

# **Newham Design Review Panel Annual Report – March 2019 – February 2020 DRAFT**

## **Background**

The Newham Design Review Panel (DRP) was established in October 2007 to help improve the quality of the design of the built environment in Newham through the planning process. Since then it has become an integral part of the planning process in Newham. It was relaunched in March 2019 with an expanded membership and updated terms of reference.

Newham DRP is an independent and expert advisory panel that reviews major planning applications and pre-application proposals and provides design advice to Development Control Members Forum (DCMF) and Strategic Development Committee (SDC). It does not make decisions on planning applications, but advises those that do – Newham members and planning officers. While the DRP is co-ordinated by council officers and was established to serve the council, the design advice it provides is independent.

The DRP usually meets monthly and reviews approximately 3 to 4 development proposals at each meeting. Each meeting comprises the Chair and a group of 3 additional panel members selected from a pool of 22. Panel members are independent experts in the field of the design of the built environment. Planning officers and, where relevant, representatives of external agencies such as the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Historic England, are invited to attend as observers.

The DRP reviews proposals borough-wide, except where these fall within the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) area. The LLDC has its own 'Quality Review Panel' (QRP).

The DRP primarily reviews pre-application proposals and therefore the reports issued following the review are confidential. The reports are circulated to the design and client teams, who are required to address the points raised by the DRP when developing proposals to the next stage. Where proposals are reviewed that have already been submitted as a planning application, or once an application is submitted, the panel report becomes a public document and is included in the application file.

## **Reviewed schemes**

Between March 2019 and February 2020, monthly meetings took place, with the exception of March and June 2019 when the monthly DRP meeting was cancelled due to a lack of proposals for review. However, additional DRP meetings took place in March, April, May, June and July 2019 to review Phase 1 of the Silvertown Quays project. Due to the size and complexity of the project and the time required to review the proposals, these meetings took place outside the usual monthly DRP cycle of meetings.

A total of 20 schemes have been reviewed by the DRP between March 2019 and February 2020. Of these, 6 have been brought back either for a Follow-up Review by the panel or for a Chair's Workshop. The location of these schemes is shown on the map (**Figure 1**) below. Details of the schemes reviewed and a summary of the panel's advice is shown in **Appendix A**.

In addition, the DRP also reviewed the Royal Docks Team's public realm proposals for the Royal Docks Enterprise Zone.

Following each meeting a report is produced and, once approved by the Chair, circulated to the applicant team and Newham planning officers. Newham's planning officers use the DRP comments in subsequent pre-application discussions with applicant teams and negotiate improvements to design quality. Most large schemes are taken back to the DRP, either for a follow-up, full panel review or for a Chair's workshop once Officers consider that the majority of the DRP's comments have been addressed. The full reports from each of the panel meetings can be found in **Appendix B**.

## **Feedback**

As part of the annual review a feedback survey was sent to all applicants who presented to the Panel (including architect, planning agents and clients). The completed surveys are included in **Appendix C**.

In total, 35 questionnaires were sent out and we received 4 responses. Although a low response rate, this is similar to previous years where feedback has been sought.

The limited responses received were overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the process, from the engagement with the Council beforehand, the review itself and the written feedback afterwards. The only significant criticism was with regards to the room where the review took place, suggesting that electronic presentation formats should be allowed or that the room should have better facilities for pinning up. It should be noted, however, that when this particular review took place the large meeting room with a magnetic wall usually used for design review panels was double booked due to problem with a new IT booking system. As a result an alternative meeting room had to be found at short notice to allow the review to take place. It is considered unlikely that the same feedback would have been received had this review taken place in the meeting room usually used for the DRP.

Verbal feedback was also received from the applicants from one scheme who felt that one of the panel members was unduly critical about their proposals and that their tone was unhelpful. However, officers present at the review were satisfied that the criticisms made about the scheme were valid and justified but this feedback was nevertheless discussed subsequently with the relevant panel member and the importance of maintaining a tone of constructive criticism and diplomacy during reviews was discussed.

## **Overall progress**

The DRP has been operating since 2007 but this is the first annual report to be produced since 2011. This is due to an increased capacity in the Design and Heritage Team resulting from a new appointment and the requirement to undertake regular monitoring/evaluation of the DRP in accordance with the GLA's Quality Review Charter.

The Newham DRP is considered to be achieving its objectives for the following reasons:

- Through their comments the DRP has directly led to improvements being made by to the design of schemes.
- The DRP continues to have a key role in raising design standards major schemes across the borough. It has also contributed to raising expectations from councillors and planning officers, which has positively impacted the borough's ambitious regeneration agenda.

- The DRP has generated external interest from other boroughs and organisations such as Urban Design London and Public Practice. Officers from other local authorities have attended meetings in as observers and/or sought advice as to how the panel was set up and is run.
- The DRP has proved a valuable asset to Newham's planning staff. Development control officers have found design reports helpful to secure changes in their negotiations with developers. Furthermore, staff have been encouraged to attend the Panel meetings as a useful design training exercise.
- Feedback from applicants has generally been positive. Most accept design review as an integral part of the pre-application process, and recognise its potential to improve the design quality of their proposals and secure Officer and Member support.

The Panel makes a positive contribution to operation and reputation of the planning service and the wider Council. Operationally, it is felt that the Panel is working very well under the guidance of the Chair, Neil Deely, and the Vice-chairs when necessary, and through the organisation of the Strategic Design Manager.

All panel members have attended at least one review over the course of the year and have made positive contributions. At this time, there is no intention to make any new panel member appointments as it is considered that there is a sufficient breadth of experience and expertise within the existing pool of panel members.

For major schemes, the DRP remains integral to the Council's planning process.

### **Issues arising**

As noted above, the Panel is generally working very well. Nevertheless, during the last year there have been a small number of issues that need addressing to ensure the smooth operation and continued success of the Panel as an integral part of the planning process.

#### **1. SDC**

The chair of the DRP is invited to attend SDC as an independent design advisor to the committee members and represent the views of the DRP if asked. For the most part this works well, with members giving significant weight to the views of the DRP and verbal clarifications are helpful. However, there have been a small number of occasions during the year when communication between officers, the DRP chair and committee members could have been improved to avoid confusion and potential deferral of items.

On one occasion, the verbal comments made during SDC by the DRP Chair were not consistent with the assessment of design quality within the Officer's report and this caused some confusion among SDC members. The application was recommended for refusal with design as one of the reasons for refusal. The Officer's report therefore emphasised the negative aspects of the scheme, whereas the DRP – although not fully supportive – had taken a more nuanced position regarding the design. It is rare that proposals are recommended for refusal on design grounds as applicants are usually more responsive to DRP comments and a position is reached where the DRP Chair can support the scheme at committee. However, should a similar situation arise, the Officer briefing of the DRP Chair will be improved to ensure that any verbal comments reflect the conclusions of the final DRP report. This is particularly important if it is one of the vice-Chairs in attendance as was the case here.

On the second occasion, an item was deferred when the DRP Chair was asked his views on the scheme and was unable to say whether or not the concerns of the DRP had been addressed. Although Officers took the view that DRP comments about a previous (refused) submission on the same site had been addressed, the revised proposals had not been reviewed by the DRP as the applicant had chosen not to engage with the Council through the pre-application or PPPA prior to resubmission of a revised scheme.

This scenario is avoided in the vast majority of cases as the applicant for most strategic items engage proactively with the Council through the pre-application or PPPA process and it underlined the importance of pre-application engagement. However, should a similar situation arise where there is a recommendation to approve a proposal (where design is a key consideration) for which there has been no pre-application engagement, Officers will ensure that the proposals are discussed with the LBN Strategic Design Manager who may recommend a Chair's workshop review prior to committee.

## **2. Meeting Room**

At the October 2019 DRP meeting, officers and panel members returned to Newham Dockside from site visits to find that the usual meeting room used for the DRP was occupied and had been booked by another member of staff. A booking made months in advance by the Strategic Design Manager had been cancelled following the introduction of a new online meeting room booking system. An alternative room was found at short notice but this had less space and lacked the magnetic wall facility for pinning up drawings. Given that the DRP is a service paid for by developers, it is important to the reputation of the Council and the DRP that such a situation is avoided in the future and that meeting takes place in the appropriate room. There is a pre-meeting checklist including a reminder to confirm the room booking a week prior to meeting and this will be strictly followed going forward.

Figure 1 – Map of Reviewed Schemes, March 2019 – February 2020

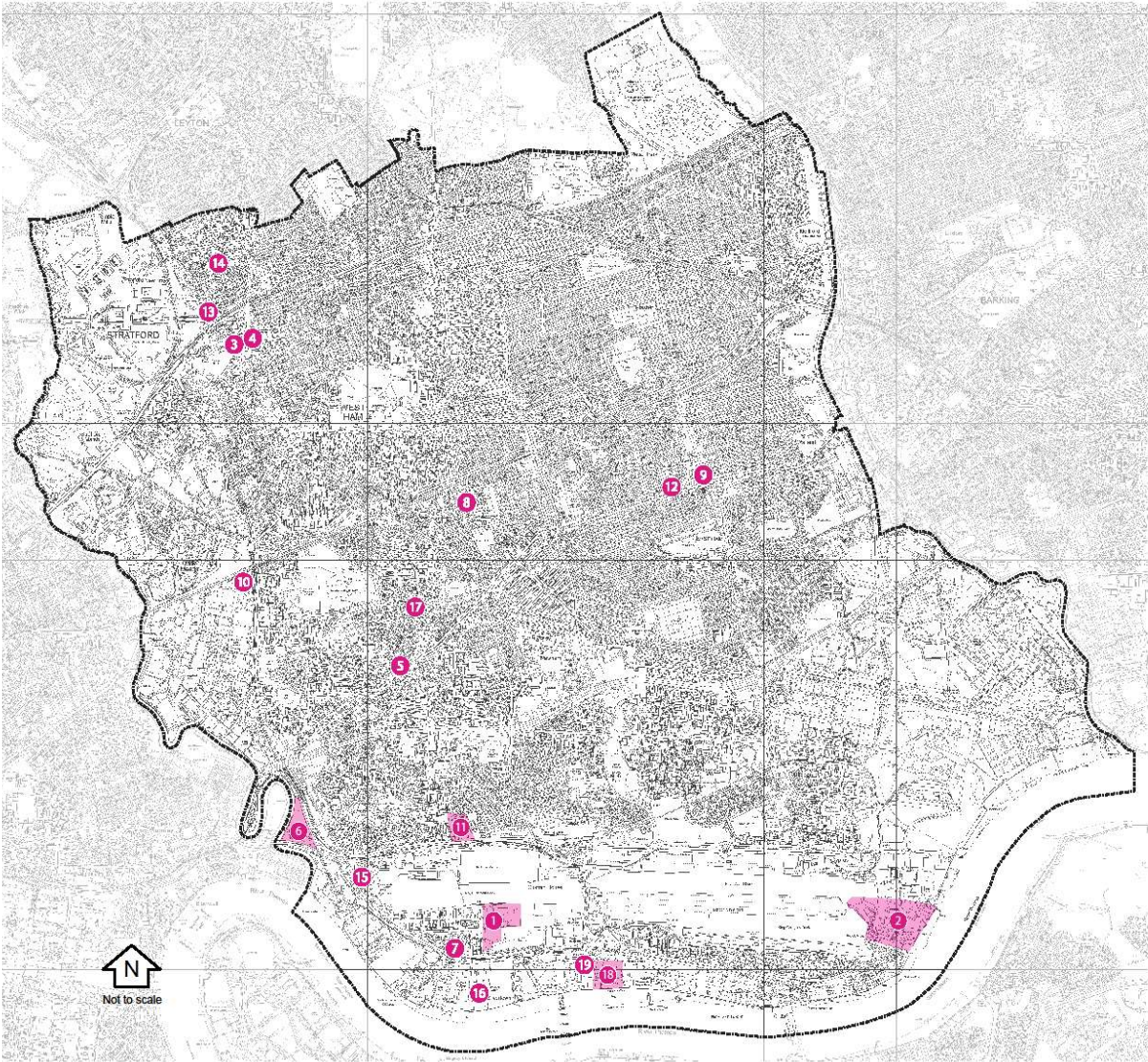


Figure 1

**Design Review Panel  
Reviewed Schemes**

March 2019 - February 2020

- 1 Silvertown Quays, Phase 1 (E16 1UR)
- 2 Albert Island (e16 2qy)
- 3 Apart Hotel, Broadway (104-106 Broadway, E15 1NG)
- 4 Ibis, Broadway (1a Romford Rd E15 4LJ)
- 5 Glory House (E13 8EG)
- 6 Limmo (E16 1DN)
- 7 279 North Woolwich Road (E16 2BB)
- 8 Lister School (E13 9AE)
- 9 Brickyard (St John's car park, East Ham E6 1LA)
- 10 Stephenson Street, Plot C01 (E16 4SA)
- 11 Custom House Regeneration Area (E16 3AR)
- 12 Hartley Centre (E6 1LB)
- 13 Railway Tavern (E15 1DB)
- 14 Colegrave School (E15 1JY)
- 15 Triangle Site (E16 1GB)
- 16 Royal Wharf, Plot 14B (E16 2TF)
- 17 Grange Road (E13 0EG)
- 18 Connaught Riverside (E16 2EZ)
- 19 3 Thames Road (E16 2EZ)

