



SOMERSET
QUALITY REVIEW
PANEL

1 JANUARY -
31 DECEMBER
2024

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, and includes 19 professional members, selected through an open recruitment process in collaboration with Somerset officers.

Terms of Reference, available on the planning authority's web site, 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.

In the year from January 2024 to December 2024, the Somerset Quality Review Panel has advised on 21 schemes, including five schemes 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: View over town from Dunster Castle © John Lord, [geograph.org](https://www.geograph.org)
Image: Taunton County Ground © Ytfc23, [wikimedia](https://www.wikimedia.org)



Quantitative data was gathered from reviews that took place from
1 January 2024 - 31 December 2024.

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

16

Number of follow up reviews

5

Number of site visits
(virtual)

9

Number of site visits
(in person)

8

Full reviews
(chair plus four panel members)

7

Intermediate reviews
(chair plus two panel members)

11

Chair's reviews
(chair plus one panel member)

3

PANEL COMPOSITION

PANEL MEMBERS USED THIS YEAR

No. of different panel
members used

17

Male panel members

59%

Female panel members

41%

Diverse ethnic background
(based on 19 diversity forms)

6%

PANEL EXPERTISE USED THIS YEAR

Architecture

28

Urban design /
townscape

9

Landscape /
ecology

21

Sustainability

5

Transport / inclusive
design

4

Other

1

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

20

Local authority

1

Public private partnership

0

STAGE OF PROPOSAL

Pre-application

12

Planning application
submitted

9

Amendment to approved
application

0

TYPE OF PROPOSAL

Masterplan

5

Mixed use

4

Residential (1-50 units)

3

Residential (50+ units)

4

Policy or strategic document

0

Commercial

1

Public realm

1

Other (care homes)

3

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

In April 2023, Somerset Council came into being as a unitary authority. Somerset Quality Review Panel began offering its services to area planning teams across Somerset. During 2024, uptake of its design review services increased, and this has given the panel a broader understanding of development opportunities and challenges in Somerset.

Emerging themes and issues from 2024 have been summarised below.

Outline submissions

Somerset Council continued to receive a significant number of outline planning submissions for large developments in 2024. While these offer the applicant the benefit of gaining agreement to the principle of development, the limited amount of information required reduces certainty about the quality that will be achieved.

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

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. This challenge is sometimes heightened where schemes have been granted on appeal due to the Council 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.

Influence of private vehicles

The Council promotes active travel and pedestrian-friendly streets through its placemaking and sustainability policy and guidance. However, in schemes reviewed by the panel during 2024, the design of new streets and

the amount and arrangement of parking have often not met the council's ambitions.

While private vehicles will still be used in most Somerset locations, the goal is to lessen reliance on cars, and encourage alternatives. The panel has focussed on advocating for places that prioritise people, with better provision for walking, cycling and public transport, and adopting alternative approaches to accommodating vehicles and parking.

The panel is keen to support the Council as it develops policy and guidance to build on lessons learnt through the review process, and strengthen the tools to secure high quality design.

Sustainability

The Council has declared a climate emergency, but the influence of sustainability on proposals, beyond meeting Building Regulations, is often limited. The panel has encouraged applicants consider sustainability earlier in the process, so that it can become integral to the designs - for example, how it can inform a scheme's layout and density, home orientation, water and nature integration, and the design of homes.

Paragraph 84

The NPPF's paragraph 84 offers a way for isolated homes to be constructed in rural areas under specific circumstances. One is where a proposed design is 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.

Care Homes

The panel has reviewed designs for several care homes during 2024. While some have been purpose designed for the site and local context, most were based on standard designs by national operators. The panel has encouraged these applicants to adopt more locally distinctive proposals, with site and building configurations which offer a better environment for residents.

FORWARD LOOK

In November 2024, officers briefed the panel on the new Somerset Council unitary authority, its planning policy context, and character areas. The meeting included a presentation on the recently adopted Placemaking Principles, which are intended to guide developers towards creating attractive, inclusive and high-quality places, where people enjoy living.

The panel strongly supports the principles which capture many of the themes and issues regularly discussed at panel meetings. Somerset Council intends to engage internally to help establish them in decision making and address any areas of conflict. Frame Projects and the panel can help support this process.

The government has set more ambitious targets for housing delivery. In Somerset, the target has gone up to 3,891 new homes per year, a 46 per cent rise from the previous target. Meeting this target will require applicants to explore alternative housing models, including more urban forms to increase the density of schemes and reducing the amount of space for cars.

Frame Projects and the panel are ready to support Somerset Council and applicants grappling with this challenge in a way that positively responds to the Council's placemaking principles.

Image: Somerset Quality Review Panel site visit © Frame Projects

