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A Housing Design Audit for England

East Midlands

There has been resurgence of interest in the design quality of new housing in recent years. Revised in 2019, guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) now states that, “permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions.” However, over the past decade, there has been no systematic evaluation of design quality of new developments within England. The last was conducted by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in 2004-2007. CABE found ‘an uncompromising and unflattering picture of new housing design quality.’ In light of the recent emphasis, CPRE and Place Alliance recognized it was high time for another review. Our report, ‘A Housing Design Audit for England’ evaluates over 140 residential development schemes built during 2014-2019 and compares results to those of the previous CABE audits. Overall, we found that two of every ten housing developments scrutinised should have been refused planning permission outright based on poor design principles. A further 50% should not have been granted permission without significant improvements to the proposals being made first.

This factsheet provides a regional breakdown of report findings for the East Midlands.

Methodology

Following broadly the same methodology as audits conducted by CABE, the housing design audit evaluated developments against seventeen criteria in four categories – Environment & Community; Place character; Streets, parking and pedestrian experience; and Detailed Design and Management. It also considered Environmental Impact. Each criterion was scored on a five-point scale with five categories from ‘5 - very good’ to ‘1 - very poor’. Aggregated scores were then assessed against the total available score to give an overall standard for the development – with a score of more than 80% of the total possible score being classed as ‘very good’, and less than 40% being classed as ‘very poor’.

Nineteen schemes were assessed in the East Midlands, reflecting the ‘typical’ volume housebuilder product and encompassing a range of projects including brownfield and greenfield; different socio-economic contexts; and inner-urban, suburban and more rural settings.



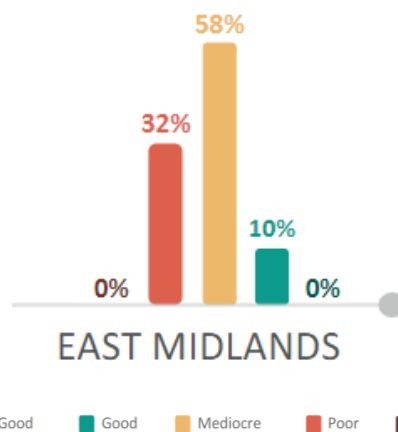
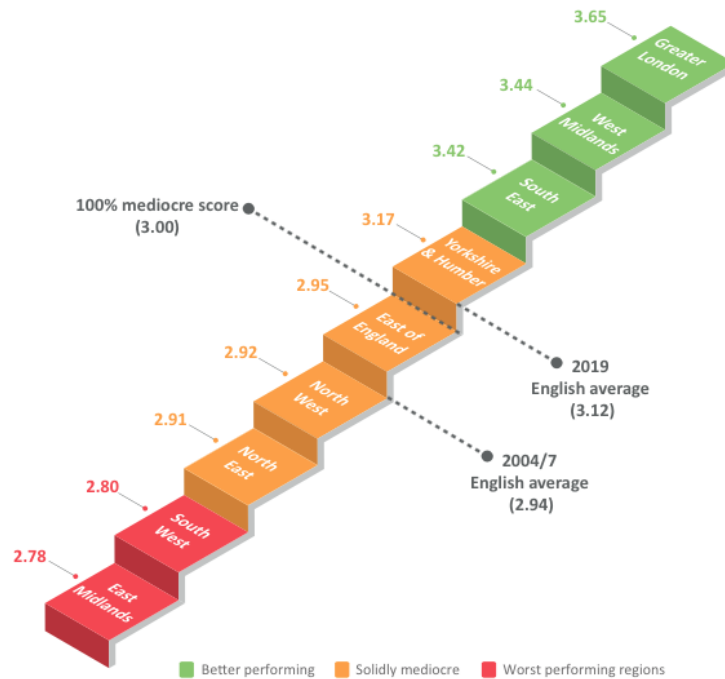
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Results

The East Midlands exhibited results significantly skewed towards lower scoring categories. The region has the lowest average design score of any in England, with its bottom ranking in regional comparison unchanged since the CABA audits in 2006. At just 2.78 ('poor'), the region's average design quality is below the national average of 3.12 ('mediocre').

However, the East Midlands has seen an improvement in design quality since 2007. Comparing the results of this study to CABA audits in 2004-2006, the proportion of lower scoring developments (poor and very poor) is down 23% and the proportion of higher scoring developments (good and very good) is up 7%. The reduction in lower scoring developments is the second highest of all the regions, although clearly many have improved only to 'mediocre'.



Top: Regional ranking by average design audit score. Above: Proportion of schemes in the five categories.



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Why is design quality so poor?

The main reason for poor design quality in the East Midlands is over-dependence on, and provision for, private transport. Developments in the region were rated the worst in terms of being cycle and pedestrian friendly, and scored significantly lower than all others for highways design and parking, where road and parking infrastructure dominated developments at the expense of other qualities. They also had the poorest access to public transport. Developments in the East Midlands were also joint-worst for architectural response, with very few place-specific schemes. More positively, they had some of the lowest Environmental Impacts.

Case Study

Homes: 104 (18 affordable)

Setting: Rural

Site History: Greenfield

Audit Score: 35, Mediocre



This development forms part of a larger new free-standing settlement comprising housing, a primary school, community buildings, shops, and public open space.

Selected audit observations:

- The development provides a reasonable mix of housing types - including semi-detached, detached and terraced houses - and sizes, ranging from 2- to 5- bedroom dwellings.
- It is possible to identify tenure from dwelling appearance, with the affordable units distributed within three main clusters.
- Good access to community facilities at a neighbouring local centre within a 10-minute walk.
- The two main access points feed into a number of cul-de-sacs that serve shared private drives, meaning parking and access arrangements are problematic in places.
- An area of public open space with a local play area is situated in the North West corner of the scheme; however this is adjacent to a main road junction and poorly overlooked.
- The townscape and landscape qualities of the scheme are poor.

Planning Process

Development within the wider settlement is shaped by several policies, including an approved design guidance document that covers building typologies, structure and density, with an emphasis on soft



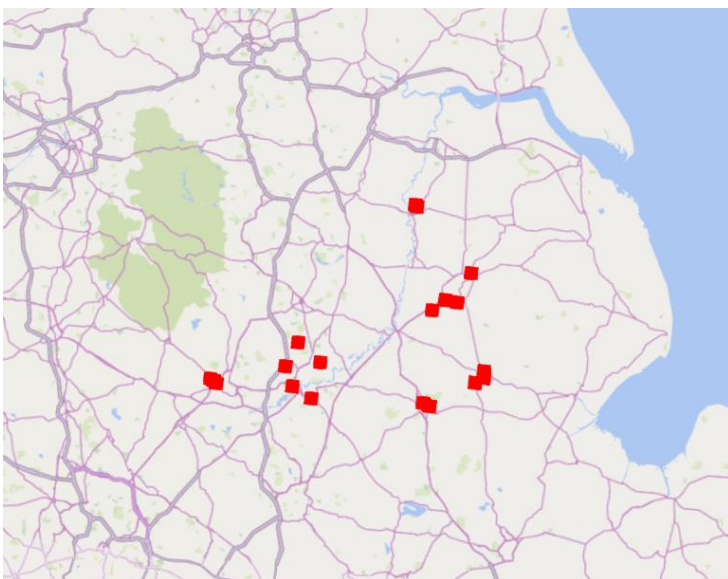
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landscape and visually screening off-street parking. Whilst proposals for this scheme underwent a number of changes in response to engagement with local Council, Parish Council and other stakeholder groups, the scheme has not been successful at reflecting these overarching policy aspirations. The audit found that good quality design is generally supported by proactive, site-specific, and independent design tools, such as design codes and reviews. The East Midlands was a very low user of either of these but was the highest user of Building for Life 12 – a more generic, passive design checklist.

Schemes Assessed

The Case	Location
Kingsway Hospital Site	Derby
Prince Charles Avenue	Derby
Radbourne Lane	Derby
Castle Park	Sleaford
Holdingham Grange	Sleaford
Racuceby Hospital	Sleaford
Lake Side	Lincoln
Witham St Hughes	Lincoln
Manor Farm Phase 3	Lincoln
Nettleham Fields	Lincoln
Poplar Farm	Grantham
Beacon Gardens	Grantham
Allotments Hassocks	Nottingham
Lime Tree Gardens	Nottingham
Papplewick Lane	Nottingham
The Avenue	Gainsborough
The Swale	Gainsborough
Princess Boulevard	Nottingham
Gamston Lings Bar	Nottingham



Above: Map showing schemes assessed in the East Midlands.