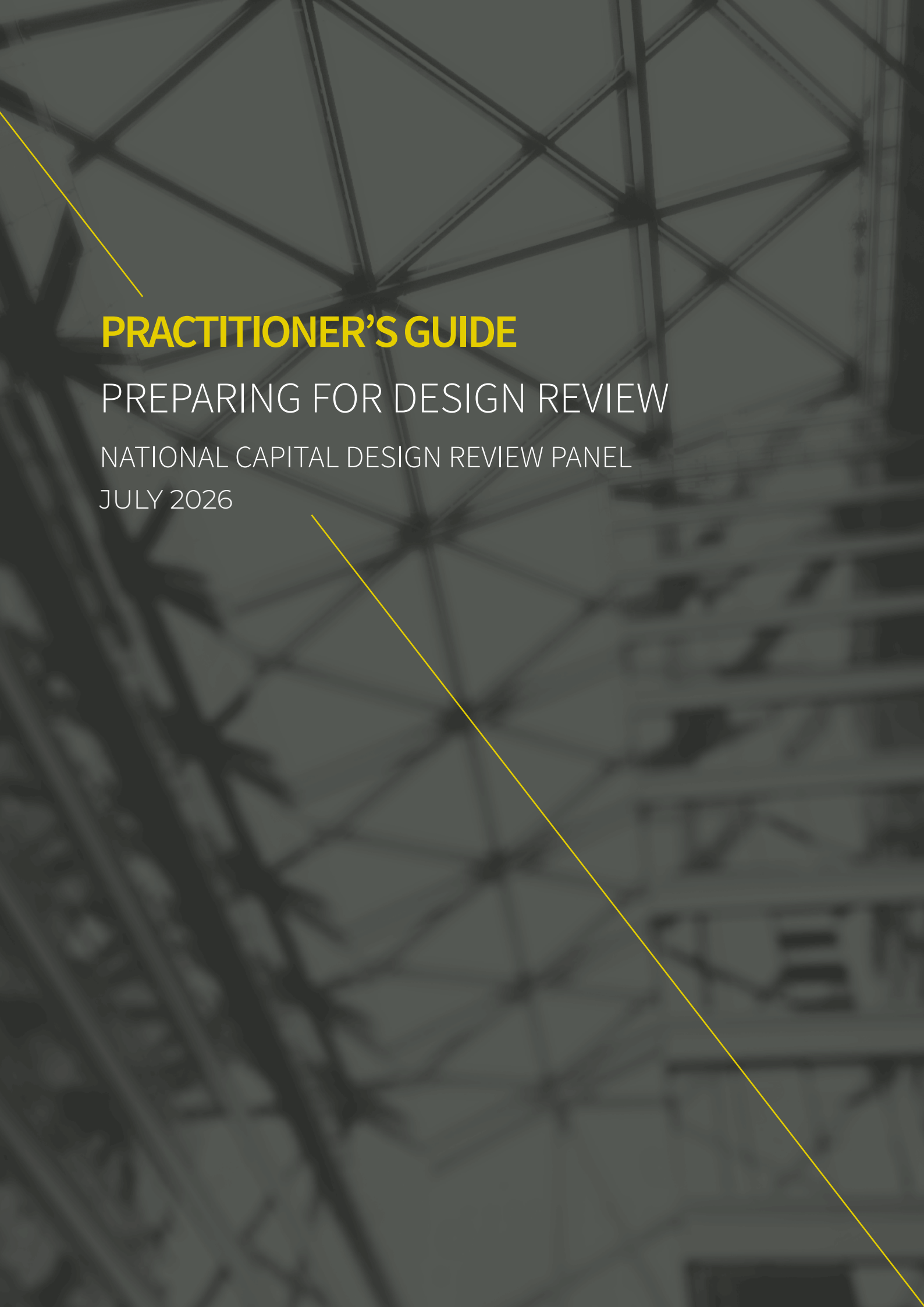




PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

PREPARING FOR DESIGN REVIEW

NATIONAL CAPITAL DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

JULY 2026

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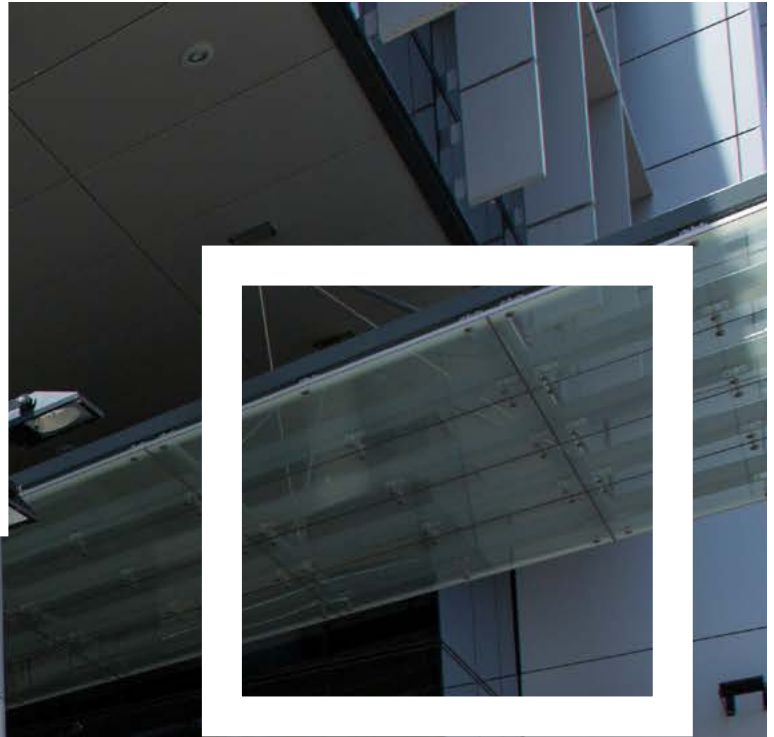
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NATIONAL CAPITAL DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

Design review is recognised across Australia and internationally as an effective way to raise the design quality of the built environment. It offers the opportunity for peer review of development proposals by independent design professionals with the aim of achieving the best possible outcome for significant development proposals and public spaces.

The National Capital Design Review Panel (NCDRP) is a joint initiative by the ACT Government and the National Capital Authority (NCA) to provide a single city-wide design review panel process. The NCDRP also offers an efficient and consistent approach to delivering independent design advice for development proposals across Canberra.

Under the supervision of the ACT Government Architect and the NCA's Chief Planner, the NCDRP provides design advice to decision makers, developers and their design teams.

Interim panel

The interim NCDRP commenced in September 2017 to provide independent, expert and impartial advice on priority and time critical proposals while the panel was being formally established.

The interim panel also allowed for the testing of the design review processes and provided the opportunity for those who went through the interim process to provide feedback to government. This feedback has been used to refine the NCDRP processes and procedures.

Panel refresh

In 2024-2025, the ACT Government undertook a formal procurement process to refresh the membership of the NCDRP. This process was to ensure the panel continues to reflect a diverse and contemporary range of expertise across architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, sustainability, and planning.

The refreshed panel includes newly appointed members selected through the competitive tender process and returning members whose contributions remain highly valued. This update supports the delivery of high-quality, independent design advice for significant development proposals across Canberra.

SNAPSHOT

The National Capital Design Review Panel (NCDRP) is a joint initiative between the ACT Government and the National Capital Authority to provide independent advice on the design quality matters for development proposals across Canberra.

Advisory role

The NCDRP provides independent, expert and impartial design advice on significant development proposals in key growth and renewal areas, reviewing projects such as residential, mixed-use and commercial developments, public infrastructure, parks and public spaces, and master plans.

Guiding principles

The *Design Principles for the ACT* supports the review of projects by the NCDRP and provides high level guidance for proponents when preparing for design review.

Independent and expert

The NCDRP reviews development proposals, under the supervision of the ACT Government Architect and, for proposals under the jurisdiction of the National Capital Authority (NCA), also by the NCA's Chief Planner.

The panel consists of a multidisciplinary and independent membership that is selected for their expertise, experience and communication skills.

Early engagement

Proponents should consult with the NCDRP as early as possible to gain the greatest benefit from the design review process. The Panel's Advice is provided within 10 working days after the design review session.

Confidential and free

Presenting to the NCDRP is a confidential and free service at the pre-development application stage.

Regular sessions

Design review sessions are typically held on three Wednesdays per month, with a morning and afternoon session. A list of the forward session dates can be found at www.planning.act.gov.au/professionals/our-planning-system/design-review.

Self-referral

Proponents are encouraged to present development proposals to the NCDRP that are outside of the development thresholds as identified. The benefits to design review are outlined on page 5.

Development thresholds

National Capital Plan

The following development thresholds apply to proposals that must be considered by the NCDRP:

- Instruments under the National Capital Plan:
 - Development Control Plan 17/01 Manuka Circle Precinct, Canberra Avenue
 - National Capital Plan - Amendment 91 - City and Gateway Urban Design Provisions.

The NCA may refer proposals determined to be of significance within Designated Areas that warrant design review.

ACT Government planning jurisdiction

Since 1 October 2019, proponents of prescribed development proposals have been required to undertake design review before lodging a development application. This requirement continues under the *Planning Act 2023* and the *Planning (General) Regulation 2023*.

A prescribed development proposal is:

- a building with 5 or more storeys
- a proposal to increase the floorspace of a shop by more than 2,000m², that is fully or partly located in a residential, commercial, community facility and/or a parks and recreation zone.

Transparent and accountable

The Panel's Advice and a proponent's response to the Panel's Advice is made publicly available when a development proposal is lodged and publically notified as a development application with the ACT Government.

The *NCDRP Terms of Reference*, panel membership and governance process can be found www.planning.act.gov.au/professionals/our-planning-system/design-review.

Contact

The City and Environment Directorate (CED) administers secretariat support for the NCDRP.

Email: designreview@act.gov.au

THE BENEFITS OF DESIGN REVIEW

The intent of the NCDRP is to ensure that each development proposal is realising its full potential through independent peer review for the benefit of the ACT community. The panel will look at each project in terms of surrounding context and character, built form and scale, density, sustainability, landscape, amenity, safety, housing diversity and social interaction, and aesthetics. The NCDRP will provide constructive and independent advice that gives full consideration to the project history, the site context, budgets and timelines.

The NCDRP process will provide key benefits to stakeholders that include:

- Community – enhanced design quality of development proposals that result in increased amenity for occupants, neighbours and the broader community and provide further confidence in the development assessment process.
- Developers – reduction in risk, time and potential costs by identifying issues early in the design process to gain a level of certainty with a proposal before investing in detail design and development application.
- Design professionals – receiving early recommendations for change when it is most useful and more easily implemented. Design review is also an opportunity to gain support for innovative design intentions.
- Government – ensuring that design quality is important by promoting independent expert advice for development proposals. Ultimately, design review panels help to enrich the design industry with fresh perspectives and advice arising from the professional examination of projects through peer review.



THE CHAIR AND THE PANEL

The Chair

The NCDRP review of development proposals will be under the supervision of the ACT Government Architect (GA) and, for proposals under the jurisdiction of the NCA, the NCA's Chief Planner.

Where conflicts arise or the Chair is unavailable, a suitably qualified panel member will be identified through the expression of interest process to chair design review meetings.

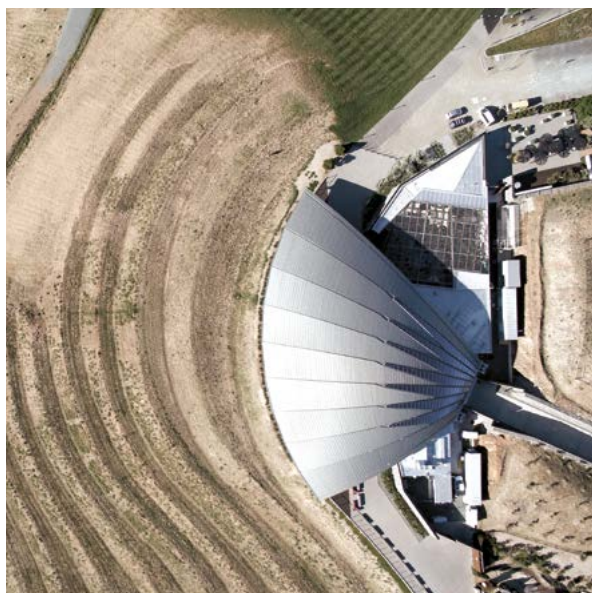
The Panel

Design review panel members are selected from a pool of experts identified for their skills, expertise and record of achievement in one or more professional fields relevant to planning, design and development.

The panel is composed to achieve a balanced representation of skills and experience in professions including Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Planning, Urban Design and Civil Engineering. A minimum of three and a maximum of five panel members will attend each NCDRP session, with additional panel membership sought by the Chair, based on the scope of a project.

Where a specific skill set is required, additional panel members will be called in on an as-needs basis. These may include advice from fields such as heritage, education, sustainability and environmental services, universal design, structural engineering and transport.

The panel also draws on First Nations design professionals and cultural advisors, whose perspectives are essential to achieving respectful and inclusive design outcomes that reflect Country, culture, and community.





How does the NCDRP assess proposals?

A set of design quality principles (*Design Principles for the ACT*) have been developed to support assessment of projects by the NCDRP and to provide guidance for proponents when preparing for review. The *Design Principles for the ACT* have been benchmarked against best practice from design review panel documentation across Australia and New Zealand, including the principles outlined in the NSW Government's State Environment Planning Policy (SEPP 65) and WA's Design Review Manual.

The design principles are provided in the booklet titled, *Design Principles for the ACT*, which is available at www.planning.act.gov.au/professionals/our-planning-system/design-review.

Interagency Collaboration

The City and Environment Directorate (CED) is responsible for the secretariat support for the NCDRP. The NCDRP Secretariat will provide the first point of contact for the proponent, and will act as an intermediary between the development assessment areas within Government, the ACT Government Architect, the NCA and the proponent.

ACT Government directorates and the NCA will have the opportunity to provide technical and contextual guidance into the design review process upon request by the NCDRP Secretariat. There will also be an opportunity for Government stakeholders to provide a pre-briefing to the NCDRP in a meeting on the day of the review.

Incorporating key stakeholders into each stage of the NCDRP process will ensure that an integrated and consistent approach to design advice is delivered across the ACT.

LEADING UP TO DESIGN REVIEW

Pre-design review panel meetings

The City and Environment Directorate (CED) offers information meetings ahead of presenting to the design review panel and before submitting a development application. These meetings are provided to help guide a proponent through the NCDRP process.

A pre-design review panel meeting is not mandatory and is a free service. Proponents are encouraged to attend these meetings as early as possible in the design development stages and well in advance of presenting to the NCDRP.

If you wish to attend a pre-design review panel meeting, please email the design review secretariat team at designreview@act.gov.au

Pre-application meetings

Pre-development application meetings is an existing service provided by the CED. Pre-application information may take the form of a meeting or formal advice from CED to a proponent.

Pre-application meetings are held to discuss a development proposal prior to lodgement of a development application and is a free service. Hand written notes are recorded at these meetings.

Proponents may be advised to present their development proposals to the NCDRP at a pre-application meeting prior to lodgement of the development application.

More information about pre application meetings can be found online at www.planning.act.gov.au/applications-and-assessments/development-applications/before-you-apply

Form of Design Review

Design Review can be held as a full Design Review, a Desktop Review or as an Internal Document Review. The NCDRP Secretariat will determine the best method of Design Review in consultation with the Chair/s, to ensure that Design Review is delivered efficiently and effectively for individual proposals. Consideration of the best format of design review will include individual project details, quality of the submission and key priorities of the NCDRP.

Project detail considerations include:

Location: the proposal is located in an area that has particular significance for the city, such as historic, economic or environmental use. Potential impact on the community is also considered.

Prominence: the proposal is located on a prominent site, with a high level of visibility.

Complexity: there are complex challenges to overcome that require a sophisticated design response.

Precedence: the proposal establishes a precedent for a type of development within an area.

Steps towards your first Design Review session

1. Verify and confirm the future dates for design review as part of your project planning.

The forward schedule of dates for Design Review and an application form can be found online at www.planning.act.gov.au/professionals/our-planning-system/design-review.

2. Complete the online Application Form.

The *Application Form* is available on the CED Design Review website. This information informs initial discussions with the NCDRP Secretariat for scheduling arrangements. The application form must be submitted at least four weeks ahead of a Design Review session.

3. The design review management team will contact you regarding timing and schedule availability.

After completing the application form, you will be contacted by a member of the NCDRP Secretariat to discuss project timelines and dates for future Design Review sessions. If required, you can request a pre-design review panel meeting.

4. Complete the online Project Information Form and submit the required documentation outlining the proposal via email to designreview@act.gov.au two weeks prior to the design review session.

The *Project Information Form* is available on the CED Design Review website. This information informs briefing materials issued to the panel prior to the design review session.

Documents are to be emailed or provided to the NCDRP secretariat with the *Project Information Form* at least 10 working days prior to the design review session. See *Presentation Package (Documentation requirements for design review)* for detailed information on the CED Design Review website.

PRESENTATION MATERIAL

Essential Material

The material required for design review should sufficiently illustrate the site context and site analysis, site design response and the intended design proposal. For early design reviews, drawings may be conceptual and diagrammatic.

All images and text should be clearly legible within a digital presentation in PDF format (compressed and optimised for online viewing). Where the presentation materials do not meet this requirement, the NCDRP secretariat will request that the proponent modifies the package prior to the Design Review session.

Context and site analysis

It is particularly important to provide contextual information on drawings and information submitted for review, to assist the panel in assessing how a proposal responds to its surrounding context and site. Context considers the broader area, including the key natural, historic and built features. Context also includes social, economic and environmental factors.

The key elements of a site and context analysis include:

- site location / wider context plan
- aerial photograph
- local context plan
- site context and survey plan
- streetscape elevations and sections
-

Site design response

Site design response information should be provided including, 3D studies and diagrams that identify the site and context opportunities and challenges. These drawings should clearly articulate the considerations that have informed the broader site planning, massing and design approach. This is also an opportunity to illustrate design options that may have been explored and outline why the proposal is the best outcome for the site.

The key elements of a site design response include:

- assessment of site opportunities
- building massing studies
- shadow diagrams, including winter sun paths and overshadowing of site and adjoining properties
- access to/from and surrounding the site
- car parking strategy
- sustainability strategy
- prevailing wind and ventilation strategies
- relationship to public domain and surrounding properties
- investigation of amenity provided for occupants and neighbouring developments
- retention of existing trees and vegetation
- landscape plans and design approach
- communal open spaces
- consideration of culturally relevant or heritage elements
- any relevant specialist advice



3D Canberra

It is recommended that the proponent supplies a suitable 3D model of the proposal to the NCDRP Secretariat, which can be imported into the ACT Government's 3D Canberra platform. 3D Canberra provides a 3D contextual model of key areas in Canberra and may be used by the proponent and the panel on the day to provide a greater understanding of massing and scale, particularly in relation to the local and wider context.

Documentation requirements

Drawing material should be presented to sufficiently outline the intended design proposal for design review. The emphasis should be however on having enough information rather than having fully resolved drawings of every aspect of the proposal.

For more information and guidance on the drawing requirements when preparing for design review refer to the *Presentation Package (Documentation requirements for design review)* at www.planning.act.gov.au/professionals/our-planning-system/design-review

Design proposal

Sufficient drawing material should be presented to outline the intended design proposal, however the emphasis should be on having enough information rather than having a fully resolved design of every aspect of the proposal.

The key elements of a design proposal include:

- development details
- precedents that have informed the design proposal
- site plan
- floor plans
- elevations of the proposal in context
- sections of the proposal in context
- shadow analysis
- materiality
- 3D images or visualisations if available



ON THE DAY

Date and Location

Design review sessions are typically scheduled on Wednesdays. A schedule of future design review sessions can be found on the CED NCDRP website. Design review sessions are generally held virtually via Microsoft Teams or may be hosted in person at 480 Northbourne Avenue, Dickson unless otherwise advised. The NCDRP Secretariat in consultation with the Chair/s will advise you of the nominated format of your design review session.

Design Review Session Structure

A typical design review session is structured as follows:

1. Site Visit

Site visits are organised for the ACT Government Architect and local panel members for new projects entering the design review process.

2. Closed briefing for panel members (60 minutes)

The panel will meet for a closed briefing before the design review session begins. In this session, the Chair/s a Development Assessment Officer from CED and members from any relevant referral agencies will brief the panel on any significant considerations relating to the site, its planning history, and any ongoing issues.

3. Welcome (5 Minutes)

The Chair welcomes the proponent and project team, Government representatives and observers into the room.

If observers are present, the Chair will reiterate that they are not to contribute to the session, unless invited to do so. If Government representatives are present, they may be invited to provide brief comments on the policy context.

4. Proposal presentation (20 Minutes)

The proponent and project team will be invited to present their proposal, including the project brief, aims and objectives, and the main design elements. It is important to note that the panel have already reviewed the documentation ahead of the session and received a briefing of the issues. The presentation should focus on why the proposal is to be considered the best outcome for the site and not give a detailed history of the site.

5. Questions and answers, discussion and review (40 minutes)

The Chair will ask for the panel's initial observations and if required, ask for clarification or further information from the proponent and design team. The design team may be invited to respond. The panel will then resume discussion.

In general, the panel discussion is structured around the *Design Quality Principles for the ACT*.

During the first review, the panel will seek to identify the major issues, to ensure progressive certainty for the proponent and project team is achieved. Subsequent design changes may be reviewed with reference to the comments made at the previous design review session and associated 'Panel's Advice'.



The Chair will ensure that any fundamental opinions or reservations raised in relation to the proposal are made clear before the proponent and design team leave the room. It is important that the panel's views are expressed openly. If there are any major differences in opinions of panel members, these will be discussed and resolved by the Chair. The Chair will ensure that the presenting team leaves with an accurate understanding of the issues discussed.

6. Summary of key issues (5 minutes)

The Chair will summarise the panel's discussion and views. This will inform the NCDRP's written advice.

7. Close session (5 minutes)

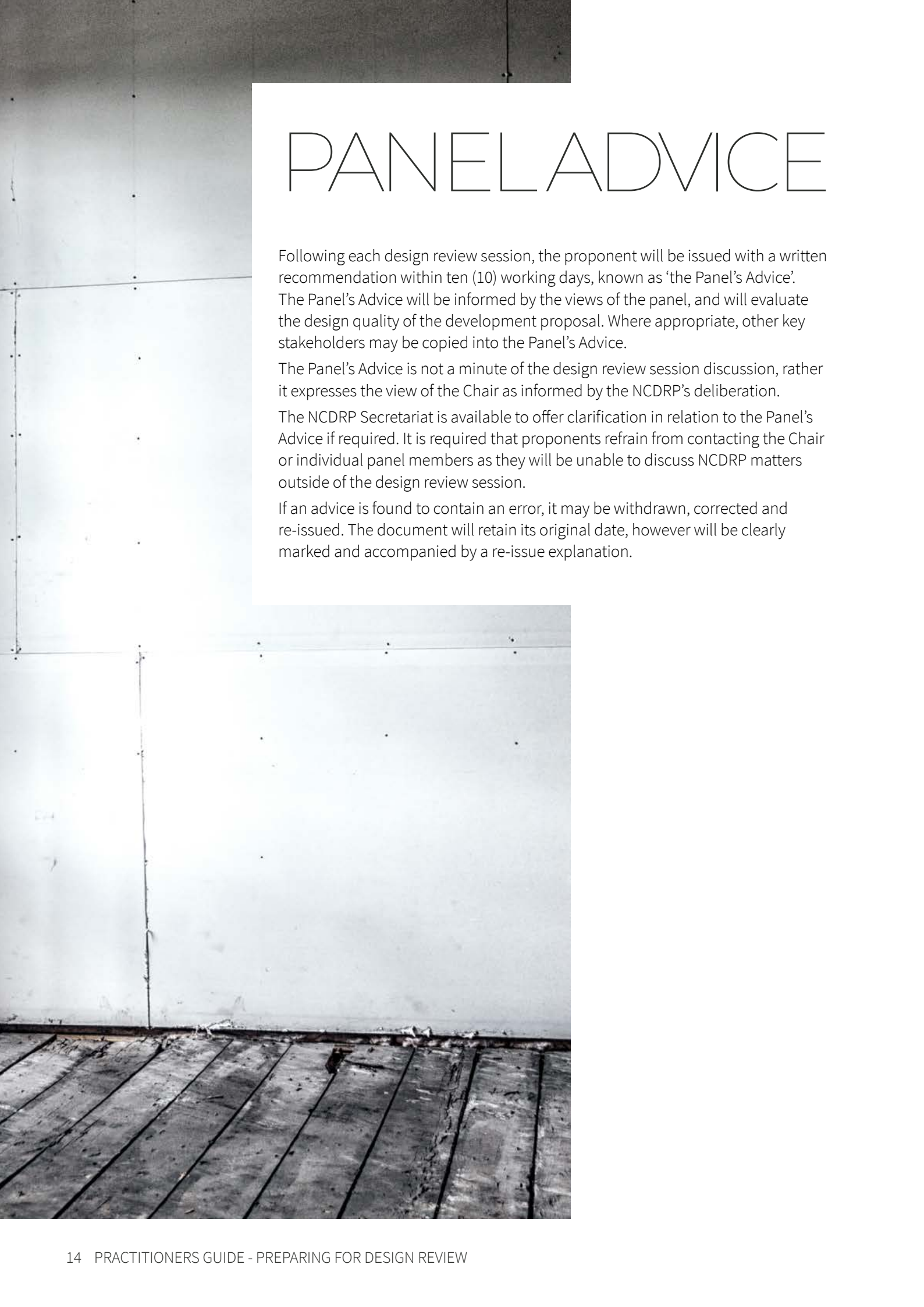
The Chair finalises the design review session with the proponent and project team and invites them to leave the meeting.

8. Closed panel debrief (15 minutes)

The panel will privately summarise and consolidate their comments, which the NCDRP Secretariat will record, confirming and clarifying points if needed, for inclusion in the 'Panel's Advice'. New observations are not introduced during this closed discussion, unless a significant issue emerges.

Figure 1: Example design review session agenda

TIME	ITEM	WHO
9:30am	Briefing to panel (60 minutes)	Panel members and Government representatives
10:30am	Tea Break (10 minutes)	Panel members and Government representatives
10:40am	Welcome project design team (5 minutes)	Chair
10:45am	Proposal presentation (20 minutes)	Design team
11:05am	Questions and Answers, Discussion and review (40 minutes)	Panel members and design team
11:45am	Summary of key issues (5 minutes)	Chair
11:50am	Close session (5 minutes)	All
11:55am	Panel debrief (15 minutes)	Panel members and Government representatives
12:10pm	End of session	



PANEL ADVICE

Following each design review session, the proponent will be issued with a written recommendation within ten (10) working days, known as 'the Panel's Advice'.

The Panel's Advice will be informed by the views of the panel, and will evaluate the design quality of the development proposal. Where appropriate, other key stakeholders may be copied into the Panel's Advice.

The Panel's Advice is not a minute of the design review session discussion, rather it expresses the view of the Chair as informed by the NCDRP's deliberation.

The NCDRP Secretariat is available to offer clarification in relation to the Panel's Advice if required. It is required that proponents refrain from contacting the Chair or individual panel members as they will be unable to discuss NCDRP matters outside of the design review session.

If an advice is found to contain an error, it may be withdrawn, corrected and re-issued. The document will retain its original date, however will be clearly marked and accompanied by a re-issue explanation.

AFTER DESIGN REVIEW

Opportunities for further feedback or additional design review sessions are important, particularly if the initial Panel's Advice raised significant issues. The NCDRP Secretariat can offer clarification in relation to the Panel's Advice, if required.

Additional design review sessions are advised in cases where significant changes have been recommended by the NCDRP or where proposals have been presented at the conceptual stage. For project familiarity and the delivery of consistent advice, a minimum of two (2) original panel members will be present at subsequent reviews. The NCDRP Secretariat will brief the panel to ensure previous recommendations are not contradicted.

Desktop Review

Desktop Reviews or Internal Document Reviews can be held for some proposals when a full Design Review session is not warranted. This style of design review may also be held to deal with additional project details following the resolution of major design issues through full Design Review sessions.

Desktop Reviews and Internal Document Reviews, typically with two panel members and the Chair, are conducted around a table and may run for the same length of time as a Design Review session or shorter. The proponent and design team are not required to attend Desktop Reviews or Internal Document Reviews unless invited to do so.

The presentation material should thoroughly describe the proposal, as per Design Review, however should be reduced to A3 size. A digital copy of A3 drawings should be submitted to designreview@act.gov.au one week prior to the Desktop Review session. The Panel's Advice will be issued within ten (10) working days of the session.

In some instances the proponent may be invited to present. The proponent will have 15 minutes to present the proposal, after which the panel will discuss issues. During discussion the panel may seek clarification from the proponent and design team.



