



**Association of Consulting Architects**  
The Business of Architecture

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# Development Assessment Panels & Design Advisory Committees

An ACA WA Member Survey

September 2016

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**Prepared by the: ACA WA Branch**

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## Association of Consulting Architects

The Business of Architecture

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The Association of Consulting Architects (ACA) leads the discussion on business matters in architecture in Australia and is the key body representing architectural employers in Australia. The ACA was founded in 1987 as the national peak body representing the interests of employers in industrial matters. It now addresses the “Business of Architecture” more broadly, with industrial relations as a vital core of ACA activity.

The ACA helps architectural firms navigate the changing world of practice by providing regular advice and information on business and employment matters, by promoting awareness of and discussion about business issues, and by advocating for better business practices and legislative frameworks.

Through this leadership, support and advocacy, the ACA helps to ensure the long-term health and viability of the profession, and thereby supports the important contribution that architecture makes to our cities, environments, communities and cultures.

In Western Australia, the ACA-WA Branch has a membership of over 50 practices, representing over 800 architects and design professionals. Our members include major national and international firms, and the majority of medium sized practices working in metropolitan Perth.



## **2016 Member Survey on Development Assessment Panels and Design Advisory Committees.**

In August 2016 the ACA WA conducted a detailed member survey on their experiences with Development Assessment Panels (DAP's) and Design Advisory Committees (DAC's).

The survey was responded to by over 30 firms, with multiple responses from firms at a senior director level. Practice scales ranged from 5 to 150+ staff firms (majority in 6-30 staff range) with sectors across multi-residential, education, commercial, health, infrastructure, retail, industrial, heritage and public architecture.

Detailed findings of the survey are included within this report, but key findings and recommendations are listed below:

## **Development Assessment Panels (DAP)**

### **Key Findings:**

- Overwhelming support for the DAP process over the previous system of Local Authority applications, with majority believing the outcomes are better for their clients than previous system.
- Strong support for administrative reforms to streamline the process including the ability for minor amendments to be dealt with expeditiously.
- Strong support for the ability for all project to “opt-in” to the DAP process regardless of value. This would assist in streamlining certain sectors such as industrial and educational which may have had a delegated approval pathway previously. It would also provide clear feedback on local authority performance with the ability for applicants to opt-in (or out) of local authority approvals process.
- A majority of firms have had none or slight improvements in processing times for Development applications through the DAP process compared to the previous system. This may be as a result of prolongations often experienced with existing Design Review Panel processes. Concerns were raised over the time taken for RAR to be completed (often in excess of statutory timeframes requirements), and the limited opportunity for applicants to prepare responses prior to DAP sitting (as little as one day to prepare responses)

### **Key Recommendation:**

The ACA WA strongly supports the continuation of the Development Assessment Panels in Western Australia, and calls for a streamlining of processes relating to minor amendments, and the ability to “opt-in” or “opt-out” to the DAP process regardless of project value or type.

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## **Design Advisory Committee (DAC)**

### **Key Findings:**

- Support for Design Advisory Committees in Local Authorities
- Overwhelming support for quality and standardized framework and terms of reference for Design Advisory Committees. There was considerable feedback that Design Advisory Committees operated inconsistently across jurisdictions, and sometimes within a single DAC decisions would vary depending upon panel composition and the influence of the Chair.
- Support for Design Advisory Committees to review all Development Applications and Proposals for strategic or town centre projects.

### **Key Recommendation:**

The ACA WA considers it essential that all DAC's have both clear operational frameworks and uniform terms of reference to ensure consistent advice is provided across Local Authority jurisdictions.

A stronger link to the approval process is recognised as an opportunity but only if considered as part of an efficient planning approvals process, and with strong statutory timeframes for provision of Design Review advice.

The ACA WA is pleased to provide a clear evidence based approach to our State planning system. Our members are in the 'front-line' of the processes required for our clients to obtain development assessments and approvals, and mediate the responsibilities to our clients (and their commercial interests) and our shared aspirations for better quality design of the built environment.

As a continuing component of our advocacy for high quality and efficient planning processes, we provide this report and key recommendations to assist Government in making informed and considered responses to the ongoing role of DAP's and Design Review Panels.

The ACA WA welcomes any effective review of the planning process, and would be pleased to offer advice and input on behalf of our members.

Yours faithfully,

Kieran Wong RAIA

President, Association of Consulting Architects, WA  
Design Director, CODA Architecture + Urban Design

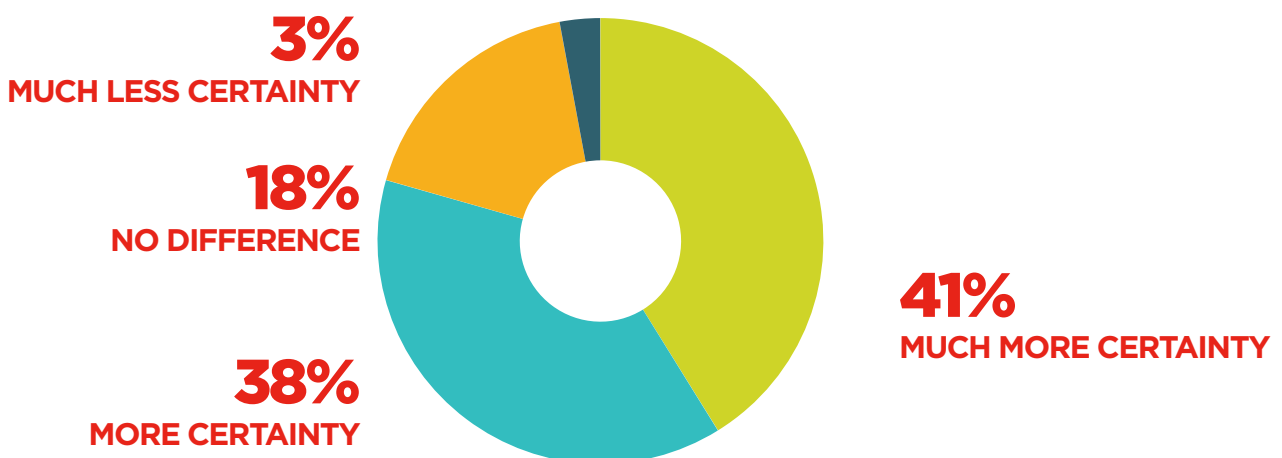
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## Questions 1-9: Development Assessment Panels (DAP's)

Q1: In your experience, how effective is the current DAP approval process compared to the previous system controlled by local councils?

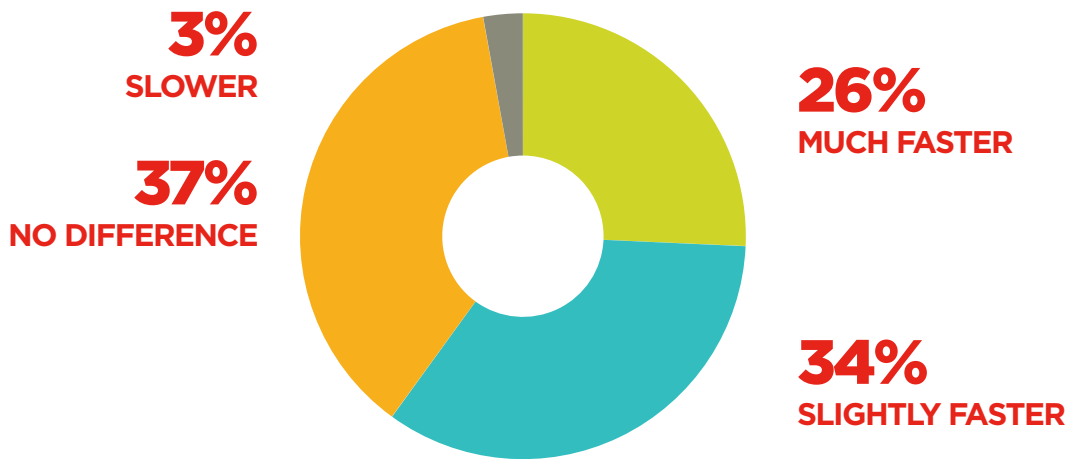


Q2: Does the current DAP approval process provide more certainty for your clients in obtaining a Development Approval than the previous system?



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**Q3: Does the current DAP approval process generally provide an approval in a shorter period of time than the previous system?**



*“We havent seen any noticeable effects regarding certainty - many of our projects could have had a Delegated Approval by the local authority in our opinion.”*

*“We have experience good results with the DAP process on several of our major education projects. Although prior to DAP we hadn’t experienced any significant issues with the Local Authorities on similar projects..”*

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**Q4: Does the current DAP approval process deliver a better outcome for your clients in all project types and values?**



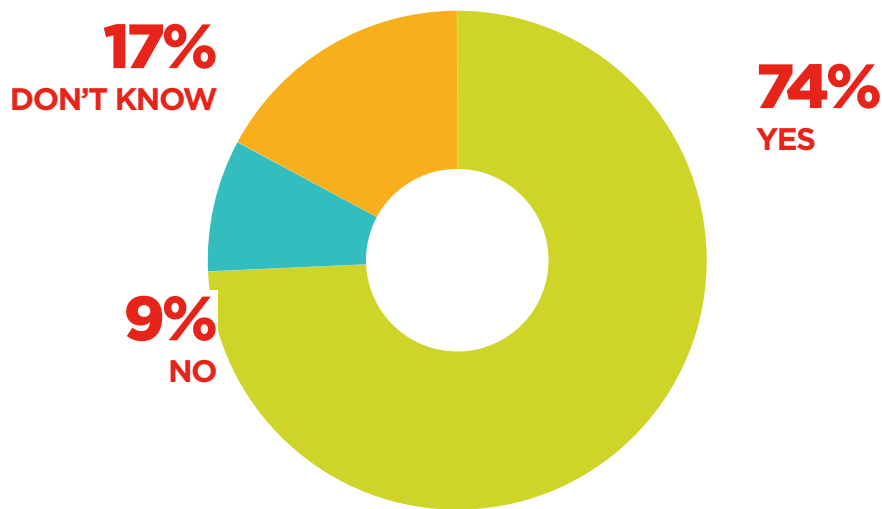
*“Better than having to go to tribunal to sort out non-development orientated local authorities.”*

*“Typically the ‘expert’ members have brought new insight to the Council members of the DAP, and so ‘improvements’ to submitted DAs are encouraged but with design excellence in mind (rather than taking a general ‘anti-development stance’ but with little or no commercial awareness).”*



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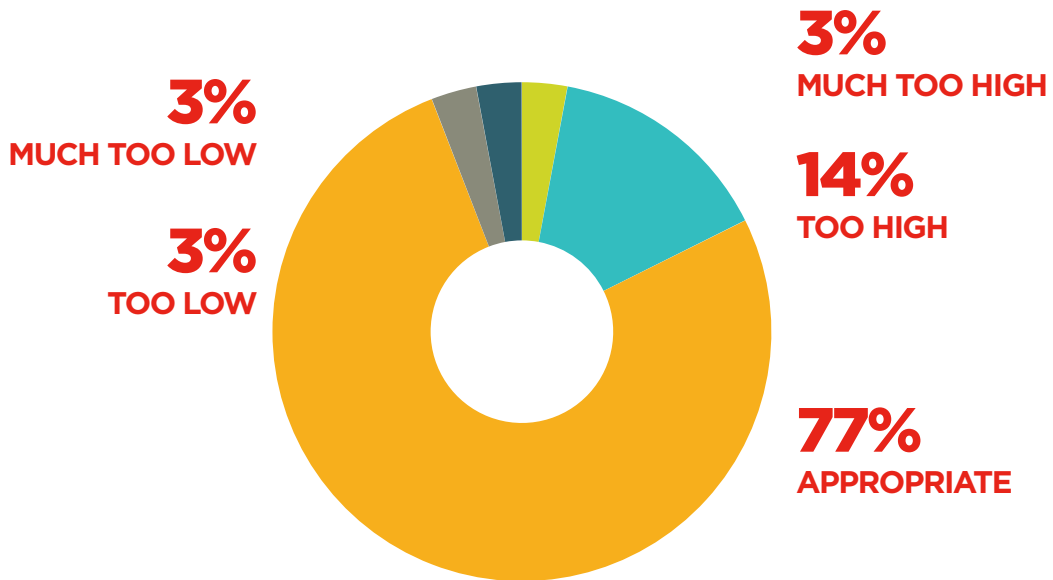
**Q5: Does the current DAP approval process adequately address the views of local residents impacted by your clients' development projects?**



*“Community consultation is handled in some councils much better than others. Melville in the CBSP is a good example, where significant engagement was undertaken before re-zoning of area so there was no surprises for local residents. This is much harder in established areas like Vincent. Above all we fight a perception issue with multi-res developments which has been exacerbated by too much laziness in design approach by some practitioners.”*

*“Most local views reflect the NIMBY attitude and the DAP although acknowledging them professionally deals with the outcomes in our experience.”*

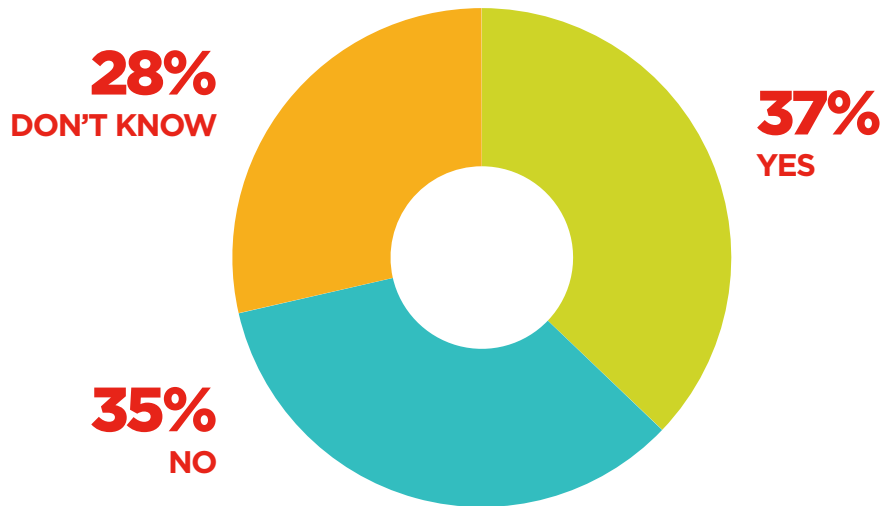
**Q6: What do you think of the current threshold value of projects that allow your clients to 'Opt In' to the DAP approval process?**



*“Vocal local resident groups are often motivated by self interest (understandable) and a lack of knowledge and expertise to be able to adequately assess a development project in accordance with their local council's planning guidelines. ‘I don't like it’ is not a suitable reason for objecting to a proposed project.”*

*“It is the responsibility for Councils and residents to amend their LPS to reflect community expectations if necessary rather than react and disallow a legitimate proposal once they are lodged. ...it is ... too easy to blame the DAP and say that it is unrepresentative and unelected.”*

**Q7: Does the current DAP approval process allow for the efficient processing of minor design amendments between design approval stage and Building Permit stage?**

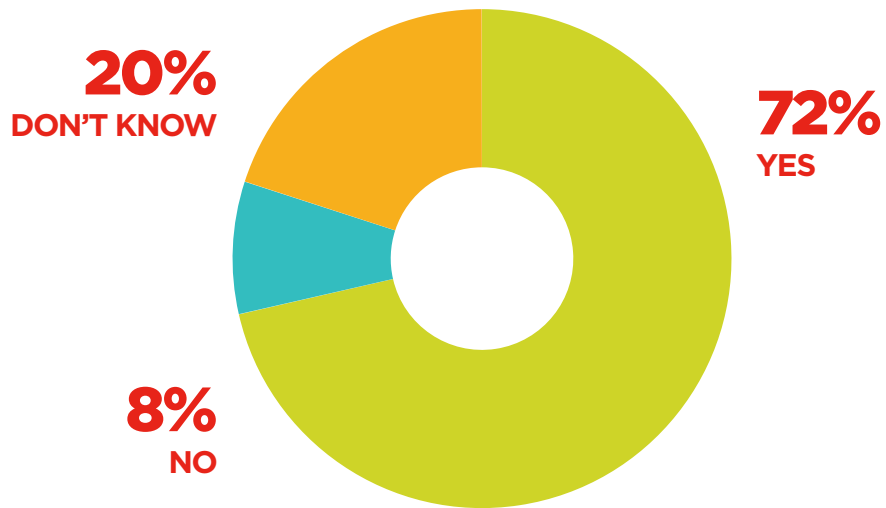


*"In our opinion all projects beyond \$500,000 should have the option of being dealt with by a DAP"*

*"This is becoming a growing problem. It is obvious that design development for any project is going to mean slight changes to the building design, especially in relation to the building services component. The process of going back to obtain an amendment for a minor revision is a waste of time and resources."*

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**Q8: Do members appointed to DAPs have sufficient experience and expertise to provide an assessment of the projects submitted?**



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*"I believe the DAP process has a positive role in the approval process with decisions being made on a professional assessment and not an emotive or political agenda. The personalities are removed from the process and it is more objective."*

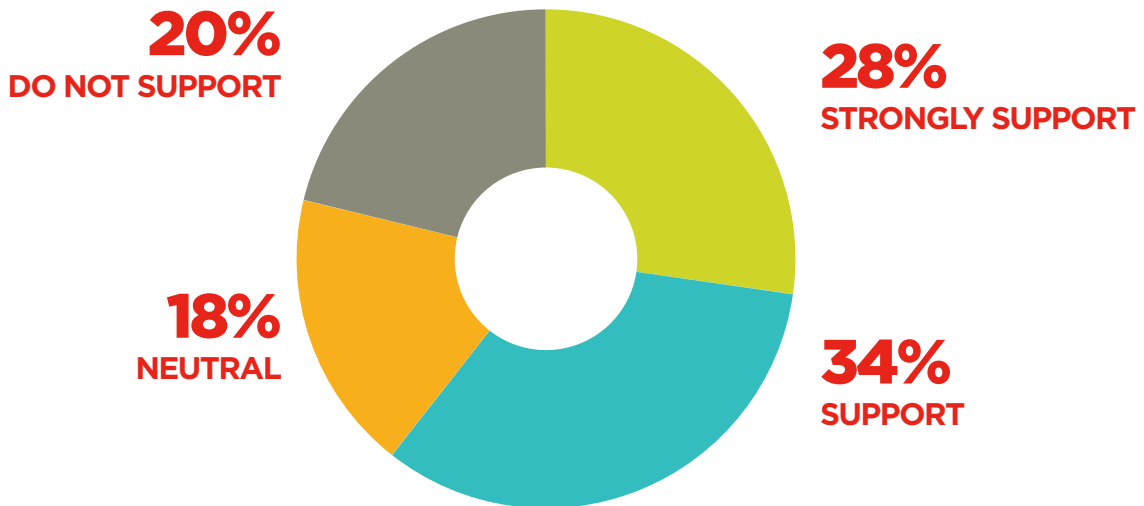
*"I support the DAP process especially where it is the approving authority in areas of incentive based planning policy. This is where we have seen the most consistently strong outcomes."*

*"An excellent system operated by professionals that takes into account the important strategic planning issues and separated and regardless of local insular issues."*

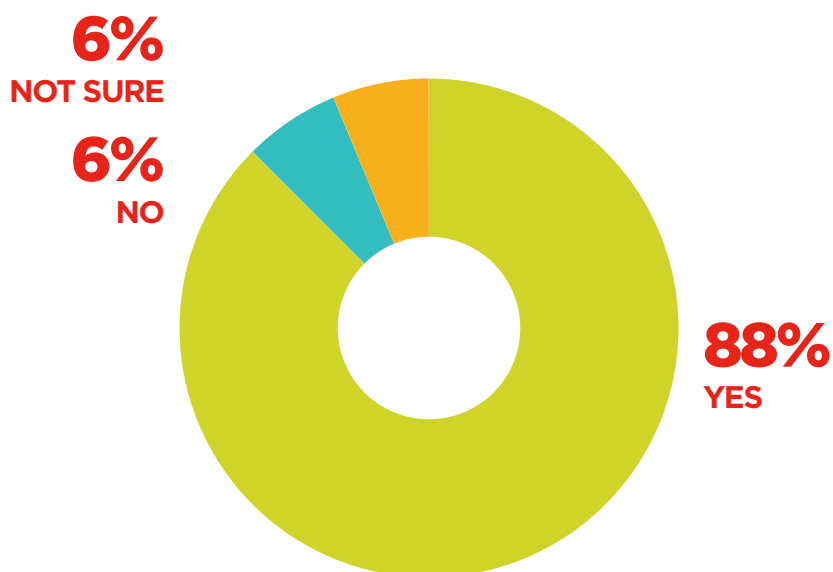
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Questions 10-16: Design Advisory Committees (DAC's)

Q10: Do you support the role of the DAC within Local Councils in the Development Approval process?



Q11: Should DACs in all Local Councils operate under the same uniform framework and terms of reference?



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*"DAC's are a concern for certainty and members are often commercially conflicted and or not qualified"*

*"We do not support the DAC process as many are personality and/or local issue influenced."*

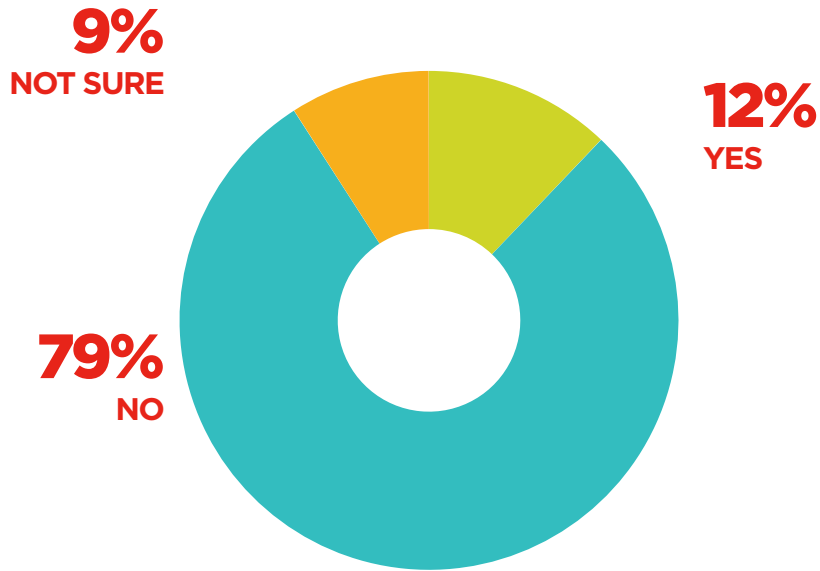
*"DAC process can be an effective session when the members give constructive advice and provide clear guidance base on what is supported in the local scheme. Subjective opinions sometimes do come up and may be quite confusing. Going through the DAC process can be quite onerous..."*

*"Problems occur when different members assess the same project and provide completely different views. Problems occur when one member of a DAC has strong views/personality and overrides others."*

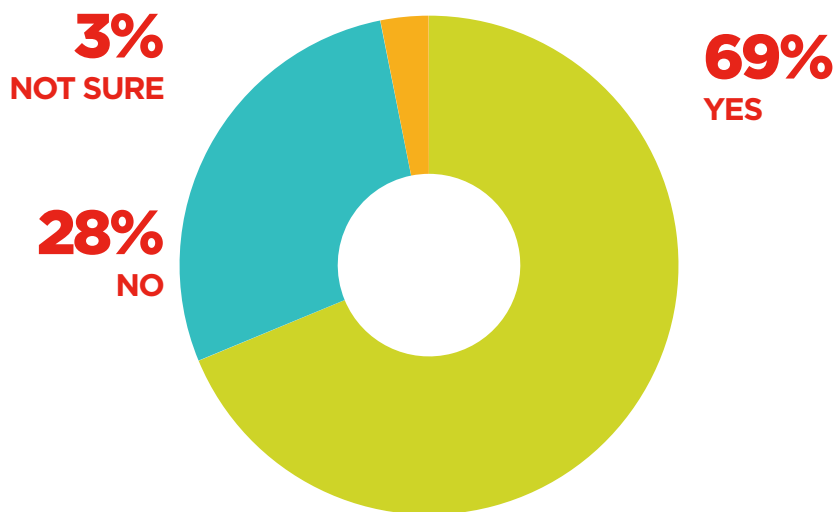
*"Our biggest issue with approvals is where poor design can still 'tick boxes' and get approved, where exemplary design often challanges the 'codes' and yet cannot 'tick boxes'"*

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**Q11: Should DACs review all Development Approval applications regardless of building type or \$ value?**



**Q13: Should DACs only review Development Approval applications for sites of strategic importance within the Local Council or for projects above a significant \$ value?**





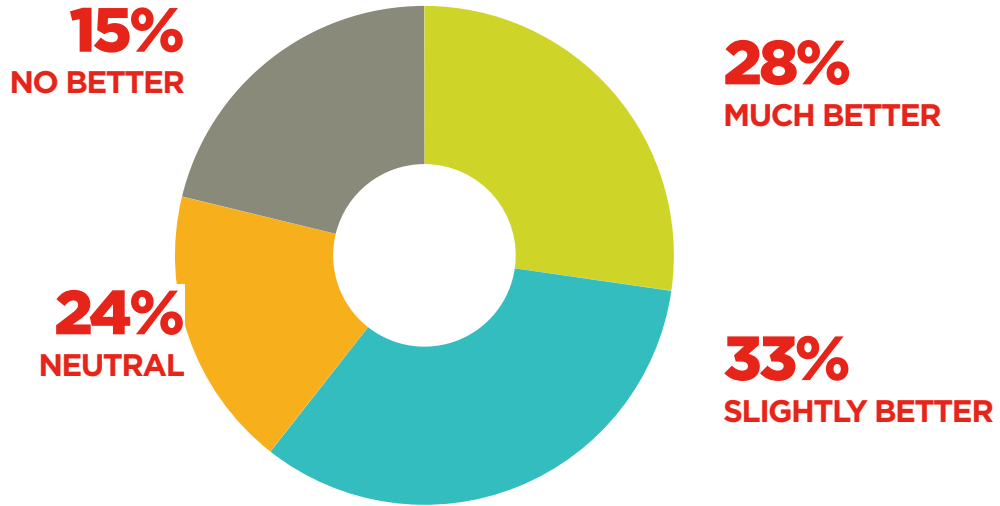
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*“The most important issue is to ensure a uniform framework and terms of reference for DAC’s in all councils. Then to ensure that governance is tightened up. Perhaps include a provision of a rotating chairman to ensure individual council’s DAC’s are not dominated by one personality.”*

*“...where they need to have an influence is in grouped housing which is the greatest threat to the built environment. Triplex to six pack subdivisions are the worst possible outcome for density, ecology and the visual landscape.”*

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Q14: Do you think DACs produce better design outcomes for projects that obtain their approval?



Q15: Do you think DAC members generally have the experience and expertise to provide an assessment of the projects submitted?



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*"There is much evidence of terrible design outcomes in every neighbourhood, making (as an example) the task of delivering good urban infill much harder as the community presumes all such outcomes to be equally as bad as the worst."*

*"In the main yes, but not exclusively the case - see above. There is a lot of rubbish that the JDAP cannot refuse approvals for - but the DAC is faced with an incompetent designer and no amount of 'design coaching' can get the project to a decent standard."*

*"We have also found that DAC's tend to collect groups of like minded Architects together, who have a limited and highly personal view of what good design is, and this was of great detriment to the process. If DACs remain, I would like to see the process amended to draw a broader range of professionals to be involved, for example in the UK membership of design review committees is open to more than just Architects (urban designers, landscape designers and engineers are amongst those welcomed) and I think would bring a much wider variety of experience and broader understanding to the Committees. It is also essential that all DAC's operate under the same framework and process..."*

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**Q16: Do DAC members currently operate under suitable governance requirements and in a professional manner.**



*“If there are to be DAC’s then they must operate under a uniform framework with terms of reference. The Chair should not be an architect, but an independent professional. Whilst an architect should be objective, this tends not to be the case.”*

*“They provide a range of professional opinions to the client. It remains a cheap methodology to improve the value of the total development.”*

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*“Emphasis should be on ‘advisory’. Current panel system is a collection of critics. would feel better with fewer experienced design architects advising/assisting towards an acceptable design outcome.”*

*“Yes, there needs to be more guidance and a proper framework coming from SPC so that the role of DAC’s is more consistent across all of Local Government. Care also needs to be taken to ensure that such a framework is not limiting on creativity; encourages variety and spontaneity; and avoids mediocrity which is always a danger if roles and frameworks for design parameters are too prescriptive.”*

*“DAC’s empower committed Architects to do what they do best and give confidence to clients that they need to listen to the first principles design approach that their Architect has been espousing. DAC’s are crucial, only lazy Architects could have a problem with them.”*

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