



# GCSP Design Review Panel: Terms of Reference

## 1. Introduction

The Terms of Reference outline the purpose of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) and explains how it is intended to work. The GCDRP replaces the Design and Conservation Panel and Design Enabling Panel and implements the recommendations of an independent review carried out in 2020-21. <sup>i</sup>

## 2. Purpose of the Panel

The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) supports Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS), for South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridge City Council (CCC), in achieving excellent design in new development. It offers multi-disciplinary advice from leading built and natural environment professionals through a robust design review process consistent with the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth.

The GCDRP is set up to raise the quality of development by identifying where designs can be improved to achieve the best possible outcomes. This is in line with the planning authority's aspirations and in accordance with the local plans for the two councils. It is a critical friend to all parties, offering impartial advice to developers, planning officers and planning committee. It helps inform the planning process and gives greater confidence to decision makers to support innovative, high quality design. The Panel operates in the public interest and always considers the best

outcome for the whole community.

### 3. Remit of the Panel

GCSPS benefits from 2 Design Review Panels: the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel and the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel.

1. The [Cambridgeshire Quality Panel](#) is administered by Cambridgeshire County Council and it is governed by its own terms of reference. Within the Greater Cambridge area, it reviews strategic scale allocations within the adopted local plans, infrastructure projects and all new schools and extensions. In Cambridge City, the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel reviews sites that are generally covered by the City Fringes Joint Development Control Committee. The Cambridgeshire Quality Panel may also review policies, guidance and documents that have strategic and spatial implications at a sub-regional scale.
2. The **GCDRP** is set up to review major or significant planning and pre-planning applications for sites within the Greater Cambridge area, that fall outside of the remit of the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel. The GCDRP may also review any policies, guidance and documents that relate to these sites. Occasionally, the GCDRP may also review projects from outside of the GCSPS area in agreement with the Local Planning Authority.

### 4. Approach

The GCDRP will operate across Greater Cambridge. It will be managed by GCSPS and be overseen by an Independent Advisory Group. The Panel will have two Chairs, one Vice-Chair and a pool of 53 panel members with diverse expertise. Where appropriate, sub-panels may be formed from the Panel membership to respond to the different development pressures or type within Greater Cambridge areas.

The Panel will usually meet twice per month and review up to two schemes per meeting, although additional meetings and reviews may be organised when required. Meetings will normally be held in Council offices in either Cambridge or South Cambridgeshire unless they are required to be held virtually. Up-to-date information

about the Panel and its membership is to be published on the GCSP website.

## 5. Principles and Practice

Design review is an independent and impartial evaluation process that should meet high standards to be respected and effective. In undertaking its advisory role, the GCDRP will adhere to the following established best practice principles:

- The 10 principles of design review—independent, expert, multidisciplinary, accountable, transparent, proportionate, timely, advisory, objective, accessible, developed jointly by the RIBA, Landscape Institute, Design Council (formerly CABE) and RTPi developed.
- The integrity of the Panel is essential to its success and, for this reason, all panel members will abide by the seven Nolan Principles of Public Life—selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Conflicts of interest procedures are set out in Section 12.
- Design review aims to provide a rounded assessment that considers the aesthetic, sustainability, and functionality of a project. For this reason, the GCDRP will assess schemes against the [Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth](#), within the context of the adopted planning policy framework.
- The GCDRP will operate within the National Planning Policy Framework and policies within the Local Plan, taking into account the climate emergency that has been declared by both councils.
- The panel will be formed of professional experts from the field of the built and natural environment.
- The advice will be integrated into the pre-planning and planning application processes and considered as a material consideration in determining planning applications. The outcomes of panel meetings will be reported as part of the planning officers' report.

## **6. Governance**

An Independent Advisory Group (IAG) will ensure the effectiveness and accountability of the panel in the public interest and, in consultation with the Joint Director of Planning & Economic Development, make recommendations to adjust working practices in accordance with these terms of reference.

The IAG will comprise two independent built environment experts with significant experience and reputation, and who are external to the panel (such as Chairs or experts of other design review panels), the two Panel Chairs, senior council officers, the lead members and planning committee Chairs of both councils (excluding the Joint Development Control Committee as these developments are reviewed by the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel).

The independent built environment experts will rotate annually as the Chair of the IAG. They will be appointed initially for a three-year term by The Joint Director of Planning & Economic Development in consultation with the Lead Members.

The IAG will meet once a year to review an Annual Report (see section 13), assess any issues, advise on improvements and the future direction of the panel. The Annual Report is a public document, comprising the feedback, finance and summary of the outcome of the Panel's advice within the planning process and as development is built. The Annual report will be prepared by the IAG Chair and circulated to the group in advance of the meeting. The IAG meeting minutes will be taken by Panel Manager, checked with the IAG Chair and shared with the group and the panel membership.

A review of the Panel and its Terms of Reference should be conducted after a maximum period of 5 years.

## **7. Management and Roles**

The GCDRP is managed by the Council's Built and Natural Environment Team, with independent governance provided through the Independent Advisory Group.

**The Panel Manager** is responsible for the delivery of the panel process, including the selection of schemes, the type of review, and panel members for each review, the review agenda, collating the materials for review, arranging site visits, managing the review session and issuing the Panel letter and collecting feedback from stakeholders using surveys, and will be supported by an administrator. The Panel Manager will collate factual information to assist the IAG Chair in preparing the Annual Report, including stakeholder feedback, finance and summary of the outcome of the Panel's advice within the planning process and built development.

**Planning Officers** must attend reviews to brief the Panel on their planning application schemes. Planning officers will receive training on the Design Review Panel to make sure they can participate fully in the process. Planning officers should attach the review letter in full to their planning officer/committee reports and provide a commentary where advice has not been followed and why. Planning officers are also expected to observe the Panel from time to time as part of their continuing professional development because the discussion can be a helpful way to learn about design quality.

**Panel Members** are expected to commit to approximately 5-8 reviews per year. They should provide their availability in advance to the Panel manager and must be able to attend, to contribute to reviews when selected. Panel members must also attend an induction and/or briefing session set up to update the Panel on any issues, changes to its processes or policies, to ensure that they have the information they need to fully participate in the Panel process. Panel members are responsible for reporting conflicts of interest as set out in Section 12.

**The Panel Chair** is responsible for chairing the review sessions and writing the review letter with the assistance of the Panel Manager. In exceptional circumstances, the Chairs/Vice Chair may also be asked to attend Planning Committee at the request of the planning committee chair in agreement with senior officers of GCSPS.

**The Planning Committee** will receive an annual briefing to explain the role of the GCDRP and Members are encouraged to attend reviews as observers. The GCDRP letter will be included within the planning committee report. The GCDRP comments are a material consideration in determining planning applications and should be given appropriate weight by the Committee.

**The Developer** attends the review session and has an opportunity to present and answer questions raised by the panel.

**The Design Team** prepares the briefing and presentation material for a review session (set out in section 9) and attends the review session. They present their scheme to the panel and have an opportunity to answer questions raised by the panel.

**The Independent Advisory Group (IAG)** is responsible for overseeing the governance of the panel and meets once a year (See section 6).

**Observers:** Observers may attend review sessions, with the consent of the Chair and Panel Manager.

## **8. Panel Members and Chair**

GCDRP is to be made up of 53 members, with a balance of skills that address the themes of Community, Character, Connectivity and Climate. The members will be diverse and nationally respected professionals from the fields of architecture, urban design, planning, landscape architecture, public realm, green infrastructure, sustainability, highway engineers, transport planning, conservation, biodiversity, active travel, town centre management, inclusive design and water management. There will be a mix of Panel members from the Cambridge region and beyond who understand the region, its context and are committed to delivering the high aspirations stated in the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth. The roles and responsibilities of Panel members are set out in section 7.

Chairs and Panel members will be appointed via an open recruitment process, that encourages applications from people with protected characteristics. Panel members will be selected on their own merits using a clear and published set of criteria. Panel members and Chairs will be asked to submit a CV and covering letter stating how they meet the listed criteria. Chairs will be interviewed for the role by a panel that will include senior officers and the Lead Members from both authorities. The Joint Director of Planning & Economic Development, in consultation with the Lead Members, has final sign off on the appointment of Chair and Panel Members.

The Panel Members and Chairs will be appointed for a period of three years and refreshed thereafter following a review of attendance and performance in consultation with the IAG. If necessary, additional members may be recruited by the council following the process set out above, to fill any gaps in expertise. The performance of Panel Members and Chairs will be reviewed by the IAG at the annual meeting. Panel members and Chairs will be paid for their attendance. In addition, expenses will be paid to cover travel. The Chair will also be paid for half a day when they attend Planning committee.

## 9. Referral Criteria

The GCDRP will review schemes that meet the following three criteria:

- 1) The **scale, size and use** of development, including:
  - larger scale buildings and groups of buildings generally over 1000m<sup>2</sup> (gross) or where there is a site area of more than 0.5 hectares
  - large public realm schemes
  - housing schemes generally over 10 or more dwellings or a site area of more than 0.5 hectares
  
- 2) The **site** is particularly sensitive, irrespective of their scale, size and use. For example:
  - developments affecting significant views and heritage assets or have a major impact on their surroundings

3) The proposals are **significant** because of a **local issue, specific impact, exceptional challenge, or public benefit**, including:

- design policies and guidance including, frameworks, masterplans, design codes and development briefs
- design for climate adaptation and mitigation
- schemes involving major public investment or council-led regeneration
- proposals that are unique and likely to set a precedent

The Panel manager, in consultation with planning officers, will confirm when a project is suitable for review.

Schemes benefit from being brought for review early in the pre-application process as designs have not been fixed, enabling the panel to be most effective in influencing the design and suggesting improvements. Schemes are encouraged to be brought to Design Review at least twice.

Design Reviews should be specified in any Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) entered with the planning authority as part of the planning process. The PPA should include the expected number of reviews and the stage in the process when the scheme will be reviewed. The fee for design review is separate to the PPA.

## 10. Panel Review Types

The GCDRP offers three types of review: A full Design Review with a site visit, a subsequent Design Review without a site visit and a desktop Chairs' review. Where possible, the same Panel Members will be used for subsequent reviews. Site visits will be grouped together and undertaken at the beginning of the meeting. The Panel manager will need to co-ordinate with applicants, who will need to ensure that the site or building is accessible for all members including those with disability, advise on suitable PPE for site visits, planning the route in advance. Site visits will be led by applicants.

Fees and review types will be monitored as a standing item at the annual IAG

meeting and adjusted accordingly to ensure the GCDRP remains financially viable. In exceptional circumstances the fees outlined below may be reduced to support community organisations and charities, to access the panel. For schemes which are particularly complex and/or require a bespoke review format (such as specialist sub-panel) the fees outlined below may be increased to cover any additional costs to GCSP. Reviews for projects outside of the GCSP area may also incur an additional fee and this will be agreed with the Panel Manager.

### **Full Design Review**

A full Design Review is for a first review of the scheme, ideally at pre-application stage. It includes a site visit and a review by the Chair and 4-5 Panel Members. There will be a maximum of 6 panel member including disability specialist and chair for each review. It will be attended by the planning officer and other key stakeholders such as officers from the County Council and Historic England.

**Fee:** £5000 + VAT

**Typical Agenda** (approx. 3 hours plus site visit):

- Site visit (Panel Manager, Planning Officer, Panel Members and the architect and developer from the design team)
- Panel briefing by Planning Officer, 30 minutes (panel and officers only)
- Chair introductions, set up and notice of any conflict of interest, 10 minutes
- Project team presentation, 45 minutes
- Panel questions and clarifications, 15 minutes
- Panel discussion following the structure of the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter with a summary from the chair, 60 minutes
- 20 minutes for closed discussion between panel members and planning officers.

## Subsequent Design Review

A subsequent design review will be required for less complex schemes which have already been reviewed by the panel and where a site visit is not required. The format may also be useful for reviewing internal council policies and design guidance.

**Fee:** £4500 + VAT

**Typical Agenda** (approx. 3 hours in total):

- Panel briefing by Planning Officer, 30 minutes (panel and officers only)
- Chair introductions set up, 10 minutes
- Project team presentation, 45 minutes
- Panel questions and clarifications, 15 minutes
- Panel discussion following the structure of the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter with a summary from the chair, 60 minutes
- 20 minutes for closed discussion between panel members and planning officers.

## Chair's Review

The Chair's review will be used for a limited number of schemes with the agreement of Senior Officers within GCSPS. It provides a desktop review and advice on schemes that have already been to a Full Review and Subsequent Review at pre-application stage. In exceptional cases it may also be used for smaller, less complex schemes. The review will usually be one hour and be conducted by the Chair plus one Panel Member. The design team is not present and only the planning officer presents.

**Fee:** £2560 + VAT

## Meeting Advice Outcome

The review letter must be written in a clear and accessible language and reflect the main points made by the panel at the meeting. It will be structured under the headings of the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter's and should include the four

'C's:

- **Community:** Building a sense of community by providing a greater choice of housing along with community facilities which assist active participation of people in their neighbourhoods (including encouraging developers to set up proper systems of governance for their developments early in the process).
- **Connectivity:** Locating new developments where they can benefit from high connectivity to jobs and services and provision of sustainable infrastructure to match the pace of the development.
- **Climate:** Tackling climate change through good design, site layout and imaginative landscaping, including innovative approaches to energy, transport, waste and water (water treated as a friend not an enemy).
- **Character:** Creating places of character with distinctive neighbourhoods and public realm that encouraged people to walk and cycle including and integrating a consideration of public art.

The Panel Chair will write the review letter and send it to the Panel Manager within 7 days of the review. The Panel Manager will check the letter for factual accuracy, the Chair for clarifications, if required, and issue the final review letter to the design team, planning officer and other stakeholders (who attended the meeting) within 10 working days of the review.

Planning officers should share review letters with all relevant officers and stakeholders (subject to confidentiality issues) involved in assessing a scheme at pre-application and application stages. The design team should refer to the review letter within the Design and Access Statement of the planning application, which should set out how the panels comments have been addressed through the design process. Once an application has been submitted to GCSP and made public, the review letter will also be made available on the GCDRP webpage.

Planning officers should attach the review letter in full to the planning officer/committee reports and articulate where the scheme has and has not

considered the Panel's comments and why. In exceptional cases, the Chair may be asked to attend Planning Committee meetings when requested by the planning committee Chair in agreement with the Joint Director of Planning & Economic Development and in consultation with the Lead Members. The role of the GCDRP is advisory but the comments are a material consideration as set out in the NPPF.

## **11. Conflicts of Interest**

A conflict arises if there is any suggestion that a Panel Member, either as an individual or a member of a group or organisation, might have a financial, commercial or professional interest in a project, its client or its site.

Panel Members must check Panel meeting agendas and report any conflicts or perceived conflicts of interest to the Panel Manager as soon as they become aware. The Panel manager will then decide if it is a conflict. The Panel Member will not attend a review if the Panel Manager confirms there is a conflict, and the conflict will be recorded for future reference. If uncertain, the Panel Manager can discuss the conflict with the Panel Chair to reach an agreement. If any potential conflict is revealed during the meeting, the Panel Member must immediately report it to the Chair or Panel Manager. In some circumstances an association may not be considered a conflict but in the interests of transparency the relationship will be recorded by the Panel Manager and mentioned by the Chair at the beginning of the review. This will also be noted in the advice letter. If an observer is invited to the meeting, they will be asked to check for conflicts of interest before the review and must not attend if the Panel Manager confirms there is a conflict.

## **12. Monitoring and Evaluation**

To understand the impact of the review process, the Panel Manager should record the panel's activity and follow up on the evolution and planning outcome of projects once they have passed the review stage. The Panel Manager will also use a survey to collect feedback from stakeholders (Agents and Design

Team, Panel Members, Councillors, Officers) following each review and report on its findings annually. The IAG Chair will prepare an Annual Report, collating the Panel's activities, planning impact, and analysis of the feedback received. The Annual Report to be presented and reviewed by the IAG which will inform how the Panel evolves and address any issues raised. It will also be used to highlight the benefits of the panel to the wider community. A site visit of completed projects reviewed by the GCDRP may also inform the annual review.

### **13. Transparency and Confidentiality**

The GCDRP is open and transparent regarding its processes and explains how it operates in the public interest. Information about the panel and its membership is to be published on the GCSP website, including:

- Terms of Reference
- Quick Guide for applicants
- Handbook setting out the processes for all involved
- Information about the panel chairs and members
- Information about the Independent Advisory Group members
- Annual Report and minutes of the annual meeting with information on the impact of the panel and feedback received by stakeholders
- The review letters and planning outcome of schemes reviewed will be published once a planning application has been made public (see below)

There will be circumstances where a pre-application review concerns commercially sensitive information and the developer/design team may request that the review letter is kept confidential. When the Panel Manager and Chair support the request the letter only goes to the applicant's team and the planning officer and is not made publicly available. For reviews at application stage the review letter is published as part of the planner's report and will be made available on the GCSP website.

Panel Members and observers will be provided with confidential information as part of their role in pre-application discussions. They shall not disclose or use

that information for their own benefit, nor disclose it to any third party. Any press and media queries should be redirected to GCSP officers.

## **Freedom of information and Data Protection**

As a public authority, the GCSPS is subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the Act). All requests for information about the GCSPS will be handled according to the provisions of the Act. Legal advice may be required on a case by case basis to establish whether any exemptions apply under the Act.

To facilitate the operation of the GCDRP the Council needs to collect, store and process the personal information (data) of Panel Members, including contact information and certain professional details. This data will be stored in a central database of the GCSPS network, where it is only accessible from relevant GCSPS accounts. The data will be used to contact members of the Panel to inform them of the dates and locations of the GCDRP sessions and make other communications relating to the running of the GCSPS. The Council expects Panel Members receiving this data to take reasonable steps to ensure its security. This data will be held for as long as the Panel Members remains on the GCDRP; after they have left, the information will be held for one year to allow for any post-membership communication that is required, before being securely disposed of in line with the GCSPS's retention and disposal schedule.

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<sup>i</sup> Last updated May 2026, following recommendations made by the independent Advisory Group which met on 30th October 2025.