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A Housing Design Audit for England

East of England

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 of England.

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 of England, 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.



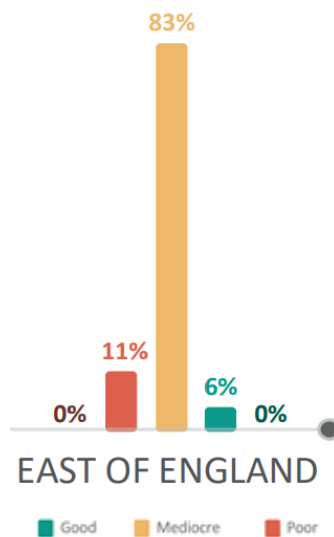
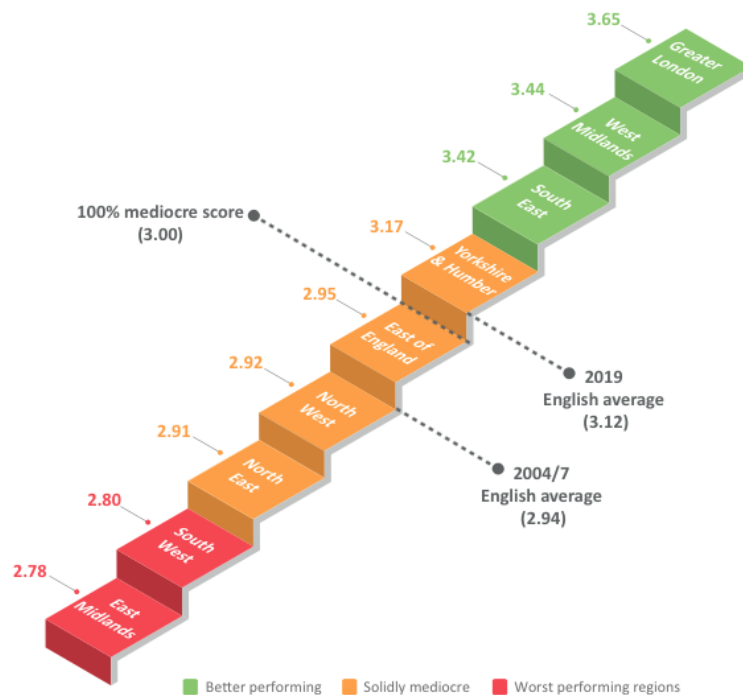
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Results

Developments in the East of England are dominated by mediocre scores. At 2.95, overall design quality for the region is solidly mediocre and is just below the national average of 3.12 ('mediocre').

The East of England is the only region where the percentage of good and very good schemes has not improved since the CABE audits – in fact, developments of this quality have declined by 6%. However, the proportion of poor and very poor developments have also declined by 16% in comparison with 2004-2006, which shows schemes have largely improved, but only to mediocre quality.



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



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Why is design quality mediocre?

Schemes in the East of England were particularly let down by poor street legibility and street definition, which refer to how easy it is to navigate through the development and how safe, walkable and social streets feel. Developments in the region often had more car-based, convoluted suburban patterns that failed to create well-defined and walkable areas. More positively, the region came third for provision and maintenance of public, open and play spaces. For many other criteria, schemes were, on average, somewhere in the middle – not good examples, but not the worst.

Case Study

Homes: 276

Setting: Rural

Site History: Brownfield

Audit Score: 39, Poor



The case study site is located towards the southern edge of an existing small village and comprises 276 dwellings and a new village centre.

Selected audit observations:

- The development comprises a mix of 2- and 3-storey dwellings as well as 2-storey flats over garages, and 4- and 5-storey blocks of flats.
- The development is a 10-minute walk from public transport and there are two bus routes serving the local town centre, which run until 7pm in the evening.
- The architectural design of the housing lacks creativity, visual interest or distinctiveness and is not site-specific.
- Poor pedestrian environment is a feature; vehicular traffic is typically prioritised, and the approach to traffic calming is extremely minimal.
- The provision of car parking is poor.
- Poor provision of landscaping across the scheme with minimal provision of street trees.

Planning process

The original outline application for 276 dwellings and a new village centre was approved in 2008 with a series of reserved matters approved later. An application to re-plan a section of the site to reduce the density and make it more attractive and commercially viable was approved in 2015. This reduced the



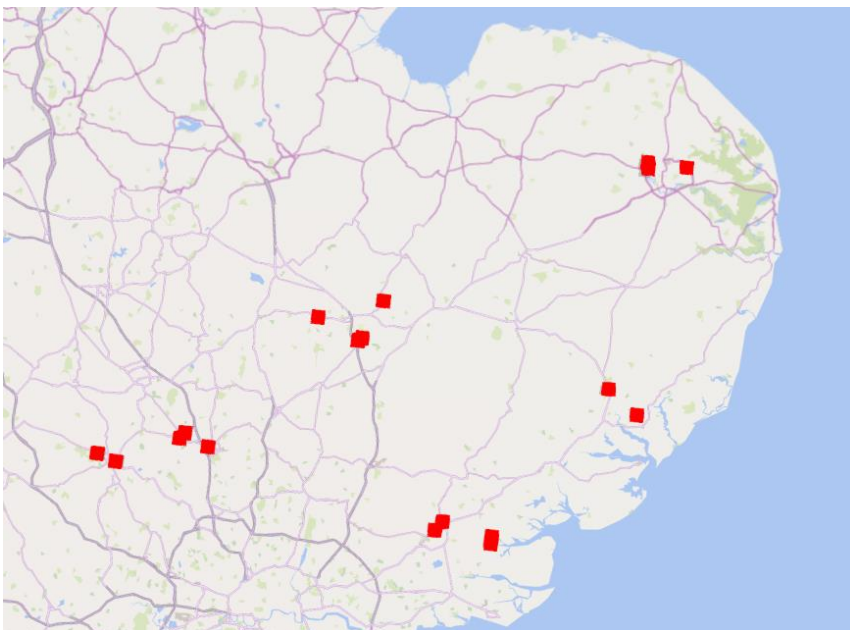
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number of flats and 3-storey houses, thereby reducing the range of property types provided. The development was generally compliant with national and local planning policy and guidance, relating to the design and layout, the provision of a range of housing types, and the requirement for developments to reflect the local characteristics of the surrounding area. Additional guidance used included Safer Places – The Planning System and Crime Prevention and Secured by Design principles to ensure community safety. Feedback from a series of community and stakeholder consultations was also incorporated into the final proposal. Despite this, the lack of distinctiveness, character, townscape quality and a poor pedestrian environment within the streets and spaces of the area have resulted in a poor outcome for the scheme.

Schemes Assessed

Scheme	Location	Scheme	Location
Berryfields Major Development Area	Aylesbury	Windsor Park Gardens	Norwich
Kingsbrook Village	Aylesbury	Costessey	Norwich
Former Four-o-Five Sports and Social Club	Ipswich	Lodge Farm	Norwich
Ditchingham Grove	Ipswich	Regent's Place	Leighton Buzzard
Bannold Road	Cambridge	Frenchs Avenue	Dunstable
Long Road Cambridge	Cambridge	Guardian Industrial Estate	Luton
Trumpington Meadows	Cambridge	Zone A Beaulieu Park	Chelmsford
Upper Cambourne	Cambridge	Marconi Works	Chelmsford
Blakenham Fields	Ipswich	Lightermans Place	Maldon
Windsor Park Gardens	Norwich	Heybridge Hall	Maldon



Above: Map of schemes assessed in the East of England.