The principles also help refocus panel management on key points. Accessibility is a reminder of the importance of relating feedback to the design officer promptly and consistently in order that comments can be incorporated into the planning process. Accountability calls for more consistent reporting on panel activities to the wider council management and elected members, which will help raise awareness of the panel's role and impact. Monitoring also allows panel members the opportunity to see the influence of their work and the positive role their feedback can have. This is particularly helpful in maintaining the motivation of these voluntary members.

The new guidance does leave some gaps that may require further thinking by local panels. The Proportionate principle does not address the question of what role a local panel should play in major applications that are already being reviewed by CABE or other sub-regional reviews. It is felt by some that it is a waste of the panel's expertise to have them doubling up on schemes already receiving detailed design review and that greater impact could be made by the panel if more modest schemes were focused on.

Also, although this has yet to be a significant problem, it is unclear what should be done if there is conflict from the different levels of review. Although final judgement always rests with the development control case officer, contradictory advice may be seen to undermine the objectivity and value of the review process and may be another reason to avoid duplication.

A more specific challenge that has been faced in recent months is how to maintain regular meetings as the frequency of major applications has slowed as a result of the recession. While the panel has always maintained a link with the planning committee and the chair and vice-chair of the planning committee have been nominated as Design Champions, another outcome from the Action Plan.

**TRAINING PROGRAMME**

Urban Design Training (Marilyn Higgins and Leslie Forsyth) was approached in 2006 to prepare a bespoke programme of training for officers and members of the Council. Since then there have been two courses of training for both officers and members, and a third course for officers about to start. The general aim of the officers' training is to improve knowledge and understanding of urban design principles and to develop skills in design briefing. The authors refined a programme similar to what they had successfully delivered to authorities elsewhere in Scotland. It was delivered in a series consisting of six full days, approximately one every two weeks. Twelve officers attended the first course and thirteen the second. The participants were from planning policy, development management, community services (parks).

It was explicit from the start that the course would be highly interactive and this drove the timing and structure. There was a clear expectation that participants would need to be involved in considerable work, both during the sessions and in between. The training days were divided into two main themes, one dealing with seminars on urban design principles and to develop skills in design briefing. The authors refined a programme.

**CONCLUSION**

While the benefits of a design panel can be considerable, both CABE's research and Haringey's experience show that a number of fundamental issues must be in place for a panel to work effectively. A skilled and diverse panel with a clear mandate and rules of operation are crucial aspects in ensuring quality outcomes from the design review process. Integration with the wider planning process is also essential. Maintaining a strong connection with development control can help draw the right schemes are referred to the panel, and that their comments result in tangible design improvements and help inform the decision-making process. The new guidance from CABE, the RTPI, RIBA and the Landscape Institute provide valuable advice on these issues, helping to strengthen planning and project teams and ongoing success of existing and future panels.

In 2006 Fife Council was awarded a commendation in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning for its Fife Urban Design Action Plan. The judges were impressed with the 19 service improvements demonstrating strong commitment to raising design quality, highlighted in particular the proposed officer and elected member training. This article charts the development of design panel and development management and reflects on the effects that officer and member training has had on practice. The evaluation is based on written questionnaires distributed at the conclusion of each training session as well as interviews with officers and members between one and three years later.

**CONTEXT**

Fife is a historic unitary coastal authority in the central belt of Scotland, containing both urban and rural areas and diverse landscapes. It has a growing population of 162,000 within 260 sq miles and typically receives about 4,000 planning applications a year. It is divided into three areas in terms of service provision: St. Andrews and East Fife, Kirkcaldy and mid Fife and Dunfermline and West Fife.

Scotland has been promoting urban design in a broadly similar way as elsewhere in the UK. Fife has been one of the more proactive local authorities in terms of initiatives to raise design quality. These aspirations were motivated by the Scottish Government’s Designing Places policy promoting the design agenda and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance. There has also been discussion of using their expertise in development briefs and area master plans, which would help ensure design values are incorporated in Council strategies from the start.

**The diverse scale, character and significance of Fife’s settlements**
urban design principles, an exercise applying these principles in decisions about planning applications and a discussion about the role of members in relation to other participants in the planning process.

There was a clear expectation that participants would need to be involved in considerable work, both during the sessions and in between.

The training is seen as an initial grounding in urban design, from which a continuing programme is being developed by the Council. A new workshop about contemporary design versus a historicist approach aimed at both officers and members is currently being planned. Members are also being briefed about a newly developed FIFE Sustainability Checklist and recent urban design trips (Poundburn, Upton, Freiburg, Greenwich Millennium Village) undertaken as part of the Council’s Designing Sustainable Communities Initiative.

OFFICERS
Feedback at the end of the training courses was very positive. After the training had been completed, officers formed a group to support each other in promoting learning from the course in their daily work. Officers contacted recently unanimously confirm that the training has resulted in greater motivation and job satisfaction.

Three years after the first training, participants from the policy team report that greater understanding about the principles of built form and open space has strengthened their ability to convey constructive information to colleagues, developers and other professions. They highlight the importance of communication and working together; the recognition of the importance of design by everyone involved in the process, including managers; and the production of well-articulated design policy, guidance and briefs to justify decisions. A result is increased confidence and assertiveness in challenging proposals and defending professional opinions on design matters. The training directly spawned activity resulting in improved policy and increased guidance. The Council commissioned Gillespies LLP to produce the FIFE Masterplans Handbook to guide major settlement expansion, which won the Commendation for Development Management in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2007. The latest drafts of local plans include diagrammatic strategic development frameworks for major land allocations that are in line with urban design principles discussed as part of the training. Officers acknowledge that a cultural change has begun, including amongst some councillors. One policy officer moved from Fife to Moray Council in Scotland and was instrumental in initiating similar training there.

Development management officers report that the practical nature of the training has meant that they are able to apply the principles in their daily work, insisting, for example, that in housing layouts streets join up, open space is well defined and overlooked, front doors face the street, a mixture of house types is included and cars are not allowed to dominate. A significant shift occurred after the first training course, when, for the first time, a housing development was refused on design grounds in Cupar (part of the new Design Guide). The decision was appealed by the developer but the Council won the public inquiry. This success set a precedent and gave other officers a confidence that the principles in the guidance are being adhered to, resulting in a number of cases of improved applications. Officers had considerable input in terms of urban design in a new housing development at Balcomie Green, Crail.

MEMBERS
Members were also positive about the training immediately afterwards. As a result of the planning committee notices that basic urban design messages about a sense of place are beginning to take root, becoming more ingrained in daily discussions. He cites the example of the urban design framework in the new plan for St. Andrews and East Fife, which aims to promote connectivity, amongst other design principles, and believes that guidance is essential early in the process for large capital projects. The vice-chair of the planning committee states that the training helped councillors think about how proposals conform to urban design principles, not just how many people objected. Both believe that the role of the three permanent specialist urban design officers has been important in raising the profile and co-ordinating action. However, they acknowledge that councillors are learning about many things all at once and more needs to be done to engage members. One suggests that the slowdown in the economy is a good time to upgrade skills and improve guidance. The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee are named as the Council’s Design Champions. Both agree that this role has remained underdeveloped, with the chair asserting that promoting good quality urban design is integral to his position in any case.

CONCLUSIONS
The example of Fife Council illustrates an authority which has taken the urban design agenda very seriously. It has created a set of documents providing excellent information for developers which have been recognised nationally, established positions to lead urban design initiatives, promoted a programme of learning for officers and members and is beginning to see evidence that these measures are leading to improvements in the quality of development on the ground. The role of specialist officers in promoting urban design and co-ordinating action on the whole authority has been important, especially where officers are scattered across geographical areas. Officers acknowledge that a cultural change has begun, including amongst some councillors. One policy officer moved from Fife to Moray Council in Scotland and was instrumental in initiating similar training there.

The training is seen as an initial grounding in urban design, from which a continuing programme is being developed by the Council. A new workshop about contemporary design versus a historicist approach aimed at both officers and members is currently being planned. Members are also being briefed about a newly developed FIFE Sustainability Checklist and recent urban design trips (Poundburn, Upton, Freiburg, Greenwich Millennium Village) undertaken as part of the Council’s Designing Sustainable Communities Initiative.

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