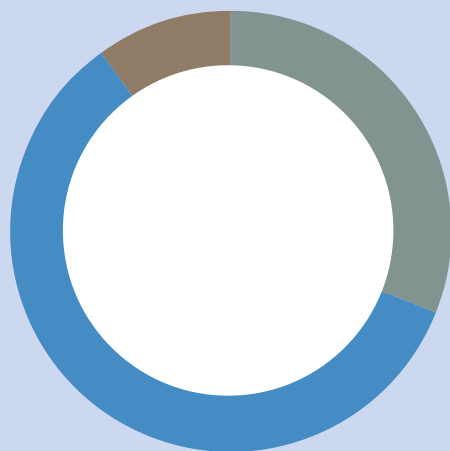
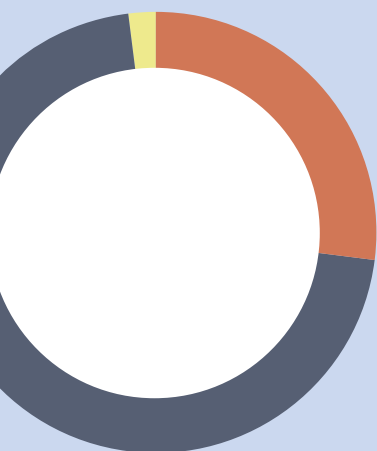




SURVEY RESULTS

Review of local authority
planning departments

2003



INTRODUCTION

Raising the quality of England's buildings and public spaces lies at the heart of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's vision for sustainable communities. Raising the quality of the built environment cannot rely on a few showpiece schemes. Instead, it will depend on the myriad minor decisions that local authorities take as part of their 'everyday' work.

To see how councils are taking on board the design message and the impact that it is having on their decision making, CABE conducted its second survey of English local authorities. The first survey was conducted in 2001, shortly after CABE's establishment. Our latest review comes at a time when planning is under detailed investigation by the Barker and Egan reviews, both of which are highlighting the need for more skills in this area. These findings will be of interest to both reviews.

The survey results make mixed reading, and there is still a long way to go. Overall the message is that local government needs a lot more

support in driving up the design quality of those schemes passing through the planning system. We still have a system that often rewards process rather than product.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF THE SURVEY

The questionnaire was mailed in September 2003 to all chief planners in England, followed by telephone calls to non-respondents after the first seven weeks.

141 authorities completed the survey. This was a lower response rate than the 2001 survey. There are a number of external factors which can explain this – heavy workload, for example – but it is reasonable to assume that failure to complete may indicate that design is not yet a sufficient priority for many of the recipients of the survey.

CABE is passionately committed to tackling this issue, and putting design at the heart of the planning system.

COMPARISON OF FINDINGS: 2001 AND 2003

Local Authorities that have a qualified Urban Designer in their planning department:

2001 48%
2003 49%

Local Authorities that have a registered Architect in their planning department:

2001 38%
2003 32%

Local Authorities that have a Landscape Architect in their planning department:

2001 57%
2003 56%

Local Authority planning departments that make use of a design panel in assessing the design quality of planning applications (not including Conservation Area Committees):

2001 23%
2003 26%

Local Authorities that have a design champion to promote the cause of good design across all areas of the authorities activities:

2001 20%
2003 43%

Local Authorities that run design award schemes:

2001 32%
2003 60%

Local Authorities that have refused planning permission principally on design grounds in more than 20 instances in the past year:

2001 22%
2003 26%

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In 2001 CABE undertook a review of design skills in local authority planning departments. At the end of 2003 we repeated the survey to see how things had changed.

- Overall it is a mixed picture. The stark lack of design skills within planning departments shows no real change in two years, although departments are increasingly seeing this as a problem
- On a more positive note there has been a marked increase in the number and status of design champions
- Local Authorities say the key factors for not taking a more active role in refusing poorly designed schemes are: a lack of skills; lack of policy guidance, both at a national level (eg PPSs) and local level; and a fear of lack of support by the Planning Inspectorate

SKILLS

Skilled design staff remain thin on the ground in local authorities and the situation is not getting any better. Just 15% of authorities employ an architect, an urban designer and a landscape architect in the vetting of planning applications. More than 80% of authorities admit they could do with more expertise.

Lack of training and expertise in design issues is the factor most frequently cited by authorities when explaining why they are reluctant to refuse on design grounds. The second most frequently cited reason is that the Planning Inspectorate will not support refusal on appeal.

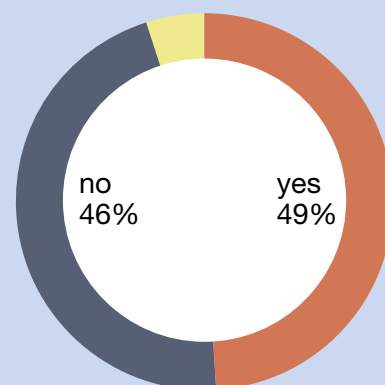
Authorities are increasingly likely to take notice of design panels' advice, even though a rising proportion regard the quality of the advice as variable.

Many authorities have never run a course in design for elected members, but more are starting to develop in this area.

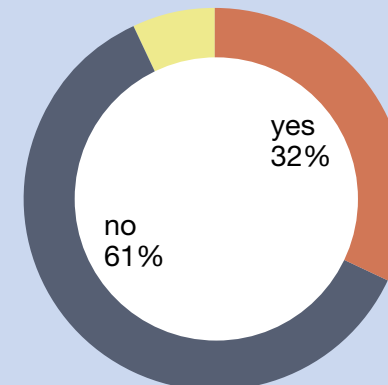
Of the 388 local planning authorities in England, 141 responded to the survey, representing 36% of local authorities. These included 87 district, 34 unitary, 15 county and four national park authorities.

Does the assessment of planning applications in your department involve professional staff who are:

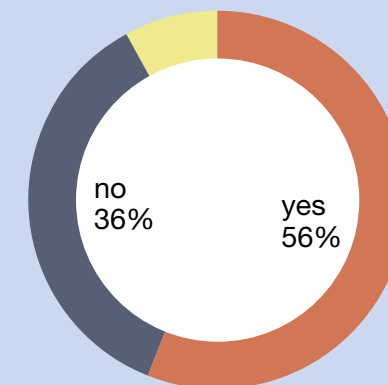
(i) qualified in urban design



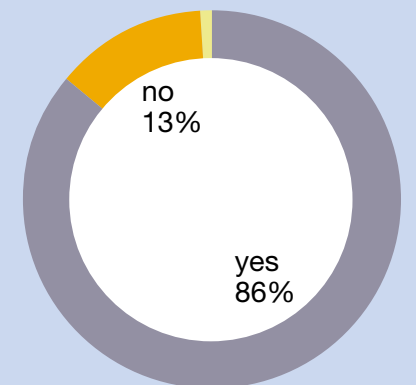
(ii) registered architects



(iii) qualified landscape architects



Do you think there is a need for further design skills within your department?



represents 'no answer' throughout these results

RESULTS

DESIGN CHAMPIONS

The last two years have seen big increases in the numbers of authorities appointing design champions and setting up design awards.

A growing proportion of design champions are drawn from the senior echelons of local authority staff and members.

POLICY

Nearly two thirds of authorities have tailor made design guidance covering the entire authority.

VIEW OF CABE

Many authorities see CABE as simultaneously fulfilling a number of roles: as a Government Agency, independent watchdog, campaigners, and as a Thinktank.

Authorities want CABE to provide more help with training and lobbying the promoters of developments to ensure higher quality proposals.

IN HOUSE RESOURCES

CABE has consistently highlighted the importance of local authorities employing trained designers to help assess the worth of schemes submitted for approval.

But in the two years between surveys there has been a negligible shift in the proportion of authorities using professionally trained designers to assess applications. Just under half (49%) of the local authorities surveyed used qualified urban designers in the assessment of planning applications – a negligible improvement on the figure of 48% previously reported.

The same period has seen a decline in the proportion of councils using trained architects to assess planning applications. Just under a third (32%) of authorities reported that they used qualified architects to assess applications, compared to 38% in the previous survey.

Landscape architects continue to be the most widely used design discipline – 56% of authorities responding to the survey said that they had used such staff to assess

applications, compared to 57% in the previous survey.

Just 21 authorities representing 15% of respondents involved individuals from all three design disciplines in the development control process, a lower figure than that reported in 2001.

However, authorities at least acknowledge that this low level of design skills is a problem – 86% of authorities said further design skills were needed in their departments.

PLUGGING THE GAP

CABE and other bodies have suggested a series of mechanisms for remedying the shortfall in design skills. These include appointing design panels, nominating a ‘design champion’ within the authority and running awards to recognise high quality schemes.

One solution is to nominate a panel of outside experts to vet schemes. Just over a quarter (26%) of authorities reported that they used design panels in addition to or instead of conservation area advisory committees to assess the quality of planning applications. This means that the vast majority do not, but it represents a small increase (3%) in the use of advisory panels compared to two years ago.

However, the survey appears to show that authorities become more luke-warm when quizzed about the quality of the advice that they receive. Of those authorities that used design panels, 42.5% rate the advice as good compared to 47% in the 2001 survey. A slightly higher proportion (47.5%) said that the advice was variable with the remainder describing it as poor.

But councils are giving more weight to panels’ advice when making decisions. Of those authorities that run panels, 73% say that the advice is sometimes influential with 25% saying it is very influential. Only 2% said it was not influential. This represents a marginal increase in how seriously authorities take the advice that they receive compared to two years ago when 62% and 25% respondents described the advice they received as sometimes influential and very influential respectively.

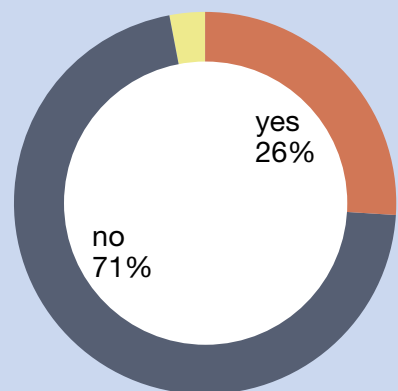
And there remains a strong appetite amongst authorities without panels to set one up. Of those authorities that do not have access to a design panel, more than two thirds (69%) said they would like advice from one. Of those authorities that wanted help, 37% suggested that this would be most usefully organised at a local level and 52% at the county. Just 11% said the region was the most appropriate level for such an arrangement.

Nevertheless, scepticism lingers in some quarters about the value of panels. One authority said it had not set up a panel because of the

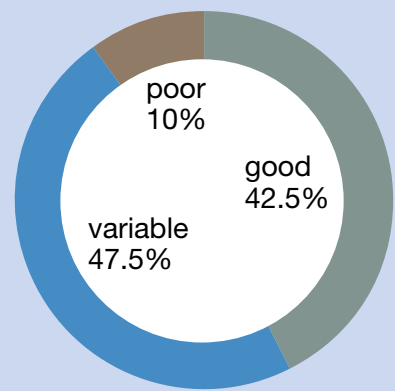
concern that such a body might act in a subjective way by promoting a particular style.

More heartening is the big increase in the number of authorities running design awards schemes. Nearly two thirds – 60% – of authorities that responded to the survey said they ran such a scheme. This is almost double the level – 32% – of two years ago.

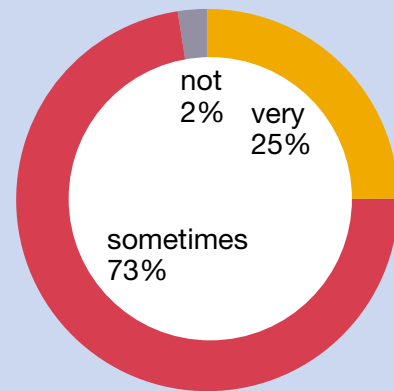
In addition to (or instead of) any conservation area committees, does your authority make use of any other design panel of any kind in assessing the design quality of planning applications generally?



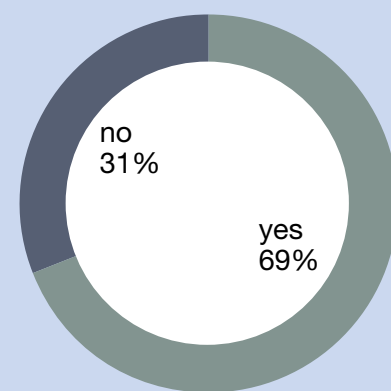
What is your view of the quality of advice given?



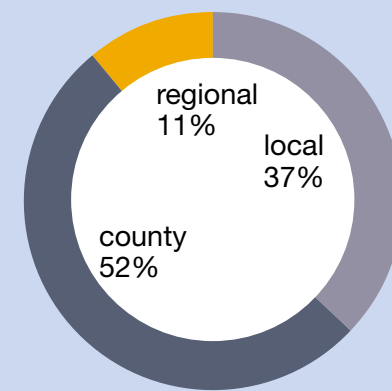
How influential is the advice on decision making?



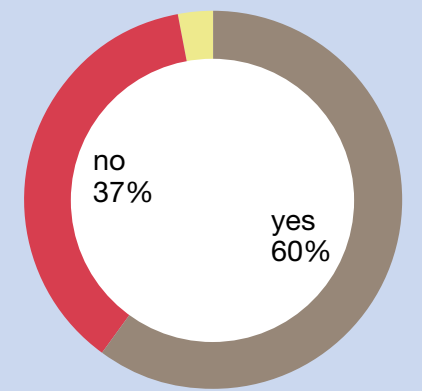
If you currently do not, would you like access to advice from a design panel?



If yes, at what level should this be most usefully organised?



Does your authority run a design award scheme?



DESIGN CHAMPIONS

Further evidence that CABE's message is getting through is an even larger increase in the proportion of authorities with an appointed design champion.

Getting on for half – 43% – of authorities now have a named officer or member charged with the responsibility of raising the profile of design within their authority. While this means the majority of local authorities continue to lack a design champion, it represents a more than doubling of the figure of 20% recorded two years ago.

Also significant is that the majority of champions are figures with clout, like directors or cabinet members. One of the findings of the previous survey was that the bulk of such positions were held by lower level officers without the kind of influence that a senior officer or member can exercise throughout the authority.

The survey also shows that nearly half of design champions (45%) are officers and 30% are members.

The vast majority of authorities (83%) think it is desirable to appoint a design champion, compared to 67% two years ago. And an overwhelming majority (80%) want more information on design champions.

GETTING MEMBERS UP TO SPEED

CABE's analysis of the reasons why authorities are reluctant to refuse poorly designed applications shows that lack of awareness on the part of committee members is a significant factor.

CABE has pushed for authorities to run courses for committee members on design. The survey shows that many authorities (42%) have never run a training course on design. This figure represents an improvement on the previous survey (52%), but is still high. More than a quarter – 26% – of authorities had run such courses in the past year slightly below the level of 27% previously recorded.

One authority that has not conducted training courses for members cited concerns over costs, but said it was considering clubbing together with neighbouring councils to run a course on design issues. But merely running a course cannot be an end in itself – one response complained that a course run by Planning Aid was not useful.

POLICY BACK UP

Another important reason why authorities are reluctant to take design issues to potential appeal is the absence of a supportive policy framework, both at a local and a national level.

Here the evidence is more heartening. Two thirds (61%) of authorities now have in place authority wide design guidance, as well as the policies contained in the local or unitary development plan. A further 12% are preparing such policies, according to the survey. Of those authorities that have produced such guidance, 81% have adopted it as supplementary planning guidance. This guidance is most likely to be produced by consultants or in house or via a mix of the two.

Some of those authorities that have not produced their own guidance benefit from county council design policies.

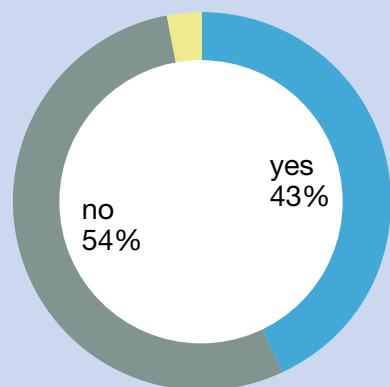
CLAMPING DOWN ON POOR DESIGN

But the acid test is whether authorities feel confident enough to turn down poor quality designs. Here the survey's evidence shows that the jury is still out.

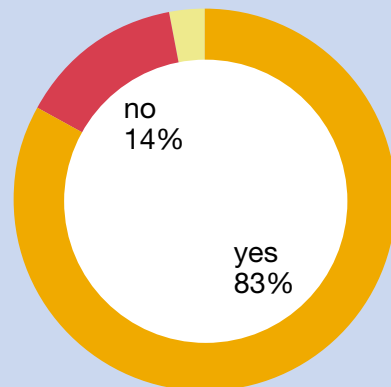
The survey shows that nearly a third of authorities (31%) say that they have refused planning permission principally on design grounds less than five times during the past year. The figure was also 31% in the 2001 survey.

The main shift is in those authorities that refuse permission on design grounds more than five times. The survey shows that the proportion of authorities turning down schemes on design grounds between five and 20 times in the past year has fallen from 47 to 42%. But it shows an increase in the proportion of authorities justifying refusal on design grounds. More than a quarter (26%) had turned down schemes on such grounds more than 20 times, compared to 22% two years ago. This could suggest that authorities well versed in design matters become more emboldened to refuse on design grounds.

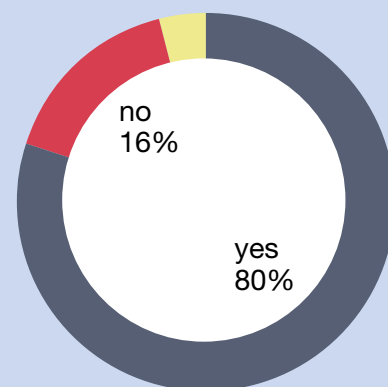
Does your authority have a design champion with a role to promote the cause of good design in all areas of the department's activities?



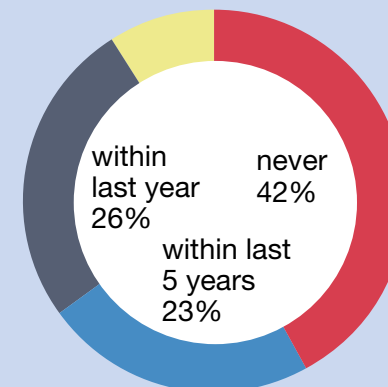
Would it be desirable for all local authorities to nominate somebody for this role?



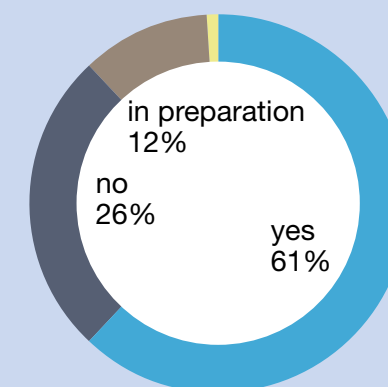
Would you like information about the role and responsibilities of local authority design champions?



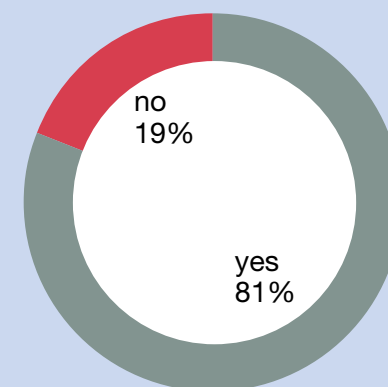
Has your authority run a training course for planning committee members on design issues within the last year?



Have you adopted authority-wide design guidance (other than policies in the local plan/UDP)?



Is it normal for this type of guidance to be adopted as Supplementary Planning guidance?



So, what are the key factors that encourage authorities to be bold in refusing permission for poor schemes? For the first time, CABE has compared the refusal rates for poor quality schemes with a range of other factors that are believed to foster good design.

The survey shows that those authorities that run design awards, are more likely than average to refuse permission on design grounds less than five times per year. But they are also more likely to refuse an average of 20 plus schemes in the course of a calendar year.

Interestingly, authorities that involve architects, urban designers and landscape architects in the assessment of planning applications are less likely (20%) than average to refuse permission on design grounds more than 20 times per annum. The use of urban designers appears to have the most marked impact on the frequency with which authorities challenge decisions on design grounds. Just under a third of authorities (31%) that employ urban designers said they had refused permission on design

grounds more than 20 times within the past year. This may reflect the fact that more skills mean that the local authority has more opportunity to negotiate with developers at pre-application stages, leading to an agreed solution.

REFUSING POOR DESIGN – THE SKILLS AND POLICY DEFICIT

Why do authorities remain reluctant to refuse permission on design grounds? CABE asked authorities to list the reasons they are wary about mounting challenges to poor quality schemes.

Lack of confidence is the key thread running through the responses. This is likely to originate partly from the lack of expertise and training, which was the factor cited most often by authorities. The second most common reason mentioned was authorities' fear that they will not be backed by Planning Inspectorate when it comes to appeal.

The next most frequently cited factor is the belief that design is a subjective matter and difficult to justify at a planning inquiry – a lack of confidence that is perhaps related

to the previously identified lack of expertise and training. It is also linked to a less frequently cited factor – officers' nervousness about challenging architects' designs.

Other significant factors included concerns that guidance both at local and national level is often not strong enough to support a robust stance on design and that there is insufficient precedent for refusing permission on such grounds. Some authorities defended themselves by complaining that applicants and their agents should submit higher quality designs – several authorities called on bodies like the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to make more of an effort on the issue.

Other councils pointed out that design is one of a number of issues that authorities are under pressure to respond to when considering applications, including in many parts of the country the need for economic regeneration. Turning down 'borderline' schemes, those where the design is uninspiring but adequate, is particularly difficult when set against the other benefits they are likely to generate. In such cases, authorities said they were

unlikely to refuse, preferring to negotiate. Less frequently cited factors included cost and heavy workload, but some authorities reported that finding the time for the pre-application discussions that are often needed to bring schemes up to scratch was difficult given the pressure that authorities are under to hit Government targets on which funding often depends.

CABE'S EFFECTIVENESS – THE LOCAL AUTHORITY VERDICT

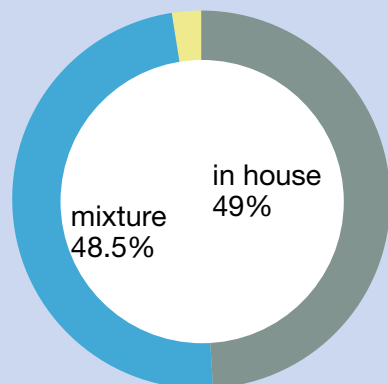
The vast majority of authorities (82%) said that CABE has been effective at raising the profile of good design.

Many authorities see CABE as simultaneously fulfilling a number of roles: as a Government Agency, independent watchdog, campaigners, and as a Thinktank. The results indicate that while CABE is seen to have the ear of Government, it is still able to retain its independence of thought and message. CABE also seems to be successfully communicating it's often innovative ideas throughout local government through its high profile campaigns

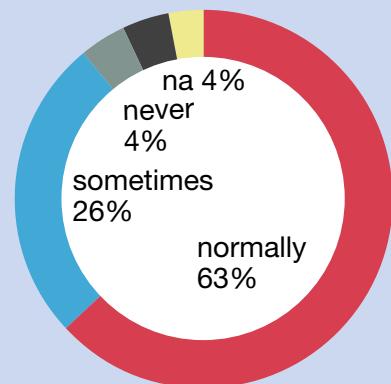
Given the shortfalls in expertise identified by the survey, it is unsurprising that what authorities want from CABE is more help with training both for officers and perhaps more importantly, members. There could be, as one authority suggested, a dedicated pot of funding to support design training.

But authorities also say that the organisation could pay more attention to the humdrum as well as the iconic schemes that the organisation concentrates on in their perception. One respondent said that CABE could publish best practice literature providing examples of smaller scale interventions. They also called on CABE to lobby the representatives of the house building industry more vigorously about the importance of good design, as well as the utilities – which according to one respondent have received very little pressure.

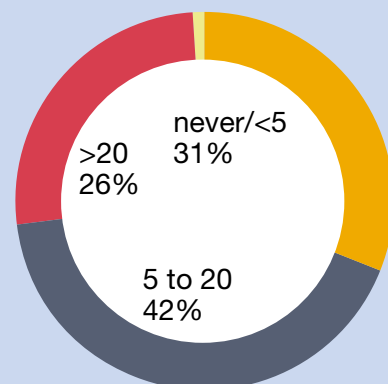
Is it normal practice for your authority to produce SPG in-house or to use outside consultants?



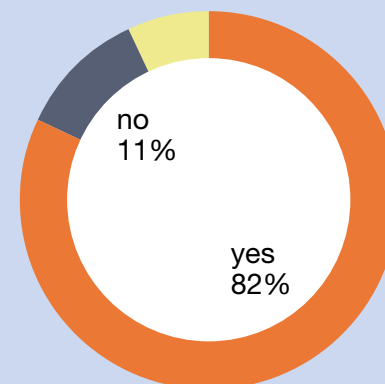
Is it normal for this type of guidance to be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance?



Approximately how often has your authority refused planning permission principally on design grounds during the past year?



Do you think CABE has successfully managed to raise the profile of good design?



cabe

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