



WELCOME TO  
WATFORD



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WATFORD



PRIMARK

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WATFORD  
PLACE SHAPING  
PANEL

ANNUAL  
REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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# INTRODUCTION

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The Watford Place Shaping Panel was set up in 2020 by Frame Projects on behalf of Watford Borough Council (WBC). It is chaired by Peter Bishop and includes 17 professional experts selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with WBC officers.

Terms of reference, available on the WBC 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 a review. Officers provide a briefing on planning context and key issues, both in writing for the meeting agendas, 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 Watford Place Shaping Panel held a total of 16 review meetings, in the year from June 2020 to May 2021, and advised on 10 different schemes. Six of these schemes were 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 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.

Frame Projects has developed a process for monitoring and evaluating the impact of design review panels. This process allows us to obtain insight into the effectiveness and performance of each of our 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 our services. This process includes collecting quantitative information based on the reviews carried out from June 2020 to May 2021. It also includes feedback from panel members, applicants and local planning authority representatives gathered through anonymous surveys.

This framework builds on initial work carried out by Public Practice to develop a monitoring tool for design review.



Quantitative data was gathered from reviews that took place between 1 June 2020 and 31 May 2021.

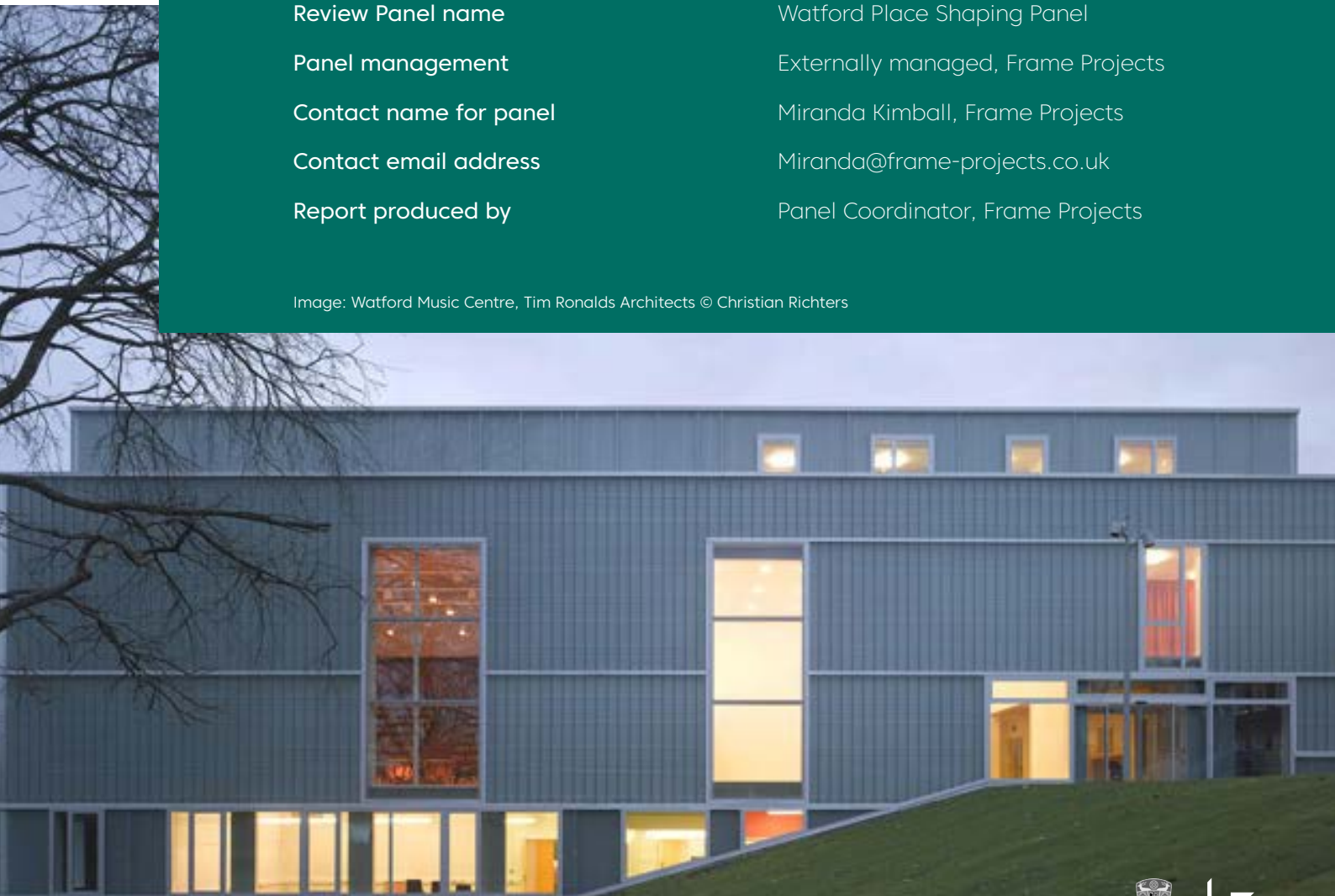
Due to government restrictions relating to Covid-19, all review meetings held after 16 March 2020 were conducted online via video conference, including all meetings of the Watford Place Shaping Panel.

## PANEL

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Authority	Watford Borough Council
Review Panel name	Watford Place Shaping Panel
Panel management	Externally managed, Frame Projects
Contact name for panel	Miranda Kimball, Frame Projects
Contact email address	Miranda@frame-projects.co.uk
Report produced by	Panel Coordinator, Frame Projects

Image: Watford Music Centre, Tim Ronalds Architects © Christian Richters



# REVIEW TOTALS

Number of first reviews

**10**

Number of site visits  
(virtual)

**16**

Chair's reviews  
(chair plus one panel member)

**6**

Number of follow up /  
second reviews

**6**

Formal reviews  
(chair plus four panel members)

**9**

Smaller site reviews  
(chair plus two panel members)

**1**

# PANEL COMPOSITION

## PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel  
members used

**16**

Male panel members

**62%**

Female panel members

**38%**

BAME panel members  
(based on 16 diversity forms)

**19%**

## PANEL EXPERTISE USED THIS YEAR

Urban design /  
town planning

**16**

Heritage

**6**

Sustainability

**4**

Inclusive design

**0**

Architecture

**13**

Landscape

**5**

Transport planning

**3**

# PROPOSALS REVIEWED

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## APPLICANT TYPE

Private developer

**15**

Local authority

**1**

Public private partnership

**0**

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## STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre-application

**13**

Planning application  
submitted

**3**

Amendment to  
approved application

**0**

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## TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan

**1**

Mixed use

**8**

Hotel

**1**

Hospital

**2**

Residential (1-50 units)

**0**

Residential (50+ units)

**4**





Frame Projects has worked with WBC to identify schemes to assess as part of the monitoring and evaluation process. The schemes chosen are those that have been reviewed by the Place Shaping Panel, and where a planning decision was determined between 1 June 2020 and 31 May 2021.

The schemes used for feedback in this evaluation are:

- Cassiobury House            20/00663/FULM
- Mothercare Site            20/00623/FUL

Anonymous survey responses were collected from the applicants (planning agent and lead architects), panel members who attended the reviews, and local authority representatives (planning officers) who were leading on the schemes. Surveys took the format of yes/no questions with options to provide further specific feedback. Participants were sent an email inviting them to take part in the survey and given two weeks to provide feedback, with one follow-up reminder.

Image: Watford High Street © Dave Parker



# APPLICANT QUESTIONNAIRE

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Four applicants were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire.

Two out of four applicants responded to the following questions:

1. Did you find that the review sessions were conducted in a constructive manner?
2. Were you clear about the information you needed to provide prior to the review?
3. Did you consider that the advice from the panel helped to improve the proposal?
4. Did you feel that the panel reports accurately captured review discussions?
5. Did you think that the panel's advice assisted with officer and council discussions?
6. Would you recommend using the Place Shaping Panel?
7. Any other comments?

## APPLICANT FEEDBACK

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All applicant respondents agreed that they understood the information that they needed to provide prior to the review, and that reports of the review meetings accurately captured discussions. Half of those who responded considered that the review sessions were conducted in a constructive manner. The other half considered there was often too much emphasis placed on the panel members' opinions about what could or should have come forward, rather on than the proposals presented.

Half of the applicants who responded did not think that the panel's advice helped to improve the design of the scheme, and the other half thought that it did to an extent, but felt that a lack of understanding of the proposals from the panel and the absence of a site visit made some of the comments unreasonable. One of the applicants who responded also felt that the panel's advice did not assist with officer and council discussions. However, they would all recommend using the Place Shaping Panel if the context was better understood by the panel.



# LOCAL AUTHORITY QUESTIONNAIRE

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Four local planning authority representatives were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire. One out of four local authority representatives responded to the following questions:

1. Were you clear about the information you needed to provide and your role in the review process?
2. Did you find the panel's comments during the review clear and constructive?
3. Did you find the review session and report clear and useful?
4. Did you find the panel's advice helped support negotiations on design quality?
5. Did you incorporate the panel's comments into a delegated planning report or reported to committee?
6. Did you feel that the planning committee gave weight to the design review advice during decision making?
7. Any other comments?

## LOCAL AUTHORITY FEEDBACK

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The WBC officers who responded to the questionnaire felt that the panel's comments during the reviews were clear and constructive, that the report helped support negotiations on design quality, and that the planning committee gave weight to design review advice in the decision-making process.

Image: Cassiobury Park © Knox Bhavan





# PANEL QUESTIONNAIRE

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Six panel members were contacted twice to complete the feedback questionnaire.

All six panel members responded.

1. Did you feel that the level of information provided prior to the review session was appropriate?
2. Did you consider the site visits a benefit to the review session?
3. Did you consider the information presented at the review to be sufficient to enable a thorough review?
4. Did you consider planning officer written and verbal briefings provided clarity on design and policy issues?
5. Did you feel that panel reports accurately captured review discussions?
6. Did you feel that you could contribute your advice fully?
7. Any other comments?

## PANEL FEEDBACK

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The six panel members who responded agreed that, while physical site visits are preferable, virtual site visits were an adequate substitute and that the information provided by the applicants before the meeting was appropriate. Half the panel members questioned felt that the information presented by the applicants during the meeting was not sufficient to enable a thorough review, with one panel member noting information lacking on sustainability and landscape proposals, and integration between the two.

Five of the six panel members who responded felt that the planning officers' written and verbal briefings provided clarity on design issues, and that the panel reports accurately captured review discussions. Almost all of those surveyed felt that they were able to contribute their advice fully. However, one panel member did not feel that this was the case.

# EMERGING ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS

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Given the need for a greater emphasis on sustainability and low carbon design, the panel has undergone a refresh and recruited one additional sustainability expert.

The panel has also added an additional expert in heritage, as one panel member with expertise in this field has taken maternity leave while another had to resign due to a conflict of interest.

When possible, Frame Projects and WBC have now returned to holding reviews in-person accompanied by a site visit, except for returning schemes which will be reviewed online.

The return to in-person meetings will provide greater opportunities for open discussion in meetings, and for the panel to gain the information on site context that can only be obtained from a physical site visit. In-person meetings will help to ensure all panel members feel able to question applicant teams in detail and to contribute fully.

Image: St Mary's Church, Watford © Dave Parker

