



SOMERSET
QUALITY REVIEW
PANEL

1 JANUARY -
31 DECEMBER
2025

ANNUAL
REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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INTRODUCTION

The Somerset Quality Review Panel was set up in 2021 by Frame Projects on behalf of Somerset Council. It is chaired by Andrew Beharrell, Senior Advisor at Pollard Thomas Edwards, who is supported by two Deputy Chairs, Anthony Hollingsworth, Director of Planning & Place at Homes England, and Keith French, Director at Grant Associates. It includes approximately 20 professional members, selected through a combination of open recruitment processes and direct approaches, in collaboration with Somerset Council officers.

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 Somerset Quality Review Panel has advised on 28 schemes in the year from January 2025 to December 2025. Four of these schemes were reviewed on more than one occasion. First reviews usually take place at an early to mid-pre-application stage when a client and design team have a preferred option for the development of a site, and have sufficient information on their proposed approach to allow a comprehensive discussion. There will often be a second pre-application review before planning submission, to provide advice on more detailed design matters.

Cover image: Site visit © Frame Projects
Image: Watchet Harbour and Marina © Chris Wood, wikimedia



PANEL

Authority

Somerset Council

Review Panel name

Somerset Quality Review Panel

Panel management

Frame Projects

Contact name for panel

Yingli Tang, Frame Projects

Contact email address

Yingli@frame-projects.co.uk

Image: Somerset Quality Review Panel site visit © Frame Projects



REVIEW TOTALS

Number of first reviews

28

Number of follow up reviews

4

Number of site visits
(virtual)

8

Number of site visits
(in person)

20

Full reviews
(chair plus four panel members)

11

Intermediate reviews
(chair plus two panel members)

15

Chair's reviews
(chair plus one panel member)

6

PANEL COMPOSITION

PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel members used

17

Male panel members

71%

Female panel members

29%

Members of a diverse ethnic background

12%

PANEL EXPERTISE USED THIS YEAR

Architecture

35

Urban design / townscape

20

Landscape / ecology

28

Sustainability

5

Transport

8

Heritage / inclusive design

7

Most panel members have more than one area of expertise e.g an architect may also have experience of masterplanning, sustainability or design in historic contexts.

PROPOSALS REVIEWED

APPLICANT TYPE

Private developer

30

Local authority

1

Public private partnership

1

STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre-application

18

Planning application
submitted

14

Amendment to approved
application

0

TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan

7

Residential (single
family dwellings)

3

Policy or strategic
document

4

Mixed use

1

Residential (2-50 units)

2

Healthcare

1

Public realm

1

Residential (50+ units)

11

Solar farm

2

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

During 2025, the Somerset Quality Review Panel was consulted on a wide range of schemes throughout the Somerset Council unitary area including: single-family homes; small infill developments; solar farms; neighbourhood centres; major residential-led garden towns; and design guidance documents.

A summary of emerging themes and issues from 2025 is set out below.

Outline submissions

As in 2024, Somerset Council continued to receive a large number of outline planning applications for major developments in 2025. These provide the applicant with the benefit of gaining agreement on the development principle, but the limited amount of information required reduces certainty about the design quality that will be achieved.

It is also common for different applicants to become involved at reserved matters stage, sites are often divided into separate development parcels, constructed over multiple phases by different partners, and delivered over an extended period, further limiting the certainty officers have on the quality of what will be built.

The panel's comments on outline applications have focused on encouraging applicants to develop high-quality indicative layouts, establishing robust strategic design principles, design codes, and clear design commitments that will provide greater certainty on the quality of future reserved matters submissions.

Design codes and guidance

In 2025, the panel has warmly welcomed the opportunity to comment on design codes and design guidance documents created in support of outline submissions or as a requirement of a planning condition. These are a useful design tool which can help demonstrate how a range of considerations have informed the design and provide clear design commitments for what will be delivered.

The panel's advice has focused on assisting teams in strengthening these documents so that they set clear design expectations and can be a useful tool for ongoing decision-making at reserved matters stage. It has also advocated the use of similar design tools across other schemes it has commented on during the pre-application planning process.

Reserved matters

At reserved matters stage, a recurring issue has been the limitations of historic outline approvals, which often do not reflect current national and local policies on design quality and sustainability. A challenge sometimes heightened where outline schemes have been granted on appeal due to not being able to demonstrate a five-year land supply.

The panel has encouraged applicants to adopt best practice approaches, going beyond minimum requirements to deliver schemes that can stand the test of time and where people enjoy living. This has included a need for greater emphasis on landscape and nature, people focused and legible streets, increasing density, and higher quality housing.

The panel has also engaged in workshops discussions with applicants and officers to help unpick the challenge of mismatches between planning policy, historic approvals, and development viability. It has helped to test assumptions, offered suggestions on how to create a positive environment for people, and directed teams to precedents that have successfully resolved similar issues.

Submitted schemes

During 2025, a number of reviews took place after a planning application had been submitted. While this can sometimes be appropriate, best practice is to use design review at an early pre-application stage to allow key design assumptions to be identified and considered before a scheme becomes too fixed.

Influence of private vehicles

The design of streets and the amount and arrangement of parking often do not meet the Council's ambitions for creating high quality and distinctive places. The panel has consistently advocated for places that prioritise people, with better walking, cycling, and public transportation options. - in accordance with the government's 'Manual for Streets'.

The panel is keen to support the Council as it develops more forward-looking policy and guidance. The Council's adoption of Placemaking Principles in October 2024 is positive, and the panel welcomes the intention to publish guidance to help with their implementation and the creation of attractive human-scaled green environments that better reflect the national policy and government-sponsored guidance.

Sustainability

The Council has declared a climate emergency, but the influence of sustainability on proposals is often limited. The panel has encouraged applicants to more carefully consider low carbon design, biodiversity, green and blue infrastructure earlier in the design process. This has included exploring how sustainability can inform a scheme's layout and density, building orientation and thermal performance, water and nature integration, and the approach to energy including renewables.

Paragraph 84

The NPPF's paragraph 84 offers a way for isolated homes to be constructed in rural areas under specific circumstances. It includes a requirement to demonstrate design of exceptional quality - including in its architecture, response to context, and where it can help to raise standards.

The panel's expertise in architecture, landscape and sustainability - core themes of paragraph 84 - has supported officers to rigorously assess proposals against the tests of the NPPF, providing additional scrutiny to the planning process, as well as expert advice to applicants.

Image: Somerset Quality Review Panel site visit © Frame Projects



FORWARD LOOK

Somerset Council members, officers, and the panel will hold an annual meeting in spring. This will be an opportunity to introduce new panel members, reflect on the panel's work, and discuss development challenges and opportunities for the coming year.

As in previous years, a key challenge will be meeting the government's ambitious housing delivery targets while creating places that reflect the Council's adopted Placemaking Principles. While the government is eager to build new housing, it also emphasises the importance of high-quality design, stating that “development proposals that are not well designed should be refused” (National Planning Policy Framework, para. 139).

The importance of well-designed spaces is reiterated in the recently published consultation draft National Planning Policy Framework and the accompanying Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance. They emphasise the value of a good design process in creating places where people want to live, requiring councils to have a clear strategy for design, identify where design codes and guidance are needed, and make appropriate use of independent design review, like the Somerset Quality Review Panel, in decision making.

Frame Projects and the panel are ready to help Somerset Council and applicants to grapple with the need to deliver additional housing, and other spatial challenges, through a rigorous and constructive design review process.

Image: Somerset Quality Review Panel site visit © Frame Projects

