

A supplementary note about the workings of the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel for the Select Committee on the Built Environment (further to The Edge submission and Simon Foxell's oral evidence on 10th Dec 2015)

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I am an architect, a Senior Partner of Cullinan Studio and Convenor of the Edge and was appointed Chairman of the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel in March 2010; the Panel started work in April of that year.

A brief history

Cambridge Horizons was set up to coordinate the growth strategy for the County, the City and three District Councils and was funded by DCLG. Following an extensive consultation exercise known as Cambridge Futures, a plan was adopted to expand Cambridge City and the surrounding market towns by 75,000 jobs and 73,500 homes. Cambridgeshire Horizons was determined to set a quality standard so Nick Falk of Urbed wrote the Quality Charter following European study tours with members and stakeholders and a wide debate.

Cambridgeshire Horizons selected the members of the Quality Panel (QP) to oversee the implementation of Charter and reviews schemes under the four C's – Community, Connectivity, Character and Climate Change. Following the 2010 election, Cambridgeshire Horizons was disbanded and responsibility for the Panel passed to the County Council and became self-funding through the planning system.

Why it is different from most Design Review Panels

The responsibility of the Panel is to act as a 'critical friend' of the masterplanning process and the reserved matter applications that ensue for major schemes around the periphery of Cambridge and the surrounding market towns. The critical friend role that can extend over a considerable period of time is the main distinguishing feature of the QP process in comparison with the gatekeeping role that most design review panels play. The QP is expected to be a critical friend of both the Local Authority's design values and processes and the developers'.

The Panel is small, initially 12 and recently expanded to 17, and increasingly multi-disciplinary, whereas most design review panels are larger and tend to be populated by a majority of architects. Of the original 12 only three are based locally and now 4 of the 17 are; of the 17 only 5 are practicing architects. The smaller size allows the Panel to develop an in depth knowledge of actual and emerging regional issues (1)

What have we seen

In the five years of the Panel, we have met on 57 occasions, ideally seeing two schemes in a day, including site visits where needed. However the Panel may consider only a single scheme if there is a degree of urgency or if one of the two schemes is withdrawn at the last minute, for a variety of reasons. We have carried out circa 125 reviews, some of them more than once.

Major schemes such as North West Cambridge or Clay Farm on the Southern Fringe may continue for 15 or more years. In the case of North West Cambridge we have held separate reviews of the masterplan twice, the Design Code, the western edge landscape, the streets and landscape, 7 development lots and the school; and the process continues.

Schools are a key element in such urban extensions so the QP has reviewed 6 schools, one on three occasions. The variation in quality is so remarkable that the QP is able to engage the County Education Team in a productive debate; this is about to move to the next stage with joint visits to built schools.

Principal lessons

There are a number of continuing issues and some emerging new issues as regulations and the market develop, including:

Process issues:

- Seeing schemes early enough to be able to make a real difference as it is pointless reviewing a scheme just before it is submitted for planning permission
- Ensuring that adequate community management and facilities are established before the first homes are occupied; early community engagement is especially valuable.
- The relationship with existing neighbours who will often be hostile to any significant change or major development; however, having insisted on a degree of (landscape) separation, it is surprising how often the advantages of the new shops and schools and even public transport that come with the development are seen to be a major advantage to the existing community.
- Encouraging the masterplan developer to retain an interest in the whole development even when they have sold on some of the parcels and for the planning authority to insist on the masterplan values being honoured on subsequent phases.
- Ensuring that design quality is not stripped out after planning has been achieved with substitute architects and relentless cost cutting.
- Learning from what gets built, sharing that knowledge and feeding lessons back into the process.

Design and construction issues under the 4 'C's

- Community – adequate provision that can change and grow over time, maybe starting in the school but locked into the plan as the scheme develops. The placing of bikes and bins is always difficult but can lead to an increased sense of community.
- Connectivity – prioritising cyclists and pedestrians over the car, which can increasingly be treated as 'an unwelcome visitor'. Links to existing communities and the local facilities are key to a successful plan but that also requires careful placing of the shops and schools for maximum benefit for all.
- Character – establishing just what is 'local character' can be challenging but good architects and urban designers usually understand the parameters.
- Climate change – taking climate seriously is a challenge for many although most schemes now seem to understand the importance of a fabric-first approach rather than relying on solar PVs. The significance of orientation is little understood.

Emerging issues:

- Growing concern about over-heating due in large part to unprotected over-glazing. Generally air quality and moisture is becoming a significant issue in housing design but that is largely beyond the Panel's scope
- The impact of 'smart' technologies
- The efficacy of district heating systems
- Local management of energy, water and waste and a growing interest in the local energy company

Next steps

Every year I write a short annual report and make a presentation to the Joint Steering Group of members and officers from the five authorities. As the process develops and the quantum increases, the Steering Group has become more supportive of the work of the Panel and has now grasped the need for a third party feedback process.

- (1) Dr Stephen Platt of Cambridge Architectural Research prepared a brief case study of design review for the Planning Advisory Service in April 2015 'Design Review: what is it for and what does it achieved?'