



HARLOW AND
GILSTON / EPPING
FOREST DISTRICT
QUALITY REVIEW
PANEL

1 APRIL 2024 -
31 MARCH 2025

ANNUAL
REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Frame Projects
Unit 15 Waterside
44-48 Wharf Road
London N1 7UX
020 8164 9980
office@frame-projects.co.uk
frame-projects.co.uk

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, who was Director of Design at the London Legacy Development Corporation between 2015 - 2025, and includes 26 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 committee on submitted schemes.

The Harlow and Gilston / Epping Forest District Quality Review Panel has advised on 10 schemes in the year from April 2024 to March 2025. Six 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: Cottis Yard car park site visit © Frame Projects
Image: 2024 Annual meeting © 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: Waltham Abbey site visit © Cristina Preciado



REVIEW TOTALS

Number of reviews

10

Number of site visits

5

Number of first reviews

4

Number of follow up reviews

6

Full reviews
(chair plus four panel members)

7

Workshop reviews
(chair plus two panel members)

1

Chair's reviews
(chair plus one panel member)

2

PANEL COMPOSITION

PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel
members used

18

Male panel members

56%

Female panel members

44%

Diverse ethnic background
(representative of local BAME figures)

22%

PANEL COMPOSITION

Architecture

17

Urban design /
town planning

7

Landscape /
public realm

6

Transport
planning

6

Stewardship

1

Sustainability

4

Other

1

PROPOSALS REVIEWED

APPLICANT TYPE

Private developer	Local authority	Public private partnership
8	2	0

STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre-application	Planning application submitted	Policy document
9	0	1

TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan	Mixed use
5	0
Residential (1-50 units)	Residential (50+ units)
0	2
Policy or strategic document	Commercial
1	1
Public realm	Education
0	1

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

Over the last year the panel has reviewed a large number of strategic masterplans at an outline design stage. These sites generate a substantial proportion of the development within the Garden Town and Epping Forest, delivering a high number of new homes as well as social infrastructure. Many of these sites have been taken out of the green belt and as such face issues around connectivity and access, as well as biodiversity and ecological impact.

Sustainability

The panel's technical feedback on sustainability and low carbon design continues to be valuable, but greater focus on first principles such as issues around orientation, layout and form would help support the officers apply the sustainability checklist and guidance more robustly. It is beneficial when a scheme is reviewed at a formative stage so that issues, such as orientation, form factor, and densities, can be addressed early on in the process.

Character and identity

Character and identity have been recurring themes at almost every review meeting. Officers have found detailed feedback provided on architecture and appearance helpful in supporting pre-application discussions. Epping Forest are considering developing district wide design codes, which could include character area guidance. Similar work has begun in East Herts and will be reviewed by the panel in 2025.

Transport and parking

The panel continues to support the ambitions for modal shift and active travel. The Essex car parking standards have been updated, to better reflect the sustainable transport and active travel aspirations of Epping Forest District and the Garden Town partners. Parking typologies have been recurring themes, with the panel advising on the benefits of on-plot or consolidated areas to meet the parking numbers required. Another issue raised has been how to design parking areas in such a way that these spaces can become landscape or social spaces, should parking demand reduce in the future.

TRAINING AND REPORTING

Over the reporting period, there have been several training sessions and opportunities to report on progress with both the Garden Town and Epping Forest District officers and members.

Garden Town Joint Committee

In July 2024, the chair and panel manager presented an update to the Garden Town Joint Committee, sharing example schemes and emerging issues, as well as next steps and recommendations made to Local Authorities and developers.

Planning officers forum

A meeting with officers representing the HGGT partners was arranged, to discuss how best to make use of the panel and share lessons learnt. The session provided a forum for discussion, to address challenges across the Garden Town area and demonstrate the value of the panel to developers, design teams and the community. Issues raised included how to achieve the right balance between challenging design proposals while providing suitable, focussed advice to achieve outcomes, particularly given viability, land values and deliverability constraints.

Annual meeting

An annual meeting, attended by panel members, officers and Frame Projects, took place in October 2024. The meeting began with a tour of completed schemes in Epping town centre followed by an update on planning policy, presentation of successful projects and panel discussion.

Urban design training session for Epping Forest District Committee

The findings of this Annual Report have been presented to Epping Forest District Committee members in early April 2025. Members were keen to be more engaged with the panel, by potentially observing review meetings and attending an annual meeting to meet panel members. They were also keen that the panel's feedback and the applicant's responses were made more explicit in committee reports.

FORWARD LOOK

The outline planning approval for the Gilston Area Villages has now been granted and there is an expectation that detailed designs will be brought forward as a basis for reserved matters proposals in 2025. Given the complex phasing and delivery of the Gilston area, as well as the wider Garden Town, it is likely that the masterplan will continue to be refined as part of this process.

In Epping Forest District, a number of Strategic Masterplans and Concept Frameworks have recently been endorsed by the council. Detailed applications for these sites are likely to follow in 2025. It is also expected that there may be both area wide and site specific design codes coming to the panel in the next year. A workshop-focused approach tends to be the best way for panel members to engage with these types of projects, with reading material provided in advance of the meeting.

Additional panel members with masterplanning and design code experience were appointed in 2024, in anticipation of this work coming forward.

Image: Harlow Bus Station north view © HGGT

