design:midlands

Prospectus

2026

D:M manages the Midlands Design Review Panel –

a unique group of experts in the built and natural environment.

As an independent charity, we advise on how to achieve the highest quality of design and place making. The objectives of Design:Midlands are to enable high standards of design and architecture in the built and living environment; deliver education and training to all involved in such creative activities; support other charitable projects and initiatives for community benefit in the Midlands.

Securing well-designed places (NPPF para 11, the presumption in favour of sustainable development) is now central to decision making. The design tools that Design:Midlands offers (NPPF para 139) has most benefit early in design evolution and for significant projects.

As part of the Design Network, we work alongside our regional colleagues in supporting national ambitions on design and planning reform. Being a voice with local knowledge, we are a go-to for Councils, Communities and Businesses in the adaption, creation and protection of places and spaces across the Midlands. We are establishing Local Panels, as we believe working closely with Local Planning Authorities is the best way to help meet the national requirements of the NPPF, National Design Guide and the National Model Design Code. This prospectus sets out our programme for 2026, and describes our services.

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Design Network!

D:M is the charity that manages the recruitment and appointment of independent placemaking panellists that bring support and guidance to the delivery of development schemes within the planning system – planning applications, plan making, enabling and community engagement.

Following a successful recruitment in 2025, we have strengthened our Panel to over 100 experts, the **Design:Midlands Panel** comes from a range of built environment specialists that includes:

- Architecture
- Connectivity & Street Design
- Construction & Viability
- Ecology & Biodiversity
- Heritage & Conservation
- Hydrology
- Landscape Architecture
- Planning
- Sustainability & Energy
- Urban Design
- Neighbourhood Planning

Panellists are selected to suit the scheme concept and site characteristics, and we always undertake a site visit.

Design Review

Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) – often LPAs will approach D:M when a pre-planning application request is made for a large, complex or sensitive scheme. The LPA will advise developers to contact D:M to discuss design review / enabling suited to the scheme. D:M can help support LPAs in achieving high quality buildings, streets and spaces. D:M can provide disciplines not available to the LPA, highlight and recognise best practice, provide a practical/pragmatic approach to how that can be achieved and highlight outstanding and/or innovative design. LA Officers are welcome to observe DRP sessions. When design thresholds are high (such as para 84e) or reviewing Green Belt (NPPF chapter 13) or when there is no relevant development plan policy and development is being considered against NPPF policies (para 11d), a design review process can move a scheme towards securing high quality outcomes.

Developers and their design teams – landowners and applicants can support their architects and design teams by appointing D:M to support evolution of a scheme's design. As a 'critical friend' to provide a fresh perspective, highlight opportunities that may have been missed, and offer support. A design review can form part of a Planning Performance Agreement. We would ensure consistency between different stages if we were to be involved more than once, and ensure confidentiality is observed. Design review enhances dialogue with stakeholders including the LPA, Highways Authority, Historic England etc. who are encouraged to participate. Seeking support on maximising land use efficiency, promoting higher density development and innovative design (NPPF para 130).

Community – seeking an independent view from D:M can be extremely useful to a community when engaging with their LPA or with developers. Support can be offered through a design review setting, through the preparation of evidence, or discussing evidence in setting a brief for a development site. Design Coding takes local characteristics and context into account, D:M can facilitate conversations to ensure consensus can be achieved in presenting community opinions and expectations. We will often present design in diagrammatic form, or by referring to examples from elsewhere – useful in plan preparation in particular.

Policy & Planning Documents

Design:Midlands can help raise standards in the built environment by providing advice at different stages.

1

Concept design

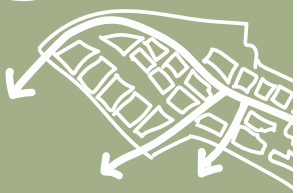
2

Development briefs

3

Masterplans

4



Design Codes

5

Pre/Planning applications

6

Policy & Planning Documents

We highly recommend the services of Design:Midlands. Their review of our new settlement plans has proved invaluable for final stages of our local plan preparation. The Panel are very knowledgeable and adopt a strong collaborative approach.

Malvern Hills and Wychavon District Councils

Types of design review

MAJOR

Large and complex schemes

Large scale / complex schemes when a full day is needed such as a garden village, an urban extension, major regeneration development etc.

£6,000.00 + VAT

MEDIUM

Mixed use or 30 homes +

Mixed use, regeneration, town/city centre, public buildings, housing developments 30+ dwellings.

£4,000.00 + VAT

SMALL

Single dwellings & up to 30 homes

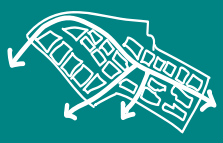
Individual buildings, including isolated homes in the open countryside / para. 80e NPPF, infill and less than 30 dwellings

£3,500.00 + VAT

BHL REVIEW

Small housing only schemes of c 10-70 homes that are unconstrained and without significant infrastructure requirements. Two assessors will be appointed and a site visit undertaken. A draft BHL assessment will be prepared and discussed at an online meeting with the LPA prior to a final report being issued

£3,000.00 + VAT



WALK AND TALK

Initial design development stage

On site appraisal or to address a specific issue

£2,000.00 +VAT

D:M will advise on what level of support is proportionate to help achieve Design Review outcomes.

Building for a Healthy Life (BHL)

Better places start with better conversations

Design:Midlands is the accredited provider for independent Building for a Healthy Life (BHL) assessment, advice and support for developers, housing providers, local authorities and design teams across the Midlands.

Our accredited assessors bring urban design and masterplanning, landscape, transport and movement expertise. We provide an independent assessment of how your housing scheme performs against the 12 Building for a Healthy Life considerations.

The greatest value from BHL is when it becomes part of the design process. Also, the quality expected of a place should not depend on housing tenure. The same BHL considerations provide the basis for our assessments across all housing projects.

If you have a housing scheme at an early stage, are approaching a planning submission, or want an independent review of an approved development, talk to the Design:Midlands team about the right approach.

Fees are based on the scale and stage of the scheme (see below) and the assessment team required, ranging from £3,000. Contact us for a fee proposal for your project

PRE-APPLICATION ASSESSMENT

Our assessors review the emerging masterplan, parameter plans and supporting information against the 12 BHL considerations. This includes a site visit, followed by a draft assessment and online feedback workshop with the client and design team. Ideal for emerging masterplans and schemes approaching pre-application discussions.

PRE-SUBMISSION ASSESSMENT

Where we have previously assessed a scheme, we can return to it before submission to consider how the design has responded and whether changes have improved its BHL performance. Ideal for design teams that have used BHL earlier in the process and want to demonstrate progress before submitting a planning application.

POST-CONSENT ASSESSMENT

We can review a scheme following planning consent, assessing the approved planning material against BHL. If you achieve more than 9 Greens then your scheme can apply for a BHL Commendation. If successful, we will pass your assessment to Design for Homes who can issue certification and marketing materials to promote the quality and credibility of the scheme. Ideal for developers, housing providers, registered providers and local authorities seeking an independent review of an approved development.

TRAINING

In-house training to support your team to deliver BHL considerations into their design activity Different methods of training can be provided to suit your team – whether local authority, planning agent, architect's office or housebuilder. We can do on-site and desk based exercises, or bring the training online if circumstances require.
£1,500 – £2,000 +VAT

D:M will advise on what level of support is proportionate to help achieve the BHL standard, using design review, workshops or tabletop approaches.

Arranging the Design Review Panel was straightforward and quick with a date arranged within a week of first contact. The site visit was a great way of showing the site constraints and opportunities. The Panel were great as a second pair of eyes in terms of how to use the landscape as a driver and make best use of the existing and proposed connections to the wider area.

Tom Dillarstone
William Davis Homes

Design Coding & Enabling

The National Model Design Code is the primary tool for LPAs to prepare and use local design codes (NPPF para 138). We can assist in engaging with the community and offer expert advice on how a design code can be prepared and better understood by all concerned.

FRAMEWORK GUIDANCE

Area-based activity to provide evidence

Suited to perhaps a neighbourhood plan or regeneration area that needs an evidence base before the design code is prepared. This area-based assessment can be at different scales and each project will require a unique approach.

From £6,000 + VAT

DESIGN CODE REVIEW

Reviewing a draft Design Code

With a draft Design Code, we can bring a Panel of experts together to review and advise on the emerging design code. Community representatives can be invited to contribute to this.

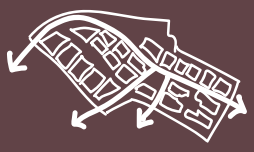
£4,000 + VAT

DESIGN CODE WORKSHOP

Design Code development

We can bring a Panel of experts together to advise on design code preparation and understanding of emerging Code. Community representatives can be invited to contribute to this.

£3,250 - £4,000 + VAT



ENABLING

DM Panel brings design expertise into a stakeholder setting to unlock potential and help towards effective design and development. Enabling activities ensure that the evidence, context, and activities needed are in place and are in alignment with project expectations to lead to more sustainable, functional and user-friendly places.

From £600 per day per Panel member + VAT

D:M will advise on what level of support is proportionate to help deliver design coding requirements.

Priors Hall has been the subject of a series of Design:Midlands design reviews 2015/16 following Urban & Civic's purchase of the site. Recent reviews considered the revised Zone 2 and 3 for 3,500 homes and the first Key Phase Design Codes. The same Panel ensured consistency of advice.

The reviews have been constructive and resulted in positive feedback and suggestions that have informed the subsequent applications. For example, suggestions relating to the rationalisation of a clearer vision within the Codes, and the use of a range of primary street typologies to create differing character throughout the development, were all incorporated into the final submissions.

David Lock Associates

Shaping Streets

Promoting sustainable transport is a national priority (NPPF para 109) in plan making and in development proposals. Our Shaping Streets support helps ensure transport considerations are integral to the design of schemes and lead to high quality places.. D:M has a range of Panel experts who can assist in the promotion of sustainable transport and how that translates into the streets and spaces we want to live in. Deciphering the jargon and appreciating the regulations that keep our streets safe, does not mean that opportunities should be missed to reclaim our streets and adopt a people-first approach to their design. Engaging with the local planning and highways authority will be part of our remit to ensure the best

TOWN CENTRE

Reclaiming the High Street

Used when a full day is needed to consider the design parameters to establish in the re-imagining of your High Street or town centre. This can also include car parking and inter-changes.

From £6,000 + VAT

NEW DEVELOPMENT

Consider streets appropriate to your site

Used for new housing developments to promote the best outcome for internal streets, car parking, active travel networks and access arrangements from the road network

£4,000 + VAT

VILLAGES

Consider design appropriate to your setting

Appraisal to consider any impact of change to a village character or setting that could result from a bypass, new housing, railway development etc.

£3,250 - £4,000 + VAT

WALK AND TALK

Brief development development

On site appraisal to provide advice on how a project could be approached.

£2,000.00 +VAT

D:M will advise on what level of support is proportionate to help deliver street based solutions

D:M manages the Midlands Design Review Panel – a unique group of experts in the built and natural environment.

Design Surgeries

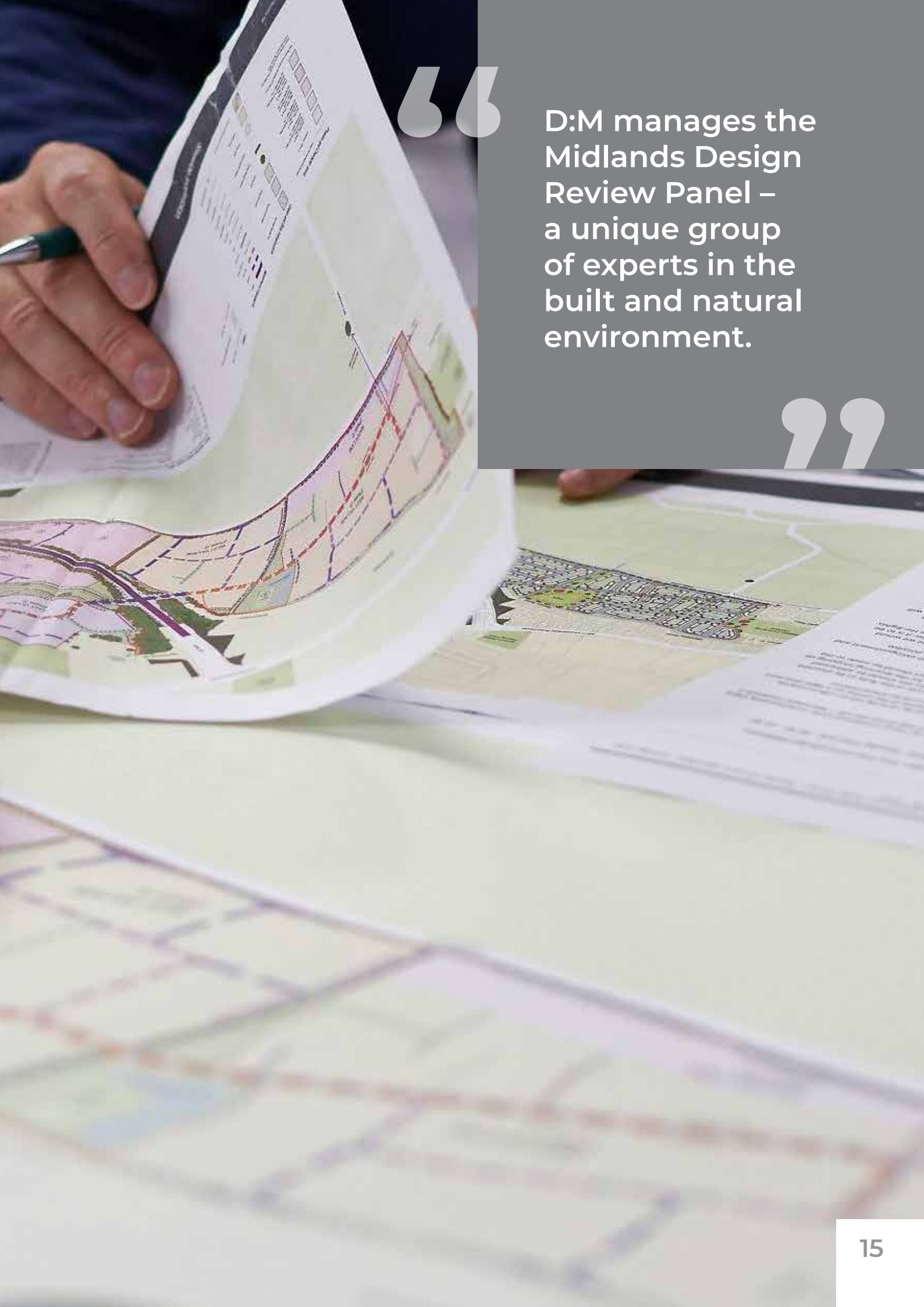
Design:Midlands arranges bespoke Design Surgeries for Local Planning Authorities seeking expert design advice on planning applications. The most common Panel expertise requested relates to landscape, ecology, architecture, transport, heritage, and design coding. These skills complement existing in-house LPA expertise and are also particularly beneficial when exploring appropriate design methods and approaches. The surgeries can be held as online meetings or in-person.

DESIGN SURGERIES

In person or online meetings with Panel members and Planning Officers to provide impartial advice and support on planning applications..

From £600 per day per panel member + VAT

D:M will advise on what level of engagement is needed to support you.

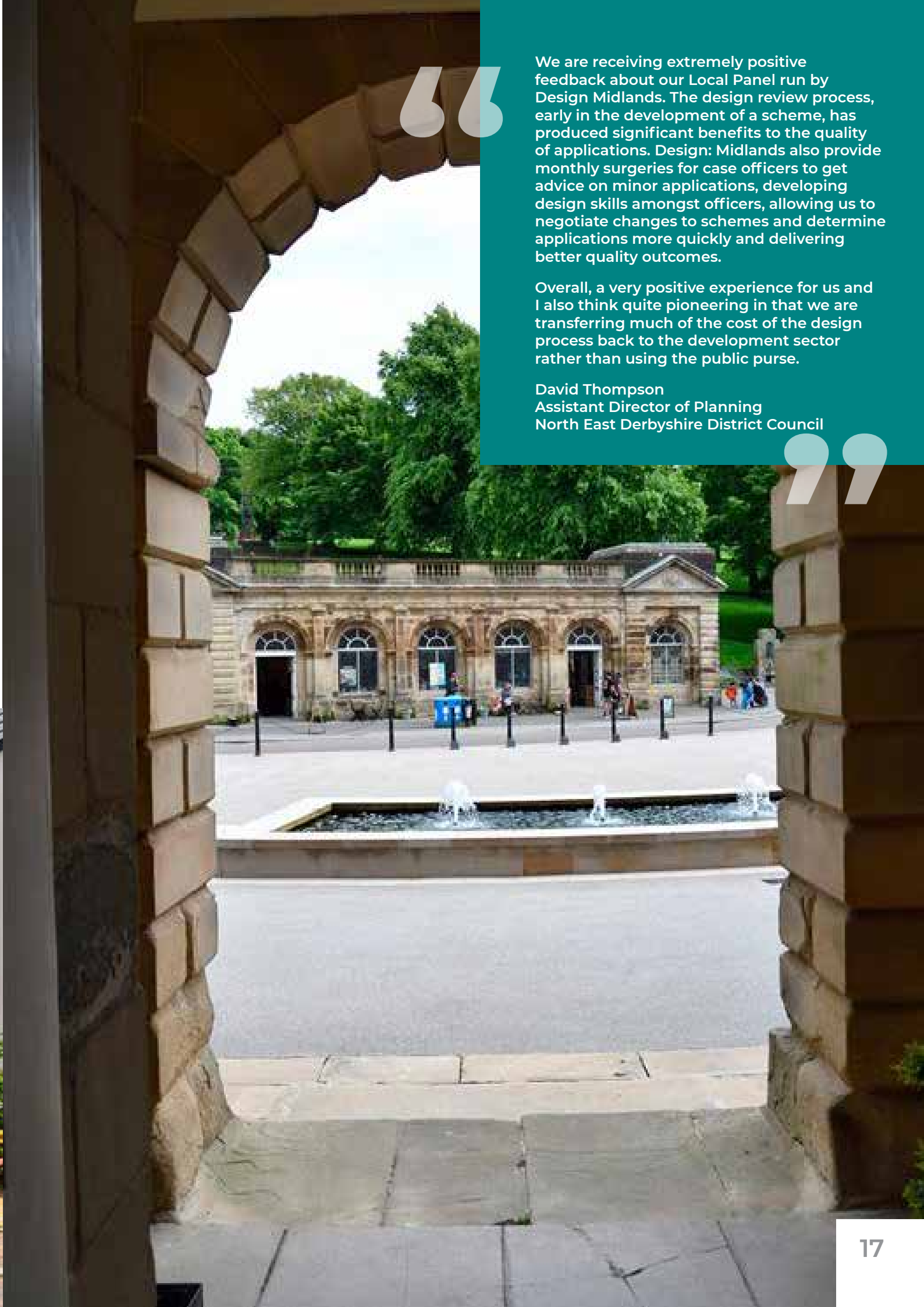


D:M manages the Midlands Design Review Panel – a unique group of experts in the built and natural environment.

Local Authority Support

Setting up a Local Design Review Panel

Several LPAs are working with Design Midlands; we have set up a Local Design Review Panel (NPPF Para 133) to support their development management service and align with Local Plan preparation. An established Local Panel adds significantly to capacity and helps develop Officer skills to use design as a functional delivery asset as well as engage consultees in wider design led discussions. A DRP undertaken at early stages, (at pre-application if possible) provides an evidential approach to define density, quantum of development, character cues and sustainable and equitable use of land.



We are receiving extremely positive feedback about our Local Panel run by Design Midlands. The design review process, early in the development of a scheme, has produced significant benefits to the quality of applications. Design: Midlands also provide monthly surgeries for case officers to get advice on minor applications, developing design skills amongst officers, allowing us to negotiate changes to schemes and determine applications more quickly and delivering better quality outcomes.

Overall, a very positive experience for us and I also think quite pioneering in that we are transferring much of the cost of the design process back to the development sector rather than using the public purse.

David Thompson
Assistant Director of Planning
North East Derbyshire District Council

Strategic Sites Design Review (SSDR)

Design Midlands is here to support LPAs during Local Plan preparation. At the point that the LPA wishes to engage with site promoters on its emerging key sites allocations, an independent Design Review Panel reviews the site's capacity to deliver housing and other associated infrastructure.

The SSDR process offers advice on aspects as set out in the National Design Guide such as inclusive growth, local context & character, movement, protection and enhancement of landscape & heritage assets, public spaces and climate resilience & sustainability.

The SSDR supports the LPA in preparing policies and de-risking the local plan in assessing overall quantum of development, as well as looking strategically at impacts on infrastructure. The process is beneficial in providing precedents and best practice

Design Policy preparation

Aligned with the above, Design Midlands also supports LPAs during the preparation of policy. In particular; Design Guides, Development Briefs and Local Plan Policy. For example, undertaking a gap analysis can assist in updating a Design Guide and ensure it is up to date, and fit for purpose to support the preparation of a Local Plan. We can also help you review the effectiveness of emerging place-based and design policies in a draft Local Plan.

In South Derbyshire, we wish to ensure our local plan allocations will deliver well designed homes and places fit for the future. Engaging the Design:Midlands Panel to work collaboratively with us and developers at early stages ensures we are clear on the design parameters we wish to take forward to meet our policy objectives.

Feedback from our partners has been positive and it has set the basis for stronger collaboration going forward.

Steffan Saunders
Head of Planning and Strategic Housing
South Derbyshire District Council

Nottingham Local Panel

Design Midlands has been asked by Nottingham City Council to set up an independent design review service to help ensure high quality, sustainable development that embraces the characteristics of Nottingham. Our dedicated Panel brings expertise and support in ensuring the best outcomes for the area.

Please refer to the Nottingham City Council to find out more about the Panel.

Nottingham City Council

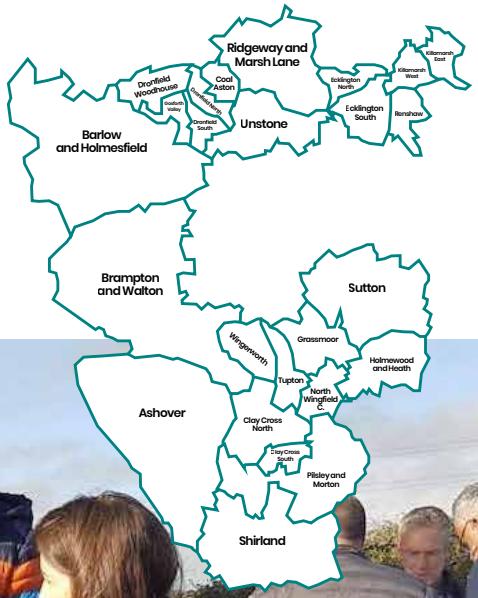
> Promoting well-designed, healthy, inclusive and sustainable places is a priority for Nottingham's future. Appointing Design:Midlands to deliver Nottingham's independent design review service ensures our development partners have access to high quality design support. We look forward to working together as we start this new partnership
>
> Matt Ralfe
> Head of Development Management
> Planning & Transport Division

North East Derbyshire Local Panel

Design:Midlands has been asked by North East Derbyshire District Council to set up an independent design review service to help ensure high quality, sustainable development that embraces the characteristics of North East Derbyshire. Our dedicated Panel brings expertise and support in ensuring the best outcomes for the area.

Please refer to the North East Derbyshire District Council to find out more about the Panel.

North East Derbyshire District Council



Newcastle Under Lyme Local Panel

Design:Midlands has been asked by Newcastle Under Lyme District Council to set up an independent design review service to he ensure high quality, sustainable development that embraces the characteristics of Newcastle Under Lyme. Our dedicated Panel will bring expertise and support to ensuring the best outcomes for the area.

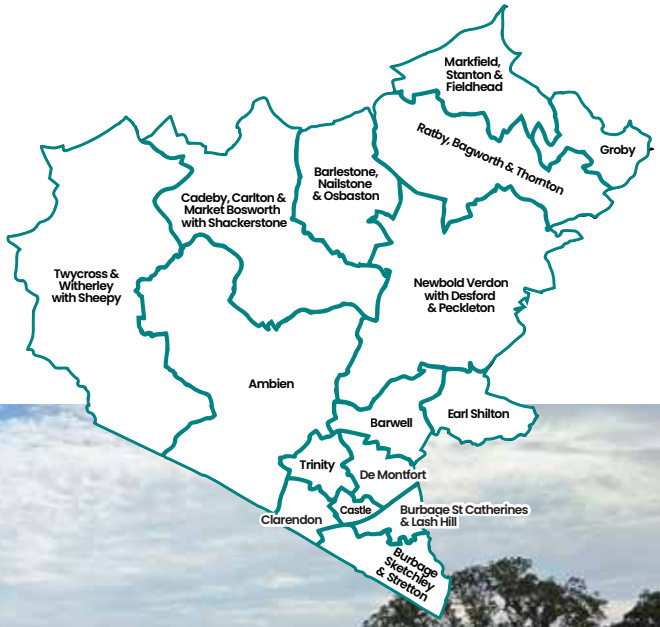
Please refer to the Newcastle Under Lyme District Council to find out more about the Panel.

NEWCASTLE UNDER LYME
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Hinckley & Bosworth Local Panel

Design:Midlands manages the Local Design Review Panels in Hinckley & Bosworth, working with the Local Planning Authority at Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council and developer communities to ensure high quality, sustainable design that embraces the characteristics of these places. Our dedicated Local Panel will bring expertise and support to ensuring the best outcomes for these areas.

Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council



design:midlands

Design Network

Building For a Healthy Life

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North East Derbyshire District Council

Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council

Nottingham City Council

Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council

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