

Agenda Item 9

Report to: HARLOW AND GILSTON GARDEN TOWN JOINT COMMITTEE

Title: HGGT Quality Review Panel Annual Report

Report reference: JC-004-2024/25

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Enclosures: Appendix A : HGGT Quality Review Panel Annual Report 2023/24

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the HGGT Joint Committee is asked to:

- A. Agree the HGGT QRP Annual Report 2023/24 as set out in Appendix A, particularly the emerging issues and next steps to address these in Section 6.
- B. Delegate authority to the Director of HGGT, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Joint Committee, to make any minor changes and publish the final version of the HGGT QRP Annual Report 2023/24 HGGT.

Executive Summary:

This report describes the role of the Quality Review Panel (QRP) in helping deliver growth and regeneration across the Harlow & Gilston Garden Town. Example schemes and emerging issues are noted, as well as next steps and recommendations made to Local Authorities and Developers.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To provide an update to the Joint Committee with regard to the work of the QRP over the last year and to highlight issues that are considered to require further attention in either policy development or through the delivery of development proposals.

Other Options for Action:

An alternative course of action would be for an Annual Report not to be provided and considered. This is not recommended as it would not enable the work of the QRP to be recognised by the Joint Committee and not enable the issues it has identified as requiring further attention to be highlighted.

1. Planning policy background

- 1.1. The NPPF 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... In assessing applications, local planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.' (NPPF Paragraph 133, Section 12 - Achieving well-designed places).
- 1.2. Harlow and Gilston Garden Town is a pioneering project, which provides one of the most exciting and ambitious growth and regeneration opportunities in the UK, setting an exemplary benchmark for sustainable living. The Garden Town's Vision builds on the area's key strengths and has established a set of core principles that will ensure the transition from New Town to Garden Town will create an adaptable, healthy, sustainable and innovative place to live, work and visit.

2. The panel's role in the planning process

- 2.1. The Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel was set up in 2017 by Frame Projects, on behalf of the collaborative HGGT partnership between East Hertfordshire District Council (EHDC), Epping Forest District Council (EFDC), Essex County Council (ECC), Harlow District Council (HDC), and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC). The Panel is chaired by Peter Maxwell, an architect and town planner who is Director of Design at the London Legacy Development Corporation. The panel includes 25 professional experts, selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with officers from the Councils. The panel makeup is reviewed through progress meetings between Frame and officers, to ensure that the relevant expertise and diversity is maintained. The panel also reviews proposals in the EFDC area, outside of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, as the Epping Forest District Council's QRP.

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- 2.2. The HGGT Quality Review Panel covers the full geographical area of the Garden Town initiative. The panel's input on strategic infrastructure such as sustainable transport corridors, which connect the garden neighbourhood sites with Harlow town centre, as well as strategic guidance documents across the Garden Town make up the key elements of the Quality Review process.
- 2.3. Terms of reference can be accessed on the HGGT website and are updated annually, they 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 planning or strategic context and flag key issues, both in writing for the meeting agendas, and in person at the panel meeting.
- 2.4. Advice given by the panel is recorded in a report, to assist with continuing pre-application negotiations, design and/or policy development, or to advise the relevant Planning Committee on submitted schemes. Where relevant, the panel's comments refer to HGGT guidance, and applicants are asked to demonstrate how they have embedded this within their schemes.

3. Schemes reviewed

- 3.1. The Quality Review Panel advised on 20 schemes, from 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. 11 of these were returning projects, that have been reviewed on more than one occasion. First reviews usually take place at a stage when an applicant and design team have decided their preferred option for development of a site, and have sufficient drawings, models, etc. for a comprehensive discussion. There will often be further pre-application reviews following this, to provide advice on more detailed design matters, before planning submission. For non-development proposals, such as strategic guidance, masterplans or policy documents, it is recommended that these come to the panel at an initial draft stage, primarily for a workshop review, with follow-up reviews as appropriate.
- 3.2. Frame Projects has developed and applied a standardised annual reporting process that monitors and evaluates the impact of the quality review panels which Frame run nationally. The annual report allows Frame Projects to obtain insight into the effectiveness and performance of each of the panels, as well as valuable information on the significant emerging issues from panel reviews. It also provides public transparency and allows for continual improvement of the services provided. The QRP Annual Report for the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and covers both the HGGT and EFDC quality review panels, is appended in Appendix 1.

4. Emerging issues

4.1. Strategic masterplans and design codes



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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 outline planning approval for the Gilston Area of the Garden Town, receiving resolution to grant in Spring 2023, subject to the completion of a S106 agreement.

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.

4.2. Character and identity

Character and identity are 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. Both East Herts and Epping Forest District Councils are in the early stages of developing district wide design codes, which will include character area guidance. 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. The Garden Town team are formulating the work programme for the next year and beyond. An update to the Garden Town Design Guide and the associated Vision could be put forward to form part of that work programme.

4.3. 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 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.



4.4. 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 ambition for modal shift and promotion of active travel, the Report advises that the Essex car parking standards should be reviewed. The panel feels that the Essex car parking standards are outdated and contradict the forward-looking aspirations of the Garden Town partners. They suggest that, to support the ambition for modal shift and promotion of active travel, the standards should be reviewed. That work is already underway, being led by the Essex Planning Officers Association with Chief Officers currently expected to sign them off in July. It will then be necessary for Epping Forest and Harlow District Councils to determine whether to adopt those revised standards. On the Hertfordshire side, parking standards are formulated at district level. East Herts District Council is also in the process of revising and updating parking standards.

5. Next steps

- 5.1. As the Harlow & Gilston Quality Review Panel enters its seventh year, the role of the panel is well-established, and the working relationships with both Council officers, applicants and design teams continues to strengthen.
- 5.2. As detailed applications for the strategic sites within the Garden Town start to come forwards, tackling compliance of the design codes and masterplan frameworks could be challenging for both the panel and officers.
- 5.3. An annual meeting is also planned for the panel in Summer 2024. A field trip to see completed or emerging schemes may be beneficial to share lessons learnt and recognise benchmark developments in the area and beyond that can be referred to.

Implications

This report is primarily for the Joint Committee to agree the activity of the Panel over the last year as set out in the Annual Review at Appendix A. There are no specific implications arising as a result. The emerging issues identified in section 4 can be the subject of further consideration by the Garden Town officer team and any actions required can be determined through the normal course of the consideration of the programme of work of the Garden Town team.

Resource Implications:

There are no new or additional resource implications. The costs of Frame and the operation of the Panel are met from charges levied to applicants who submit schemes to the Panel. The Garden Town team has a budget to cover the costs of schemes or policy documents that it wishes itself to refer to the Panel for advice.

Equalities and Diversity:

Equality Impact Assessment

Is this a new policy (or decision) or a change to an existing policy, practice or project?	No
Describe the main aims, objectives and purpose of the policy or decision	To update in relation to the provision of independent scrutiny of emerging development and policy proposals relating to the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town.
What outcome(s) are you hoping to achieve (ie decommissioning or commissioning a service)?	To report on the outcome of the service during the previous year.
Does or will the policy or decision affect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • service users • employees • the wider community or groups of people, particularly where there are areas of known inequalities? 	Service users and the wider community. Landowners and others preparing development proposals will be expected to seek advice and feedback from the QRP in the formulation of their development proposals. Employees will be expected advice in relation to policy proposals. The wider community and community stakeholders will be impacted by development and policy proposals that have been subject to QRP scrutiny.
Will the policy or decision influence how organisations operate?	No
Will the policy or decision involve substantial changes in resources?	No
Is this policy or decision associated with any of the Council's other policies and how, if applicable, does the proposed policy support corporate outcomes?	Relevant in relation to development management and planning policies seeking the delivery of high-quality development proposals. It supports corporate aims seeking the delivery of high-quality new developments.

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GARDEN TOWN

What does the information tell you about those groups identified?	N/A
Have you consulted or involved those groups that are likely to be affected by the policy or decision you want to implement? If so, what were their views and how have their views influenced your decision?	No specific engagement in relation to the ongoing operation of a QRP. However, there has been general awareness raising with the community in the HGGT area that a Panel operates within.
If you have not consulted or engaged with communities that are likely to be affected by the policy or decision, give details about when you intend to carry out consultation or provide reasons for why you feel this is not necessary:	N/A
Use this section to assess any potential impact on equality groups based on what you now know.	
Age, Disability, Gender, Gender reassignment, Pregnancy/maternity, Marriage/civil partnership, Race, Religion/belief, Sexual orientation	There is not considered to be any impact in relation to protected groups.
Does the EqIA indicate that the policy or decision would have a medium or high adverse impact on one or more equality groups?	No

HGGT Vision Assurance

1. What principles of the HGGT Vision does this seek to achieve?

Supporting the Councils to deliver against the Garden Town Vision and core principles, to achieve high-quality places to live, work and visit.

2. What steps have been taken to ensure the HGGT Vision is embedded into the project?

Progress and annual meetings held with the chair, panel members and Council representatives to regularly update on HGGT Vision, emerging strategic guidance and policy context.

