer to some make a formal pronouncement in writing to you after the meeting.

25. As national policy and the professional bodies [\[8\]](#) emphasise the positive benefits of using the design review process, it is important to be objective about any criticism received especially when this can run contrary to the direction of earlier pre-application discussions. In most instances it is best to anticipate that the criticism will not be so damning that amendment of the proposals can be achieved by further negotiations [\[9\]](#).

26. By the time a scheme is referred to a Design Panel it is to be hoped that sufficient preliminary work will have been undertaken that the positives can be emphasized [\[10\]](#), with the aim of capitalizing on the most successful elements of the proposals. Where significant specific concerns remain and the future direction of the proposals is uncertain, the

Panel may request an opportunity to see a revised scheme. Alternatively, you may wish to refer the scheme again if it has been developed much further or has gone in a different direction.

Maintain a sense of perspective

27. Successful outcomes of the design review process are not always immediate, indeed success can sometimes only be judged long after completion and occupation. Fashions and trends in architecture may see a scheme initially defined as 'timeless' or 'iconic'. Alternatively it may be referred to as 'archaic' or 'faddish' just a few years after it has been built.

28. As a likely proponent of the scheme, especially if it has developed with your input during the pre-application phase, you will want to communicate your enthusiasm for it and convince the panel of the architectural merits.

29. If the panel is critical of those improvements you have been responsible for negotiating, you must distance yourself from a sense of professional injury and consider the process part of your continuing professional development, especially as you will have to undertake many further design-orientated negotiations and presentations during your career. The important thing is always to learn from design panel presentations, treat them as an opportunity to improve professionally as well as achieve a better outcome for the development proposals.

Bob Kindred MBE BA MRTPI IHBC

Endnotes

[1] The National Planning Policy Framework deals with design in Section 7: Requiring Good Design. Paragraph 62 states: 'Local planning authorities should have local design review arrangements in place to provide assessment and support to ensure high standards of design. They should also when appropriate refer major projects for a national design review. In general, 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.'

[2] See for RIBA advice on Design Review:

<http://www.architecture.com/Files/RIBAHoldings/PolicyAndInternationalRelations/Policy/DesignReviewPrinciplesPractice2.pdf> .

This is guidance produced by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), CABE at the Design Council, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and the Landscape Institute (LI). The Guidance refers to Design review panels as comprising 'groups of leading multidisciplinary built environment experts – provide an independent, expert assessment'. Local lay expertise, for example, from amenity bodies or local councillors is not referred to.

- [3] The Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment: 'Our Future in Place' 2014, Conclusions 2A.3 & 2A.4 p.170, and Recommendations 22-24 p.172. The Farrell Review recommends Design Review Panels should become PLACE Review Panels (Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering) and includes professionals from each of these fields and should eventually be ubiquitous.
- [4] There is no disguising the fact that being judgmental is almost inevitable where ill-thought-out proposals have been submitted, where the poor conception and flawed design principles are such that the proposals are not capable of satisfactory development or amendment – and where withdrawal or refusal of consent is the only positive outcome.
- [5] NPPF, *ibid*.
- [6] Although there is clear guidance on the minimum acceptable standard for applications, and although good applicants will strive to provide all the necessary information to expedite the application, many applications are made without any design input or drafting skills. Irrespective of the adequacy of the application drawings and whether they should be registered or not, clear, informative drawings are essential if Design Reviews are to function properly.
- [7] Farrell Review, *ibid*.
- [8] Principally the professional bodies referred to in Endnote 3 above.
- [9] The Institute's 2014 Guidance Note on Negotiating Skills may be useful in this regard.
- [10] If a scheme is so dreadful that the planning authority recommends a swift refusal, the proposal should not be referred to Design Panel. If the skills within the local planning authority are considered insufficient to support design reasons for refusal, the authority should consider a more effective way to address this skills shortage.