

Oxford Design
Review Panel

Design
South East

Oxford Design Review Panel Annual Report 2022



Contents

Introduction	3
Oxford Design Review Panel: Co-chairs	4
Oxford Design Review Panel activity	6
Schemes reviewed in 2022	
Panel composition	
Panel members and expertise used in 2022	
Mentoring Programme	8
Case studies	9
Case study 1: St Edmund Hall, Norham Gardens	
Case study 2: Plot 2000, Oxford Business Park	
Case study 3: Broad Street Public Realm	
Surveys	12
Officers' survey	
Applicants' survey	
Panel members' survey	
Annual Review Day 2023	15





Introduction

The Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) was established in 2014 to deliver a wide range of benefits, not only in terms of added value to development schemes but in creating a lasting legacy of promoting and achieving good quality design for the whole city. Over the last nine years, the panel has continued to improve design quality in the built environment for the whole of Oxford and therefore improve the quality of the lives of all who live, work and visit the city.

The panel was refreshed in 2021 by Design South East when they took over the management of the panel on behalf of Oxford City Council. The panel is chaired by Joanne Cave and Joanna van Heyningen. It includes 44 professional experts, selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with Council officers.

The terms of reference set out the role and remit of the panel, and how it supports the planning process. Council officers identify the schemes requiring input from the panel and subsequently refer them for a review or workshop. Applicants can also approach officers directly to request a session with the ODRP. A report is produced following each session that synthesises the panel's advice and key recommendations.

Case studies demonstrate the impact that the panel has had on schemes. Given the confidential nature of the design review process, as case studies, we showcase schemes that are already in the public domain, have been approved or are the subject of live planning applications and are being considered by the planning authority.

This report captures key data from the second year of operation of the refreshed panel and provides insights on how the service could be improved.



Oxford Design Review Panel: Co-chairs

Joanne Cave

Joanne is a Partner and Director of David Lock Associates (DLA). She is a planner and an urban designer with 30 years of experience, principally in the private sector. She brings pragmatism and creativity to her projects, aligned with commercial awareness and an ambition to deliver well-crafted solutions and strategies on behalf of public and private sector clients. She leads leading complex projects, steering multi-disciplinary teams towards the delivery of well-designed, inclusive and sustainable places.



Joanna van Heyningen

Joanna van Heyningen formed van Heyningen and Haward Architects in 1982. She has always sought to contribute to the wider built environment, including judging the Stirling Prize and serving on the RIBA Awards Group. She is a Design Review panellist for Design Council, for which she co-chaired the Oxford Design Review Panel and several others. She now co-chairs the ODRP for Design South East and the Hounslow Design Review Panel. She is the Governor of the Purcell School of Music and Chair of its Building Committee. She was awarded an OBE for services to Architecture and the Built Environment in 2016.

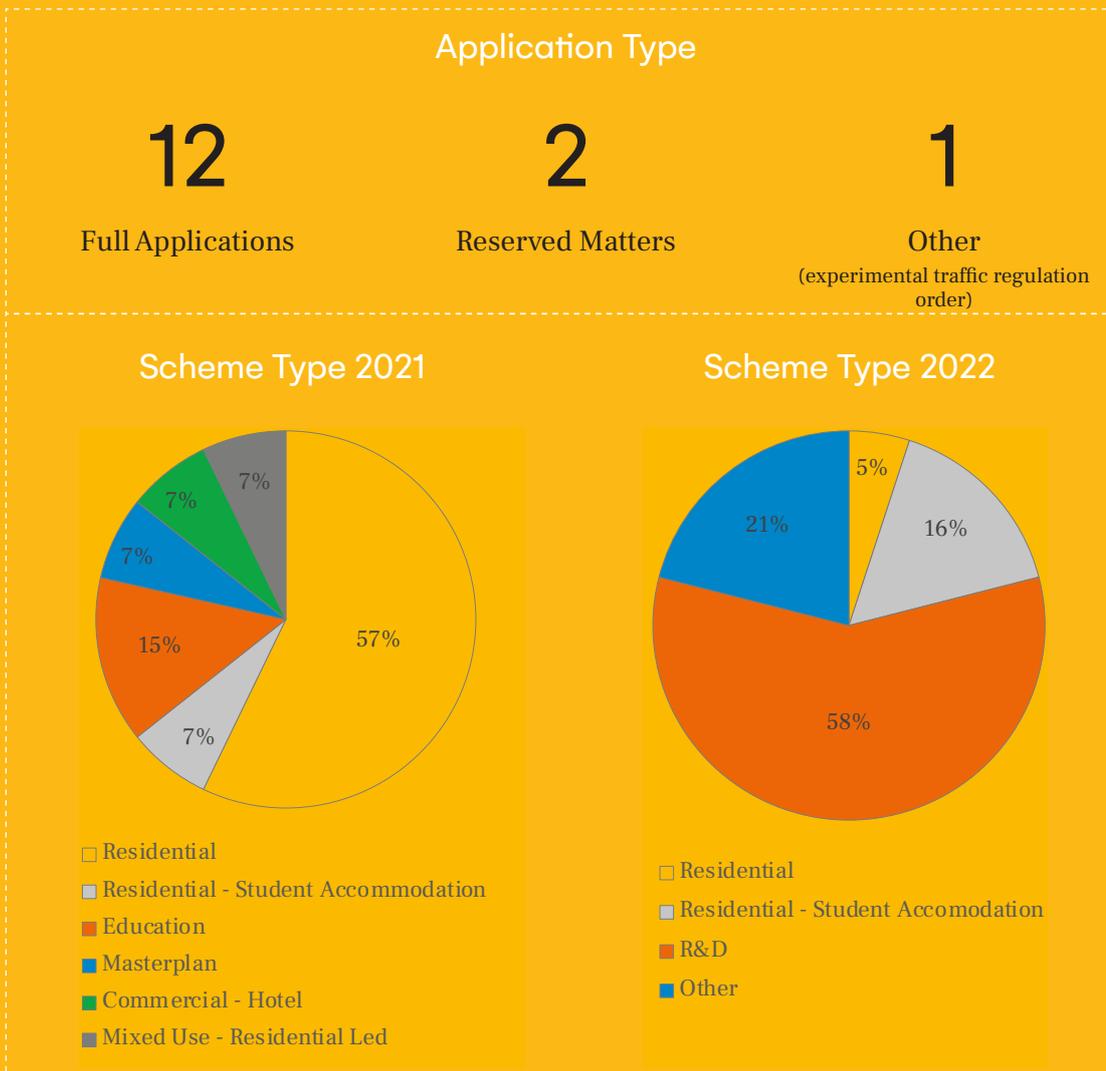


Oxford Design Review Panel Activity

Since its inception, the refreshed panel has engaged with 27 schemes over 32 sessions. As of April 28th 2023, 10 schemes seen at a review or workshop have received full planning permission, 13 are live applications, and 4 are at pre-application stage.

Schemes Reviewed in 2022

The Oxford Design Review Panel held 18 sessions and engaged with 15 schemes from 1st January 2022 to 31st December 2022. All of the schemes were at pre-application stage at the time of the review or workshop. One scheme was reviewed on two occasions, one was reviewed three times. The primary scheme type reviewed in 2022 related to research and development uses. This was different to 2021 where the most commonly reviewed scheme was residential-led.



Panel Composition 2022

19

female

22

male

19%

under-represented

self identified based on the
9 protected characteristics
(age, disability, gender, gender
reassignment, ethnicity,
pregnancy/maternity, religion
and/or belief, background)

Panel Expertise

2

community
engagement

8

heritage

19

architecture

5

housing

7

sustainable design

18

urban design

6

landscape

4

sustainable
transport

3

town planning

4

engineering

3

regeneration

Panel Members and Expertise used in 2022

31

no. of different panel members used

16

Female

15

Male

4

Under-represented

Primary Expertise used in 2022

13

architecture

6

urban design

6

landscape
architecture

3

historic
environment

2

sustainability

1

civil
engineering

Secondary Expertise used in 2022

Architecture
Building services engineering
Community Engagement
Education, Arts, and Public Buildings
Energy and Environmental Engineering
Historic Environment
Housing
Planning
Public Realm
Regeneration
SuDs
Sustainability
Transport Planning
Urban Design

Mentoring Programme

The mentoring programme has been developed by Design South East and Oxford City Council to support the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) mentees in their term as part of the ODRP. The aim of the programme is to guide early career professionals (mentees) through the design review process and offer them a cross-disciplinary understanding of design and planning whilst strengthening their knowledge of Oxford and its history.

Seven mentees were selected as the first cohort of the programme. Since the programme's inception, ten sessions have been attended by at least one mentee. Each mentee should attend at least three sessions.

Following completion of the programme, two mentees, Owen Reading and Charlotte Robinson, joined the ODRP as formal panel members.

“The mentee programme has been a really informative process, and a great opportunity to observe and learn from the more experienced panel members. It is really beneficial to build confidence and experience before taking up a position on the panel”

(Charlotte Robinson, Former ODRP mentee)

The whole programme has been a great experience, exposing me to some of the most interesting and exceptional design in the UK, allowing me to meet and observe some of the best practitioners in action, and helping me fully understand how design review can work well for all involved.”

(Owen Reading, Former ODRP mentee)



Case Studies

In the next section, we present three case studies to demonstrate the impact of the panel:

Case study 1: St Edmund Hall, Norham Gardens



Location

Norham Gardens

Description

Development of the site to provide 70 student bedrooms, social and communal spaces, cloister garden, minor works to Grade II listed Middle Common Room (former chapel)

Stage

Pre-application

Status

Permission granted

Client/Developer

St Edmund Hall

Applicant Team

Wright and Wright Architects
Bradley-Hole Schoenaich Landscape
Turnberry Planning Ltd
Ridge & Partners

Design review

April 2022

The impact of the panel Oxford City Council perspective:

“The ODRP challenged the location and size of room needed for the air source heat pumps. They supported concerns regarding the overall massing of the building in the street scene and the response of the building in relation to the green backdrop of University Parks, which was part of the significance of this part of the Conservation Area. This helped, resulting in the plant being moved into the basement and a reduced massing being achieved and positive impact on the view to the green backdrop”.

“The Panel was extremely useful and significant changes to the scheme were made in order to resolve the issues raised”

(Norham Gardens residence project, Statement of Community Involvement)

Case study 2: Plot 2000, Oxford Business Park



Location

Plot 2000, Oxford Business Park

Description

Proposal for a speculative research and development building providing lab and office space within the Oxford Business Park as part of the wider innovation campus.

Stage

Pre-application

Status

Awaiting decision

Client/Developer

ARC (Advanced Research Clusters)

Applicant Team

Hawkins Brown Architects
Carter Jonas
Macgregor Smith
Stantec
Spie

Design review

September 2022

The impact of the panel Oxford City Council perspective:

“The panel really helped the design team reassess their sustainability ambitions. The key move forward we got from this ODRP is that the design team completely rethought their parking and landscaping strategy which resulted in the basement car park being removed. The panel encouraged a tall landmark building that could be a tower, provided it was high quality design.

Overall, the main challenge officers had with the application was the tight deadline to submit, so the applicant team were unable to come back for a follow up ODRP which would have been really beneficial from an officer perspective.”

“The DRP provided key observations and feedback to the design development — including support for the principle of creating a landmark building, as well as questions regarding the sustainability of including basement level car parking.”

(Plot 2000: Planning and economic statement (including statement of community involvement))

Case study 3: Broad Street Public Realm



Location

Broad Street

Description

Proposals to improve the public realm on Broad Street

Stage

Approval granted for an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order in July 2022

Client/Developer

Oxfordshire County Council

Applicant Team

Milestone Infrastructure
Atkins

Design workshop

June, 2022

The impact of the panel

Oxford City Council perspective:

“We used the ODRP Community Fund to take the Broad Street temporary scheme to a small-scheme panel. This was a scheme led by the County Council with quite a limited budget so the City Council were pleased to be able to use the Community Fund for this. The three panel members were excellent at bringing a fresh perspective and some brilliant ideas. They made suggestions on how the temporary scheme could be run to maximise the opportunity for consultation – including a six month changing programme, as well as design ideas that could really capitalise on the history of Broad Street”.

Oxfordshire County Council

perspective:

“The Oxford Design Review Panel provided an independent review of Oxfordshire County Council’s Broad Street proposals. The panel shared recommendations which would assist us should a permanent scheme be delivered at a later date. The team found the experience and specialism from panel members very useful as it gave us a different perspective on the scheme.”

“We found the review panel process very rewarding as we were challenged on our approach, and were struck by the shared passion and enthusiasm to make a meaningful step towards a long term vision for the space. It was the panel’s local knowledge and depth of understanding which really benefited the design team.”

(Atkins Landscape and Public Realm Team)

Survey Feedback

In the next section, we summarise the findings from surveys issued to officers, applicants and the panel:

Officer Questionnaire

Following every design review we send out a survey to officers and applicants. We received 4 survey responses from OCC Officers from the survey sent out immediately after each session. All officers strongly agreed that the panel members were friendly, constructive and professional. Officers strongly agreed or agreed that the meeting was well chaired and that the advice provided was helpful. Most officers strongly agreed that the review discussion covered the right issues. However, one officer disagreed.

For the annual report, officers were also contacted to provide their feedback on the service provided in 2022. 5 responses were received in comparison to 8 responses last year. Comments and observations from officers were broadly positive, however one officer felt that some ODRPs had weakened the local planning authority's position in favour of client brief.

How would you rate the clarity of the panel's comments?



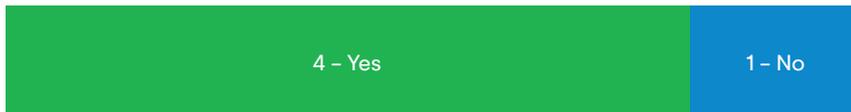
How helpful did you find the review process and subsequent report in ongoing discussions with the applicant?



If you gave a written/verbal briefing, was it clear what information you needed to provide for the design review?

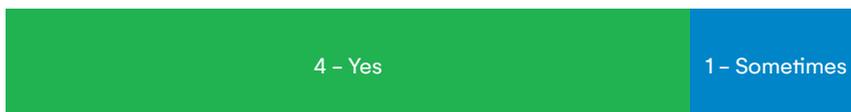


Have design or quality issues been raised through the review sessions which you think the authority could benefit from further CPD/ learning on?



- Sustainability
- Energy efficiency
- Carbon calculation

Is feedback from reviews provided/disseminated to officers who did not attend?



Applicant Survey

We contacted all members of applicant teams who attended an ODRP review or workshop in 2022. We received 7 responses from clients, architects, agents, project managers, and designers who, between them, had submitted 5 schemes to the ODRP.

There was a broad consensus from the responders that the sessions were constructive and helped to improve the proposals.

Applicant Questionnaire

Has the proposal changed based on the recommendations of the panel?



Has the panel's involvement helped you through the planning process?



Would you engage with the Oxford Design Review Panel again?



Do you agree or disagree with the following?

The design review session was constructive.



The advice/recommendations received from the panel helped to improve the proposal.



The review panel advice/report assisted with discussions with officers.



The review panel advice/report assisted with discussions with elected members.



“I think the review really helped develop the scheme and has led us to a much improved design which will benefit the users and the broader community.”

Applicant

Panel Members' Survey

In order to evaluate our service, we asked panel members to complete the Oxford Panel Members' Survey 2022. 8 out of 41 panel members responded in comparison to 14 responses received last year.

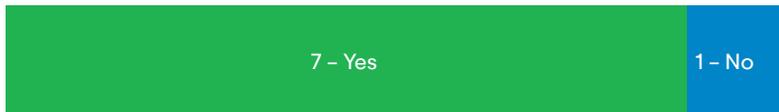
The majority of the respondents considered the level of information presented by the applicants and the local authority to be good. Three panel members noted that the contextual information provided could be improved.

The main issue or theme panel members thought needed to be addressed by the local authority was sustainability.

Most of the respondents stated that they would find it useful to receive further information about how schemes have developed in response to the panel's advice. For example, by visiting completed developments and meeting with Oxford City Council.

Panel Questionnaire

Do you feel that the level of information provided to you prior to the sessions is appropriate?



Is the information presented by applicants during the design review generally:



Is the information presented by officers during the design review generally:



Do you agree/disagree: You feel that you are always able to contribute your advice fully.



Are there particular issues or themes which have been raised during design review sessions which you think need to be addressed by the local authority?



Annual Review Day 2023

The annual review day took place on the 4th May 2023 at Oxford Town Hall.

44 people attended the day including 3 attendees from Design South East, 13 officers, 10 panel members and 18 applicants. No members attended due to the local elections taking place.

The Annual Review facilitates dialogue between the Council and applicants and is an opportunity for understanding the design issues that are arising in the city and how the planning process, of which Design Review is a part, is addressing them. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate the impact and legacy of the service on design quality across the city.

Design South East presented key findings from the year and the survey responses. In 2022, we have noted a marked increase in R&D schemes, that the panel are often asked to comment on the acceptability of building heights and that sustainability including reducing the embodied carbon of schemes continues to be a key issue raised by the panel.

Four applicants presented schemes that had been engaged with by the panel in 2022. They described how the schemes had progressed following the panel's input and their reflections on the process. The Local Authority also presented their perspective.



Key findings from roundtable

We held a roundtable activity to reflect on the aims of the ODRP and how DSE could continue to work with OCC to improve our service.

Officer perspective

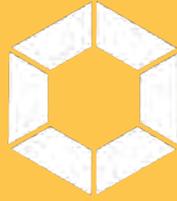
- The independence of the panel is valued.
- The role of the panel is not to merely reinforce the position of officers but also to push the boundaries of design.
- Oxford is facing immense pressure to change and develop, particularly regarding life sciences whilst respecting its sensitive heritage context.
- Oxford is facing key challenges when striving to achieve design quality; space, economics, climate change, design codes and taking a strategic approach.

Applicant perspective

- Presenting to the panel at either a workshop or a review is a significant commitment. It requires a high level of preparation and work.
- Having sufficient time to discuss the design can be challenging.
- Local knowledge and experience on the panel is greatly valued by applicants.
- Drawings by panel members can be valuable (although it may not always be appropriate to share drawings).
- Further work is needed to ensure workshops and reviews are used appropriately.

Panel perspective

- Within the limited time, it can be challenging to have a genuine dialogue with the applicant team even when delivering a workshop.
- The earlier a scheme comes to review the better. There can be a pre-conception that a design has to be fully developed, but even at the options appraisal stage it can be valuable to engage with the panel and then subsequently engage once the project has progressed.
- Senior officers being present at reviews is important and sends the message that design quality is a priority for OCC.
- Workshops need to be defined, an applicant should request a workshop at an appropriate time.
- The panel is keen to be viewed as a design resource, which can not only provide review, but training and input into policy.



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Design South East Limited

70 Cowcross Street

London

EC1M 6EJ

T 01634 401166

E info@designsoutheast.org

designsoutheast.org

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