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A Housing Design Audit for England

South East

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 South East.

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’.

Twenty-one schemes were assessed in the South East, 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.



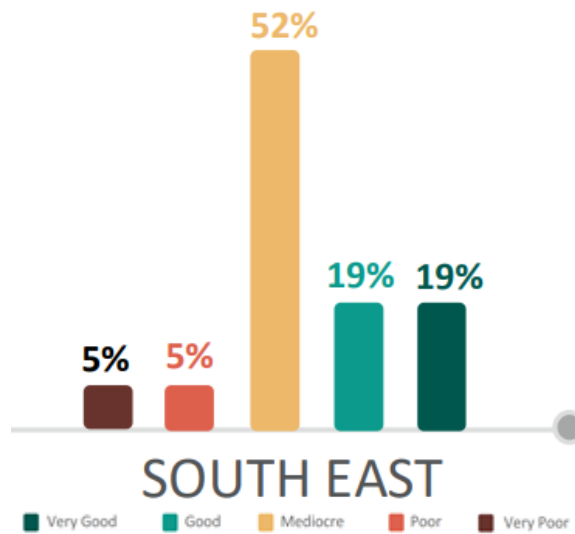
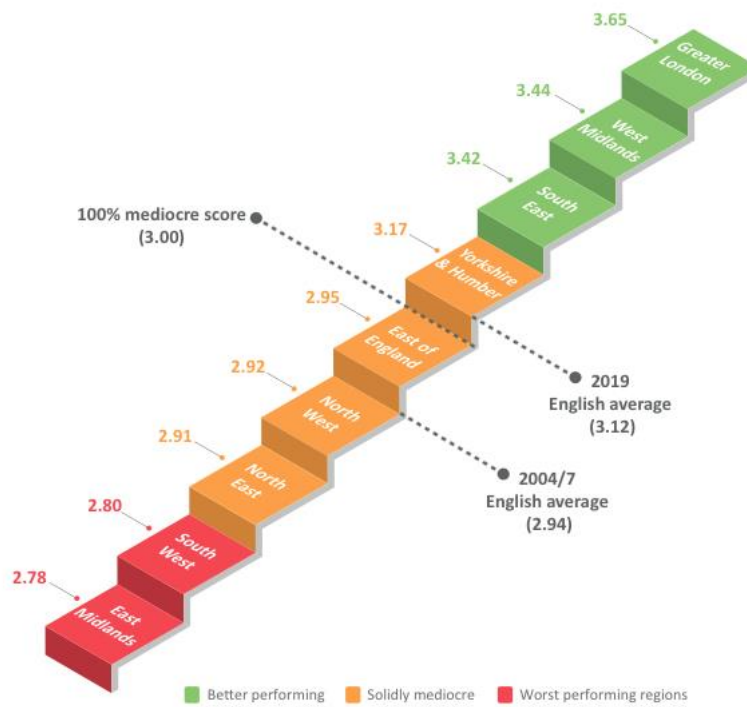
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Results

Developments in the South East are skewed significantly towards the higher scoring categories, with 38% of all schemes assessed featuring across the two highest categories ('good' and 'very good'). The region's average design quality score, at 3.42, is better than the English average of 3.12 ('mediocre').

There has been a 13% increase in the portion of good and very good schemes in the South East since the 2004-2006 CABE design audits, and a 12% decline in the numbers of schemes falling into poor and very poor categories. Overall, while the region has retained its third-place ranking (out of nine regions) between the two studies, it's average design quality score has significantly improved from 2.97 in 2007.



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



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Why is design quality better?

The South East performs well in many of the criteria. The region performs best in terms of maintaining and integrating green landscape and biodiversity into developments; connecting to existing urban areas and services, and for being pedestrian and cycle friendly. It is also one of only two regions in which schemes scored in the higher categories for architectural response, character, integration and location of car parking, and highways design. Better scores were also supported by good provision of community facilities, which was above the national average.

However, it is important to note that the region performs well only against a very mediocre standard of competition from the other English regions. Lower-rated schemes did occur in the South East, and overall the region had particularly poor access to public transport with mediocre scores for more detailed design considerations, such as integration of storage facilities and maintenance of public, open and play spaces.

Case Study

Homes: 373 (66 affordable units)

Setting: Suburban

Site History: Brownfield

Audit Score: 78, Very Good



Located on the outskirts of an existing housing area, this residential expansion project consists mainly of 2 and 2.5 storey housing.

Selected audit observations:

- The scheme successfully provides a good mix of housing types.
- Units of different tenures are integrated in a manner that obscures their tenure identity.
- Good provision and access to community facilities such as an integrated community centre, a school and pub.
- Open spaces within the development are well designed and maintained, achieving maximum recreational and social value.
- Very good street legibility and definition, creating a coherent sense of place.
- Pedestrian friendly streets enable use for socialising and children's play.
- Well-designed housing with high architectural quality, interesting facades and use of creative building materials that reflect the local vernacular, creating a sense of local distinctiveness.

Planning process



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A key objective for the site was the delivery of a residential expansion scheme of high-quality design and layout. The proposals were informed by a public exhibition, and pre-application discussions with council officers representing a range of disciplines (planning, urban regeneration and housing). The site was divided into character areas including ones focussed on the village green, boulevard and squares, and the community centre. The design approach has successfully created a well-overlooked and safe residential environment, whilst also reducing dependency upon car travel through inclusion of bus and cycle routes. Affordable housing units have been designed to Sustainable Homes Code Level 3. Strategic landscape proposals have ensured that open spaces and play areas have been well designed and carefully integrated.

Schemes Assessed

| Scheme | Location | Scheme | Location |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Aylesham Village | Aylesham | Jennett's Park | Bracknell |
| Timperley Place | Sholden | Woodhurst Park | Bracknell |
| Former Rowcroft And Templar Barracks | Ashford | Bersted Park | Bognor Regis |
| Chantry Green | Maidstone | Kingley Gate Development | Littlehampton |
| Cheesemans Green | Ashford | Toddington Lane Phase 2 | Littlehampton |
| Oakgrove Millennium Community | Milton Keynes | Toddington Lane Phase 1 | Littlehampton |
| Brooklands | Milton Keynes | West Durrington Development | Worthing |
| Aldershot Urban Extension | Aldershot | Highwood Village | Horsham |
| Queen Elizabeth II Barracks | Fleet | Jamine Square | Reading |
| Vespasian | Milton Keynes | Dee Park Estate | Reading |
| Newton Leys | Milton Keynes | | |



Above: Map showing schemes assessed in the South East.