



Oxford Design
Review Panel



Oxford Design Review Panel

Annual Report

2023 & 2024

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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 decade, 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 43 professional experts, selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with Council officers.

This report captures key data from the final two years of operation of the refreshed panel. From 2025, the panel will be managed internally by Oxford City Council.



**Oxford Design
Review Panel**

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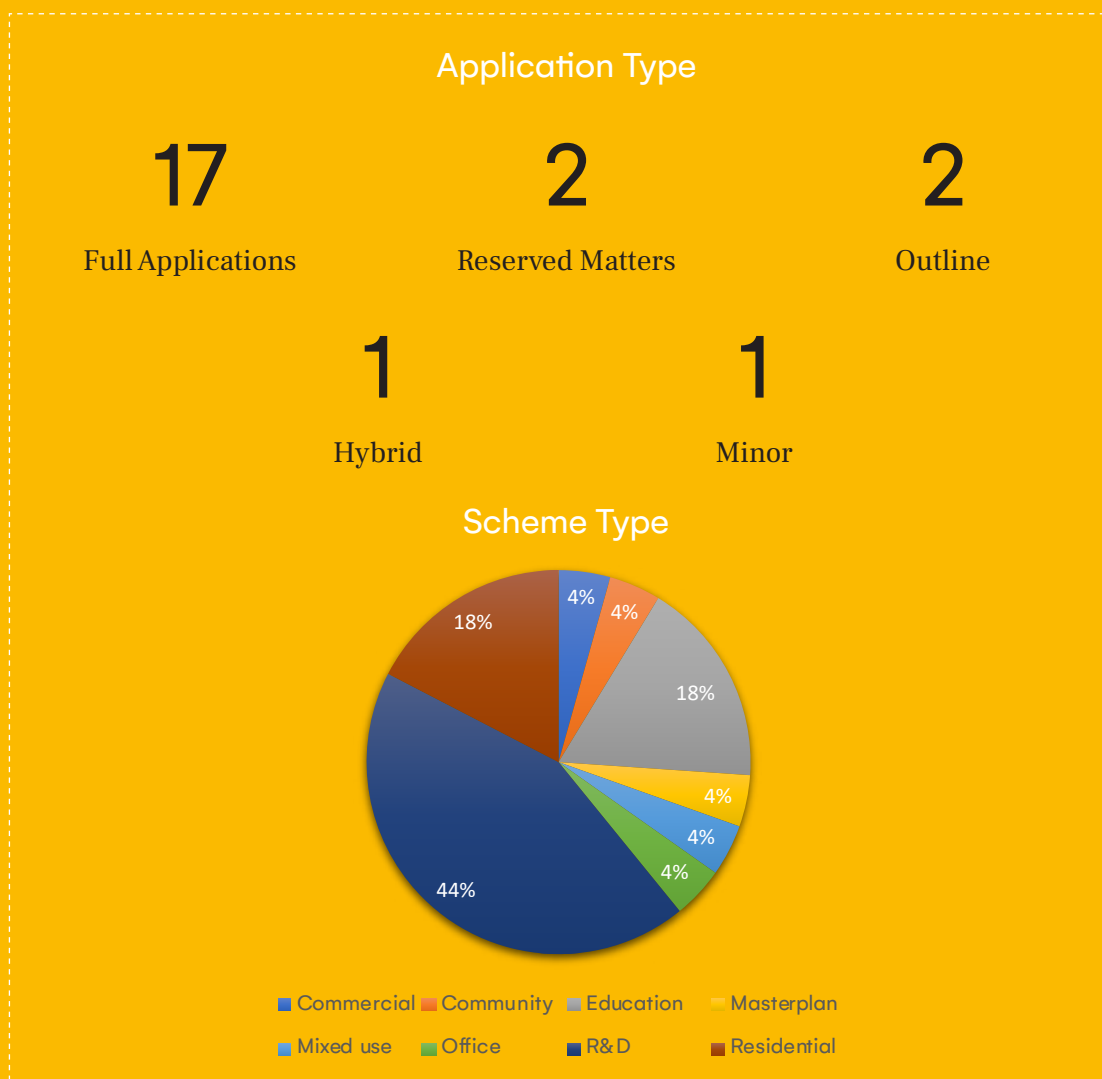
Oxford Design Review Panel Activity

Since its inception, the refreshed panel has engaged with 50 schemes over 64 sessions. As of 20th December 2024, 21 schemes seen at a review or workshop have received planning permission, 13 are live applications, and 14 are at pre-application stage.

The panel has also carried out a lunch and learn sustainability training session for officers and a community engagement workshop.

Schemes Reviewed in 2023 & 2024

The Oxford Design Review Panel held 33 sessions and engaged with 23 schemes from 1st January 2023 to 31st December 2024. All of the schemes were at pre-application stage at the time of the review or workshop. Nine schemes were reviewed more than once, with one being reviewed three times. The primary scheme type reviewed in 2023 and 2024 related to research and development uses. This was consistent with 2022 but was different to 2021 where the most commonly reviewed scheme was residential-led.





Oxford Design Review Panel Key Recommendations

In 2023 and 2024, the top recurring recommendations made by the panel related to:

1. Sustainable design and zero carbon targets

Achieving a sustainable design reflecting best practices, and producing a clear roadmap for delivering ambitious zero carbon targets, including addressing embodied carbon.

2. Contextual and heritage considerations

Further analysis of the historic environment, strategic landscape context, and local material palette to inform contextually responsive proposals; and conducting a heritage impact assessment to ensure that the design respects the character and setting of significant historical sites.

3. Landscape and biodiversity

Developing a landscape strategy that engages with and enhances the existing green infrastructure network, prioritises nature, and enhances biodiversity.

4. Movement and accessibility

Enhancing and connecting local cycling and walking infrastructure and public transport services

5. Community and public realm

Responding to existing buildings and strengthening the legibility of important public spaces to create a welcoming and accessible environment for all users.

Case Studies

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.

Case study 1: Plot 5000, Oxford Business Park



Location

Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4

Description

Demolition of the existing building and erection of a laboratory-enabled office building with ancillary commercial space (all Use Class E). Provision of new access, motor vehicle and cycle parking, landscaping (including partial delivery of landscaped green spine (the Connector)), and services infrastructure.

Stage

Pre-application

Status

Permission granted

Client/Developer

Advanced Research Clusters

Applicant Team

Aukett Swanke
Carton Jonas
Macgregor Smith

Design Review

6th July 2023 (Oxford Business Park)
3rd April 2024 (Plot 5000)

The impact of the panel – Oxford City Council perspective:

“The ODRP panel helped to reinforce Officer’s concerns about the legibility of the building – or lack thereof – and permeability of the site with its surrounding proposed infrastructure.”

Case study 2: Blackbird Leys Community Centre



Location

Blackbird Leys Road, Oxford, OX4 6HW

Description

New community centre and public square with associated landscaping.

Stage

Pre-application

Status

Awaiting decision

Client/Developer

Oxford City Council Regeneration & Peabody

Applicant Team

JTP
Jessop & Cook
Ireland Albrecht
Savills
Transition by Design

Design Review

29th February 2024
25th April 2024 (design surgery)

The impact of the panel –

Oxford City Council perspective:

“At the design review session the panel really helped the project team strengthen the design. We then used the Community Fund for a design surgery with one of the panellists - incorporated as part of a pre-app meeting and a great use of this fund. The panellist was pleased to see that the design team had responded to many of the suggestions made at the ODRP session and provided several ways to improve the design further. These included creating visual connections between spaces throughout the building by making the main stair less enclosed, affordable water play feature in the landscape fuelled by rainwater, simplified signage strategy and compositionally more successful fenestration design. The project team incorporated these suggestions and shared designs with the community who responded very positively.”

Case study 3: Beaver House



Location

Beaver House and 39-42A Hythe Bridge Street, OX1 2ET

Description

Demolition of 39-42 Hythe Bridge Street and Beaver House (23-38 Hythe Bridge Street); new build of approximately 11,612 sqm to allow for a range of commercial operation within Class E(g)(i) – (iii); and minor physical works to refurbish and restore the locally listed building at 42A Hythe Bridge Street and change of use to allow for alternative commercial or community uses.

Stage

Pre-application

Status

Awaiting decision

Client/Developer

Reef Group & UBS

Applicant Team

Hawkins Brown (first review)
Purcell (second review)
Savills
Scotch & Partners
Exterior Architectre

Design Review

29th February 2024

25th April 2024 (design surgery)

The impact of the panel –

Oxford City Council perspective:

“The scheme was challenging due to its sensitive location and impact on heritage assets and the panel offered a helpful critique of the proposals throughout the pre-application process. They encouraged amendments to the scale and massing as well as further articulation of the roof form to improve the overall design and reduce the level of heritage harm. The applicant made significant changes in response to the panel which greatly improved the scheme and ultimately resulted in a positive outcome. Also, the panel’s specialist advice in relation to sustainability was particularly useful in balancing issues relating to design and energy performance.”

Case study 4: Shaping development in East Marston



Sites

Government and Harcourt House, Land surrounding St. Clements Church, and Oxford Brookes Marston Road Campus

specific sites visited. The workshop also served as training to upskill officers to be able to carry out future engagement workshops independently.

Description

Engagement session with a focus group of representatives from the local community from the east of Oxford area and from local civic groups.

Workshop

18th March 2023

Objective

Gather local knowledge and experiences to inform contextual analysis and area-specific, high-quality design principles to make the most of development opportunities.

The impact of the session – Oxford City Council perspective:

“DSE facilitated a design-led engagement session in East Marston with support from the City Council, funded with the community fund. The intention of the session was to gather local knowledge and then use this to inform locally focussed design guides and policy. This session, run by DSE, was intended as a pilot that officers could learn from in order to run follow up sessions independently for other parts of Oxford. The session went really well - the attendees were very positive about it and we gathered lots of points we could use in the Local Plan. It was brilliant learning from DSE’s expertise – we’re looking forward to follow up sessions.”

Client

Oxford City Council

Outcome

Findings from the workshop were compiled and incorporated into the emerging Local Plan to inform design guidance for the East of Oxford Area of Focus and development briefs for the

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.



Panel Composition 2023/24

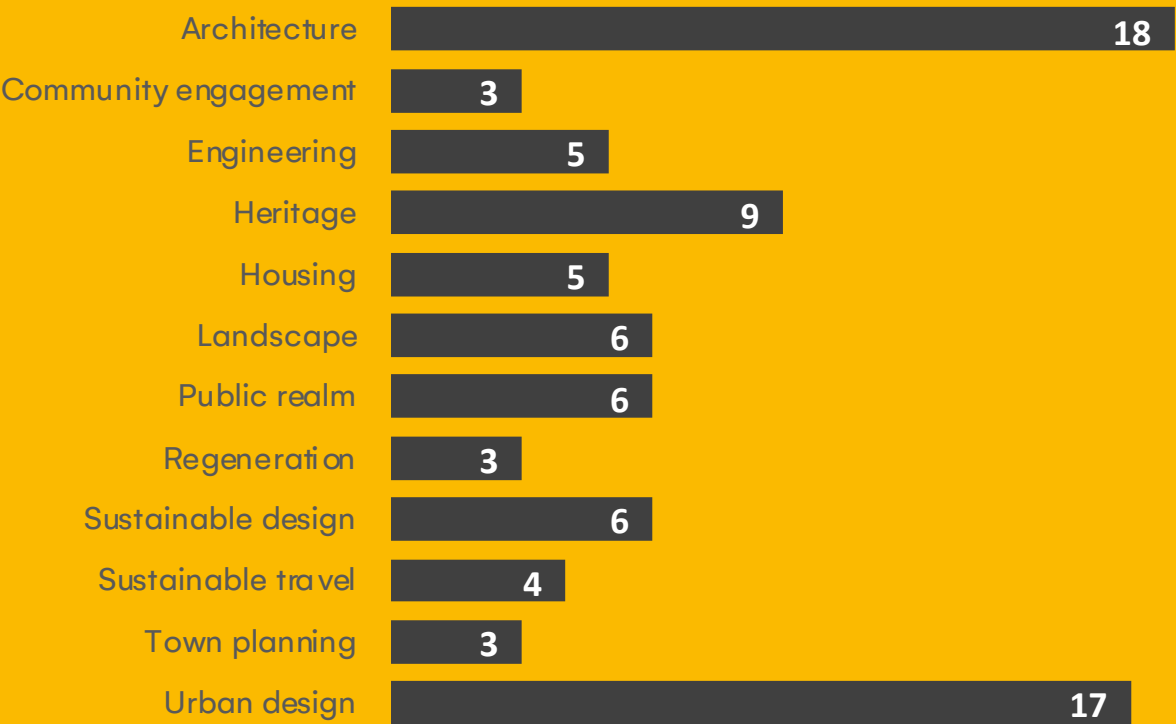
22
female

21
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 2023/24



Survey Feedback

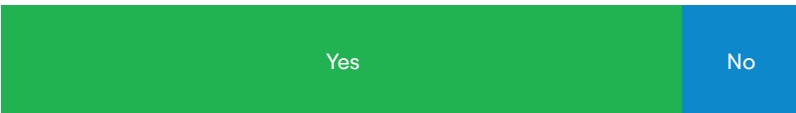
In the next section, we summarise the findings from surveys issued to officers, applicants and the panel:

Officer Questionnaire

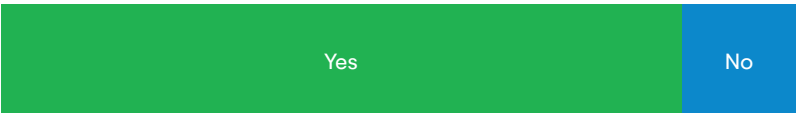
Following every design review we send out a survey to officers and applicants. We received 2 survey responses from OCC Officers from the survey sent out immediately after each session in 2023 and 2024. Both respondents strongly agreed that the panel members were friendly, constructive and professional and had the right range of skills and knowledge. Officers strongly agreed that the meetings were managed efficiently, well chaired, and covered all the right issues, and that the advice provided was helpful.

For the annual report, officers were also contacted to provide their feedback on the service provided in 2023 and 2024. 4 responses were received in comparison to 5 responses in 2022. Comments and observations from officers were broadly positive.

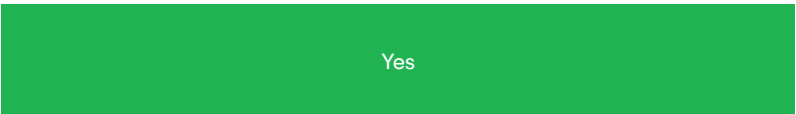
How would you rate the clarity of the panel's comments?



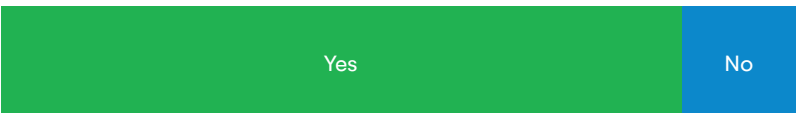
How helpful did you find the review process and subsequent report in ongoing discussions with the applicant?



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?



- Masterplanning
- Designing large buildings
- R&D technical understandings

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



Applicant Survey

We received 2 survey responses from applicants from the survey sent out immediately after each session in 2023 and 2024. Both respondents strongly agreed that the panel members were friendly, constructive and professional and agreed that they had the right range of skills and knowledge. They agreed or strongly agreed that the meetings were well chaired, and agreed that they were efficiently managed and covered all the right issues. Both respondents agreed that the advice provided was helpful.

We received 7 responses to the 2023/24 annual report survey from clients, architects, agents, project managers, and designers who, between them, had submitted 6 schemes to the ODRP. Most applicants reported that the panel's advice and recommendations helped to improve the proposal. However, views were mixed on whether the panel's involvement assisted with discussions with officers and elected members.

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.



Panel Members' Survey

In order to evaluate our service, we asked panel members to complete the Oxford Panel Members' Survey 2023/24. 17 out of 43 panel members responded in comparison to 8 responses received in 2022.

The majority of the respondents considered the level of information presented by the applicants and the local authority to be good. Panel members noted that there was sometimes a lack of analysis and understanding of the site and surrounding areas, and that sections showing the scheme in context were often missing from the applicants' presentation.

Panel members thought that the climate and biodiversity crises were the main issues that needed to be addressed by the local authority. Transport and movement - including public transport and active travel facilities - was also raised as a key theme.

It was felt that the panel's advice could have greater impact if applicants were encouraged to come at an earlier stage for an initial workshop, followed by a formal design review at a later stage of design development, prior to planning submission.

Most of the respondents stated that they would find it useful to receive further information from Oxford City Council about how schemes have developed in response to the panel's advice. Site visits to completed developments and a panel roundtable were also suggested to discuss common issues and share learnings.

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?





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