



Oxford Design
Review Panel



Oxford Design Review Panel
Annual Report
2021-22



Barton Park photo credit: Kathryn Davies (ODRP)

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Introduction

The Oxford Design Review Panel was first established in 2014 and refreshed in 2021 by Design South East on behalf of Oxford City Council. It is chaired by Joanne Cave and Joanna van Heyningen and includes 40 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 the way in which it supports the planning process. Council officers identify the schemes requiring input from the panel and subsequently refer them for a review or workshop. A report is produced following each session that synthesises the panel’s advice and key recommendations.

The Oxford Design Review Panel has advised on 12 schemes in the year from 1st January 2021 to 31st March 2022. Two of these schemes were reviewed on two occasions.

This report captures the key data from the first year of operation of the refreshed panel and provides insights on how the service can be improved. Case studies demonstrate the impact the panel has had on schemes that have gone on to receive planning permission. The outputs from the Annual Review Day are captured and analysed and the next steps are provided at the end of the report.

Paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states that “local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for a Healthy Life⁵¹. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments. In assessing applications, planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.”



About the Oxford Design Review Panel

Working in close partnership with the Council, the refreshed panel reflects Design South East's innovative and inclusive ambitions for the future of design review, with a recruitment process that was designed to consolidate the strengths of the original panel, but also to include new skills and perspectives.

Alongside more established names, six panellists are in the early stages of their careers and 29 have experience of living or working in Oxford. Expertise in energy and sustainability is strongly represented on the panel, with members also contributing knowledge of historic environments, housing, urban design, landscape, movement and planning. The panel has two co-chairs, with newly appointed Joanne Cave of David Lock Associates joining existing co-chair Joanna van Heyningen.

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' 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. Her portfolio of projects spans DLA's key practice areas from strategic growth planning to large-scale urban extensions and urban regeneration frameworks. 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 Governor Chair of the Building Committee of the Purcell School of Music. She was awarded an OBE for services to Architecture and the Built Environment in 2016.



Panel diversity

20

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, sexual orientation and socioeconomic background)

Panel expertise

4

inclusive design

8

heritage

6

architecture

5

housing

7

sustainable design

7

urban design

6

landscape
architecture

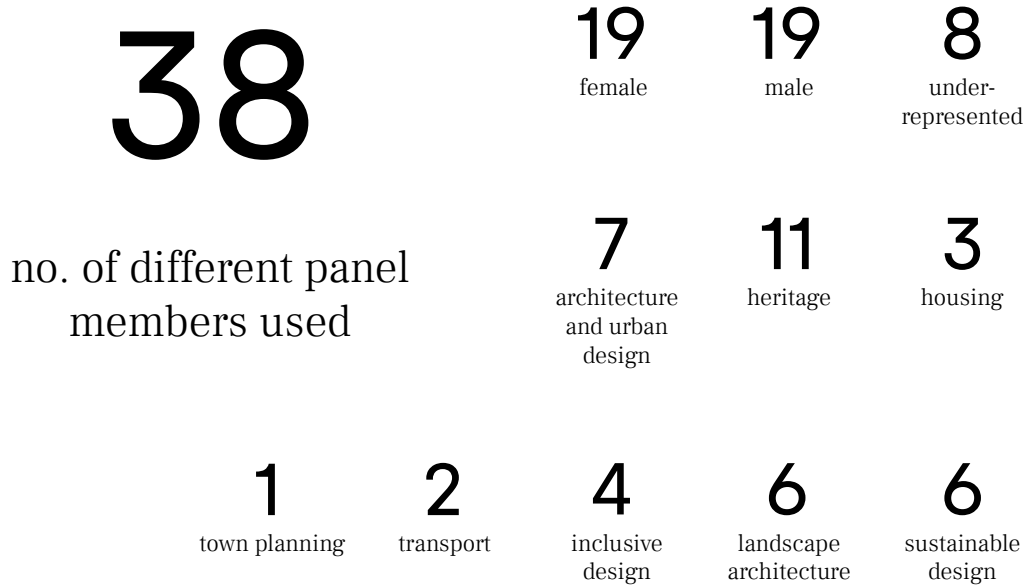
4

sustainable transport

3

town planning

Panel members and expertise used this year



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. This will enable them to understand the multiple perspectives and collaborative processes that are part of successful and sustainable placemaking.

Six mentees were selected to form part of the first year of the mentoring programme. All of them attended at least one session and one of them attended three.

Each mentoring session following a design review focuses on the key lessons the mentees learned and whether there were any additional issues they identified.

The feedback received is positive and all mentees are looking forward to participating in more reviews in the next year.

Process

This first year of operation of the refreshed panel was an experimental period where new processes were tested and lessons learnt. The Oxford Design Review Panel works in close collaboration with Oxford City Council and the planning authority in identifying the schemes that would benefit from design review by an independent panel of experts. The broad criteria for selection are:

- Classification of an application as a ‘major’.
- Sensitivities in terms of heritage and natural environment.
- Other sensitive matters where officers would value the panel’s input.

There are two main options for engagement with the panel: a design review or a design workshop. Their key differences are explained below.

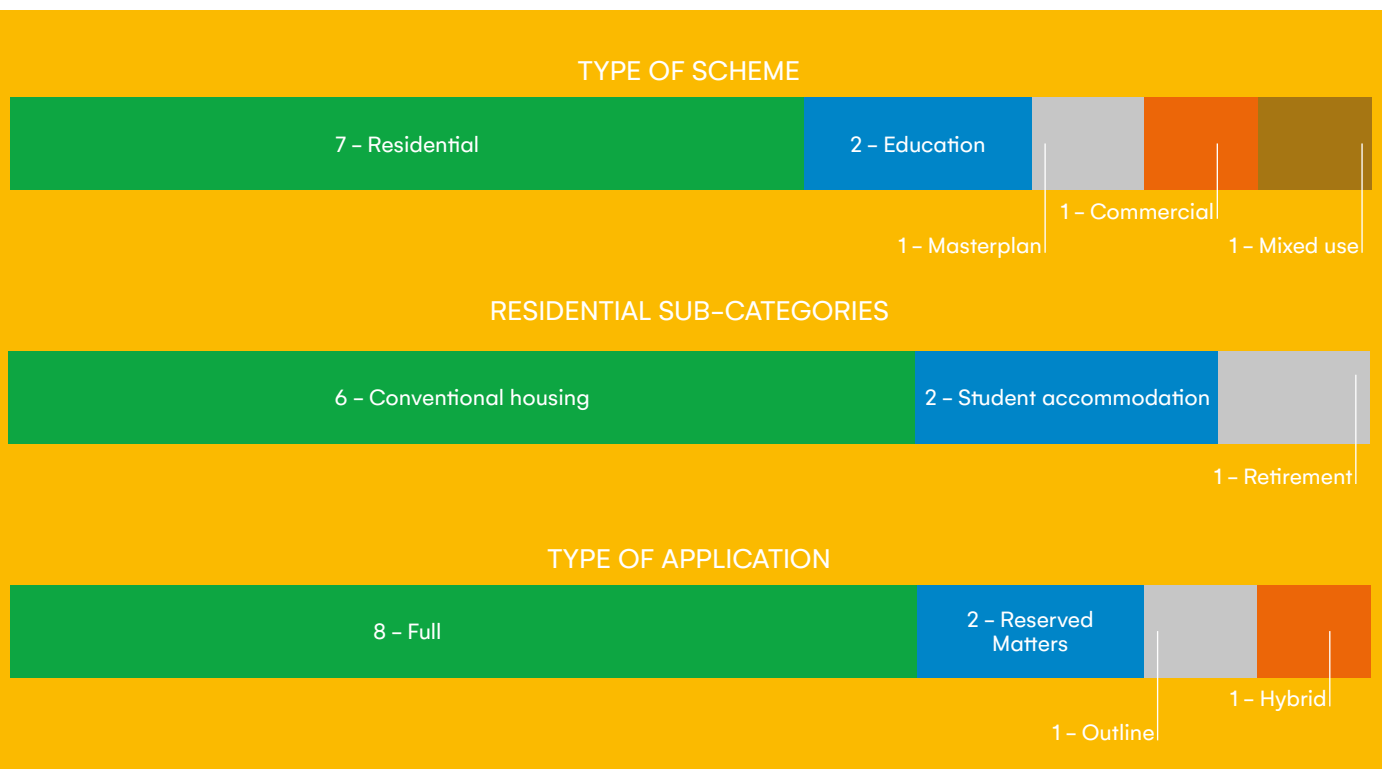
	Design Review	Design Workshop
Scope and focus	Review of a proposal	Discussion of options
Stage in planning process	Later stage but still at pre-application	Early stage (concept and design principles)
Report	A material consideration at submission	A tool to support design development
Discussion	Panel-focused	Interactive
Objective	Opinion and advice in response to proposal	Sharing of ideas and creativity to help resolve/unlock problems

We follow a transparent process in which the Council’s Oxford Design Review Panel coordinator manages the internal discussions with officers and the bookings, and Design South East selects the appropriate panel members and delivers the session.

Quarterly meetings and monthly catchups between Design South East, Oxford City Council and the two Co-chairs offer the opportunity to discuss the challenges and identify issues with the process. We seek constantly to improve the way we manage the panel to ensure a best-in-class service, providing continuity, clear and independent advice, and collaborative sessions.

Schemes

Between January 2021 and March 2022 we reviewed 12 schemes of various types and sizes. All schemes were at pre-application stage at the time of the review or workshop.

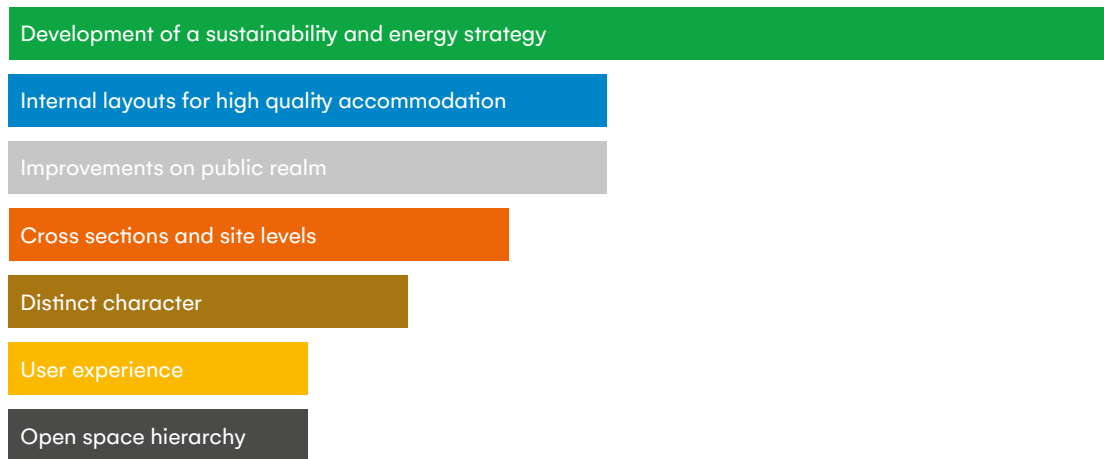


Clive Booth Student Village site_photo credit: MICA Architects

Reviews

In the last year, the panel held 11 design reviews and 3 design workshops. Two proposals were reviewed twice and panel member continuity was ensured.

The key recommendations of the panel from all sessions held can be found below:



Measuring impact

The Oxford Design Review Panel is an integral part of the planning process and as such, it is important to understand whether it has an impact on the quality of the built environment.

In order to assess the panel’s impact, we followed the advice set out in Practice Note PN003 (2019), published by Public Practice. The Practice Note sets out recommendations on how impact can be measured; these include surveys, case studies and reports. Therefore, in the next section, we present case studies and the feedback from the surveys. We analyse how the panel’s advice and subsequent reports were used in the application process and whether the Planning Committee has taken them into consideration when making decisions.

Given the confidential nature of the design review process, we use examples of proposals that are in the public domain, for example, applications that have already been considered and approved by the planning authority and the Planning Committee.



‘I have been a design review panellist, latterly mainly as chair, for several years, but it is only recently that I joined Design South East. I am very impressed by their understanding of what design review can and should bring to the built environment. They carry out their work in a timely, unusually collaborative and efficient manner. It is a pleasure to be part of their team.’

Joanna van Heyningen, ODRP co-chair



Blavatnik School of Government photo credit: Design South East

Case study 1: Old Marston Paddock



View of the public open space_application ref 21/02580/FUL

Location

Marston Paddock, Butts Lane

Description

Redevelopment of the site to provide 40 dwellings and associated landscape and cycling and pedestrian routes.

Stage

Pre-application

Client/Developer

Aubrey-Fletcher

Applicant Team

Prior+Partners - planning
tsh architects - masterplan and architecture
Tree Frontiers - arboriculture
Stantec - transport
Adams Habermehl - landscape architecture
Bioscan - ecology
Worledge Associates - heritage

Design review

February 2021

Summary

The panel were supportive of the principle of developing this site to offer much needed housing. However, the site strategy was unclear and a holistic vision of who the users are was missing. Public spaces and architectural expression should be more inventive.

The discussion focused on the public space and wider connections, as well as the block of flats. The panel's recommendations can be found below.

1. A stronger design narrative should be developed, based on the community that will use the spaces created.
2. The site layout should be simplified and other alternatives explored, including a layout with three terraces surrounding a central green, with all front doors facing the green.
3. The affordable units should be interspersed with the market units and there should be no distinction between the two.
4. Cross sections showing the relationship with the A40 should inform the design of the units on the eastern side of the plot.
5. A noise survey should be undertaken to determine A40 noise mitigation measures required, taking into account the trees in the wooded area close to the road.
6. Car parking spaces should closely align with individual dwellings but form part of the public space, which should be recognisable as belonging to all residents.
7. In order to have active frontages along the main lane, kitchens and dining rooms should face the street. Living rooms should enjoy privacy at the rear.
8. Consideration should be given to Passivhaus certification and using ground source heat pumps instead of air source.

Following the panel's comments, the applicant team made significant changes to the site layout as clearly indicated below. They also conducted a noise survey which resulted in adjusting the floorplans of the flats and placed the entrance to the block on the central space, instead of having it at the rear. Passive surveillance is achieved by placing the kitchens towards the public spaces, which was one of the panel's recommendations.

Overall, the applicant team engaged with the panel at an early stage when changes could be made without significant delays to the project. The application submission date was several months after the ODRP which gave the team sufficient time to conduct the necessary surveys and progress the design development based on the panel's recommendations.



Site layout as presented to the ODRP

The site layout was simplified with three distinct terraces facing a central green.



Site layout as approved

Case study 2: St Frideswide Farm



Linear park_application ref 21/01449/FUL

Location

St Frideswide Farm, Oxford Road

Description

Redevelopment of the site to provide 134 dwellings, informal open space including community pavilion, seating and children's play areas, hard and soft landscape and sustainable drainage areas, access, associated roads and infrastructure.

Stage

Pre-application

Client/Developer

Croudace Homes Limited

Applicant Team

Savills - planning
Boon Brown Architects - architecture
EDP - landscape architecture

Design review

September 2020 (Previous ODRP)
March 2021

Summary

The proposal improved between the two ODRP sessions and several of the panel's comments were taken into consideration.

The relationship of this site with the adjoining masterplan within Cherwell District Council was one of the main concerns; however,

the panel appreciates that it is outside the applicant's control. The issues that are within the applicant's control focus on sustainability which should aim at net zero carbon emissions, a coherent servicing and movement strategy, and design changes that could enhance the proposal further.

The panel's recommendations can be found below:

1. The north-western area would benefit from a more robust design identity, specifically clarity on the geometry of the road, its relationship with the shared surface arrangement and the car park on the west.
2. The attenuation ponds require further study to define when, and for how long, they will be inundated and when they will be dry.
3. The entrance sequence needs to allow for more space for street tree planting and growth and the architecture would benefit from bolder ambition.
4. The central boulevard and linear park need to terminate meaningfully, and the car parking spaces at the eastern end need to be relocated.
5. There is a lack of hierarchy among the open spaces.
6. A sunpath and shading analysis should inform the design.
7. Internal layouts can be substantially improved.

The site layout was improved in the north-western corner, as per the panel's recommendation, and further studies were undertaken relating to the attenuation pond. The outcome is a larger pond that will accommodate the surface water necessary to reduce flooding. The entrance sequence was significantly amended to allow for trees to grow only on one side and to have a bolder architectural approach.



Site layout as presented to the ODRP



Entrance buildings as presented (above) and approved (below)



Site layout as approved

Case study 3: Northfield Hostel



View of the development_application ref 21/03328/OUTFUL

Location

Sandy Lane West, Oxford

Description

Demolition of the existing Northfield Hostel buildings and erection of 2no. 4 storey buildings to provide 51 dwellings. Outline planning application for the erection of up to 10 dwelling houses on former playing field to the east of the existing Northfield Hostel buildings.

Stage

Pre-application

Client/Developer

Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council

Applicant Team

WSP/GL Hearn - planning
Levitt Bernstein Associates - masterplan and architecture

Design review

June 2021

Summary

The City Council's ambition to provide affordable housing, not only on this but on several other sites, and to bring forward a genuinely sustainable development was commended by the panel. Particular attention should be paid to this development, as it will set the standard for other sites. For

that reason, the panel suggested a greater focus on fostering a community, promoting active travel and designing for the specific demographics of residents.

The panel's recommendations can be found below:

1. Prepare a Health Impact Assessment to inform the design strategy.
2. Incorporate the sustainability and maintenance strategy into the design, including long-term costs and who will be responsible for each.
3. Orientate the buildings and open up the public spaces to the south.
4. Create public spaces for the wider community as well as the residents of this site.
5. Inset the balconies to provide better shelter and privacy, in addition to clearer articulation of the elevations.
6. Prepare a tree planting strategy which responds to the existing character and avoid overcomplicating the planting proposals.
7. Develop a lighting strategy that includes the journey from the bus stops to the entrances.



Design Review Panel

- West block reduced to 4 storeys
- 3 storey houses moved to Bampton Close junction, to minimise overlooking / overbearing on other houses
- Lower 2 storey houses moved towards East boundary, with 2.5 storey houses in between those and 3 storey houses
- Changes to East block balconies
- Changes to parking layout



Current Design

- Inset balconies in response to DRP comments
- Communal access doors facing Sandy Lane West following DRP comments
- Improvements to internal layouts, simpler external volumes
- Acoustic fencing to North boundary for both sites
- External cycle store spaces combined with acoustic wall
- South-East corner used as pocket amenity space
- Parking spaces and driveway areas reduced
- Hard standing area reduced following pre-application comments
- Dark roof colour to match solar panels, following pre-application comments
- Required new sub-station added next to Sandy Lane West

Extract from approved Design and Access Statement



Site layout as approved

Applicants' survey

In addition to the survey sent out immediately after each session (for which we have not received any responses), we contacted applicant teams whose schemes have recently gone through the application and Committee process. 64 people were contacted and 13 responded (8 designers, 3 developers and 2 planning consultants).

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



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



Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



‘The panel are really helpful in identifying improvements and enhancements to the details of a scheme. It is useful to have the proposals reviewed in detail as part of the ongoing pre-application process and often this will assist with making the development better. The panel’s support and professional analysis (within relevant specialisms) of the scheme is very helpful. I have found that a collaborative and cooperative approach to workshops and full reviews to be the most successful approach to ODRP sessions.’

An applicant



Officers' survey

Officers were contacted to provide their feedback on the service. Several of them were planning officers of various grades, and others were from the Urban Design and Conservation Team, as well as senior managers. 8 responses were received.

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?



- Landscape and ecology in rural edge locations
- Sustainability
- Energy efficiency
- Mechanical plant specifications
- Site strategies and understanding the needs of the future users of the spaces and buildings to inform design narratives

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



Panel members' survey

In order to evaluate our service, we asked the panel members for their opinion on how the meetings are run and what they would like to see next year.

When asked about topics that need to be addressed by the local authority, panel members identified the following: update of TAN 14 Sustainable Design and Construction, extent of parking provision; heritage significance assessment to be requested at early stages of design development; consideration for hinterland context; tree and hedge planting enhancement; and higher biodiversity targets.

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?



‘The Officers at Oxford have been involved with design review for over 6 years and have learnt a lot in the process - their input is generally well informed and useful.’

Panel Member

Elected Members' survey

The survey was sent to 20 Councillors, including three substitute Planning Committee Members. We received 3 responses, including one from the former Chair of the Planning Committee and Heritage Champion, and one from the present Vice Chair of the Planning Committee and elected Mayor of the City.

All elected members who responded to the survey feel that design quality is improving because of the Oxford Design Review Panel.

When asked about topics on which elected members would benefit from further learning, the respondents considered that energy efficiency measures, view cones and the preservation of mature trees versus development are topics they would like to explore more.

‘My experiences are positive - the range of expertise in the ODRP has brought improvements in all aspects of design to several large schemes. They seem to be able to influence developers at a stage before plans are so advanced that they are not able to, or not willing to, make big changes. Not being an architect/landscape designer/urban planner myself I set a lot of store by the views of the ODRP.’

Elected Member

Have you seen or read the Oxford Design Review Panel report?

2 - Yes

1 - Other

If yes, did you find the report helpful?

1 - Very helpful

2 - Helpful

Did you give weight to the panel's advice/report during the decision making process?

1 - Substantial weight

2 - Moderate weight

Do you feel that design quality is improving in the Council or in the area because of the Oxford Design Review Panel?

3 - Yes





Northfield Hostel site_photo credit Levitt Bernstein

ODRP reports and the application process

Our desktop research demonstrated that there is an inconsistent approach to how the ODRP reports and recommendations are shared with the public during the application process and with Planning Committee members at the determination stage. The findings are shown below.

APPLICATION STAGE – PRE DETERMINATION

Was the full ODRP report added in:



Were ODRP comments mentioned in:



Were ODRP comments addressed?



APPLICATION STAGE – PLANNING COMMITTEE

Was the ODRP report mentioned in the officer's report?



Was the ODRP report attached as an appendix to the officer's report?



Next steps

An Annual Review Day was held on 10th May 2022 when 27 officers, developers, designers and panel members participated in roundtable discussions about the impact of the panel and how the service can be improved. The findings from the surveys were presented at the beginning of the session and as such, the discussion was informed by them.

All attendees recognised the value of the ODRP in improving design quality within Oxford. There are several recommendations to improve the service and to allow for a more collaborative dialogue. The full list can be found below.

Issue	How to tackle it
Sharing local knowledge within the panel	Organise study tours and learning events for panel members.
Panel's view on final iteration	Offer the option of a Chair's review at application stage.
Inconsistency on Committee submissions	Ongoing dialogue with Officers to identify the most appropriate way to share the panel's reports.
Inadequate time allocated to discussion	Extend the roundtable slot in the agenda.
Lengthy presentations by applicants	Review the presentation material in advance and ensure it covers the key areas and can be delivered in the allocated time. Provide clear guidance to applicants on what and how to present.
Inadequate number of survey responses to provide a holistic view of the service	Share the surveys in different times, for example, directly after the session, when the report is sent, three months later and post-submission. Work with officers to help develop a culture of returning survey responses.





Oxford Design
Review Panel



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