

INTRODUCTION

The combined Harlow and Gilston / Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel was set up in 2017 by Frame Projects on behalf of Epping Forest District and the collaborative HGGT partnership, between East Hertfordshire, Epping Forest and Harlow District Councils, and Essex and Hertfordshire County Councils. It is chaired by Peter Maxwell, Director of Design at the London Legacy Development Corporation, and includes 25 professional members. The panel reviews proposals in both the Garden Town area, as well as Epping Forest District.

Terms of Reference, available on the planning authority's website, set out the role and remit of the panel, and the way in which it supports the planning process. Schemes requiring design advice are identified by planning officers and referred to the panel for review. Officers provide a briefing on the planning context and key issues, both in writing for the meeting agenda, and in person at the panel meeting. Advice given by the panel is recorded in a report, to assist with continuing pre-application negotiations, or to advise the planning decision maker on submitted schemes.

The Harlow and Gilston / Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel has advised on 20 schemes in the year from April 2023 to March 2024. 11 of these schemes have been reviewed on more than one occasion. First reviews usually take place at a stage when a client and design team have decided their preferred option for the development of a site, and have sufficient drawings, models, etc. for a comprehensive discussion. There will often be a second pre-application review, to provide advice on more detailed design matters, before planning submission.

Cover image: Latton Priory site visit © Frame Projects

Image: Gilston Village 7 site visit © Frame Projects



PANEL

Authority

East Hertfordshire District Council, Epping Forest
District Council and Harlow District Council

Review Panel name

Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel /
Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel

Panel management

Frame Projects

Contact name for panel

Yingli Tang, Frame Projects

Contact email address

Yingli@frame-projects.co.uk

Image: Harlow Enterprise Zone © Discover Harlow



REVIEW TOTALS

Number of reviews

20

Number of site visits

9

Number of first reviews

9

Number of follow up reviews

11

Formal reviews

(chair plus four panel members)

13

Chair's reviews

(chair plus one panel members)

4

Workshop reviews

(chair plus two panel members)

3

PANEL COMPOSITION

PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel members used

22

Male panel members

59%

Female panel members

41%

Diverse ethnic background
(based on 24 diversity forms)

18%

PANEL COMPOSITION

Architecture

27

Urban design / town planning

14

Landscape / public realm

5

Stewardship

8

Heritage / conservation

1

Sustainability

7

Development delivery

5

Social infrastructure

6

Transport planning

9

PROPOSALS REVIEWED

APPLICANT TYPE

Private developer

16

Local authority

4

Public private partnership

0

STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre-application

15

Planning application
submitted

2

Policy document

3

TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan

8

Mixed use

5

Residential (1-50 units)

0

Residential (50+ units)

2

Policy or strategic document

3

Commercial

0

Public realm

0

Education

2

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

Over the past year, the Quality Review Panel has continued to be a helpful and valued part of the planning process. A few emerging issues have been summarised below.

Strategic masterplans and design codes

There has been an increase in the number of strategic sites coming to the panel over the last year. This has been for a number of reasons, including the resolution to grant outline planning approval for the Gilston Area of the Garden Town in Spring 2023, subject to the completion of a Section 106 agreement. Likewise, following the adoption of the Epping Forest District Local Plan in early 2023, the panel has seen multiple strategic sites coming forwards within the district.

A recurring issue has been how to structure review meetings to ensure sufficient time given the scale and complexity of these strategic sites. Bespoke formats and extended sessions have been used to split the complex masterplans into thematic sections, to allow for independent advice on each aspect of the designs. This has worked well, and Frame Projects will continue to engage with applicants and case officers to agree bespoke formats for large and complex projects.

In January 2024, it was agreed to appoint additional panel members with masterplanning expertise, with a particular focus on design code experience. Two new panel members have now joined the panel. With these appointments, 42 per cent of the Quality Review Panel are women and 19 per cent are from a BAME background.

Character and identity

Character and identity is a recurring theme at almost every review meeting. Given the challenge of placemaking within a semi-rural setting and for urban extensions, stronger design guidance should be provided. Epping Forest are considering developing district wide design codes, which could include character area guidance. Similar work has been commenced in East Herts. Existing guidance, including the Essex Design Guide and Garden Town Design Guide, could also be reviewed to ensure that these documents are up to date, providing helpful references for design teams as well as the panel members.

Sustainability

While awareness of issues around climate resilience, biodiversity and sustainable drainage is generally positive, applicant responses to low carbon design and passive design is more variable. An update of the Epping Forest and Garden Town Design Sustainability Guidance could be considered to provide clarity on expectations for design teams, as well as the panel members.

Further sustainability training with the panel and officers could be considered, to refresh their understanding of industry guidance as well as local policy, to ensure that the council's ambitions for sustainable placemaking are reinforced.

Car parking

The panel accepts the current situation that not all development sites are well connected by public transport, and appreciates that trying to achieve car free approach is inappropriate in this context. However, parking can have a significant impact on placemaking and public realm opportunities. Providing design guidance to inform how cars are dealt with could help create stronger places. This could include ideas about alternative future uses for parking areas to assist understanding of short term and long term potential.

To support the Garden Town and Epping Forest's ambitions for modal shift and promotion of active travel, the Essex car parking standards should be reviewed. The panel feels that these are outdated and contradict the forward looking aspiration of EFDC and Garden Town partners.

FORWARD LOOK

Given the recent change in governance and the emerging Joint Committee for the Garden Town, an update briefing on the panel's role and remit would be timely. It will be important to ensure the Committee has confidence in the panel's independent advisory role, and understands how it can support the Garden Town vision and Councils priorities.

To ensure high-quality outcomes across the Garden Town and Epping Forest, a stronger expectation of engagement with the Quality Review Panel could be established through planning performance agreements. These could cover strategic masterplans, development of design codes, and reserved matters applications. As detailed applications for the strategic sites within the Garden Town start to come forwards, assuring compliance with design codes and masterplan frameworks will be a priority for both the panel and officers.

Mechanisms to share knowledge between the different design teams working on the larger masterplan areas within the Garden Town and Epping District could be beneficial. The well-established Developer Forum provides a forum for these conversations. Similarly, exchange of lessons learned between the Quality Review Panel and planning officers is important. Visits to completed or emerging schemes may be beneficial to analyse successes, missed opportunities, and to identify best practice developments that can help set high standards for future schemes.

Image: Tudor House site visit © Frame Projects

