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A Housing Design Audit for England

West 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 West 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’.

Ten schemes were assessed in the West 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. This is a slightly lower total than ideal given level of output in the region.



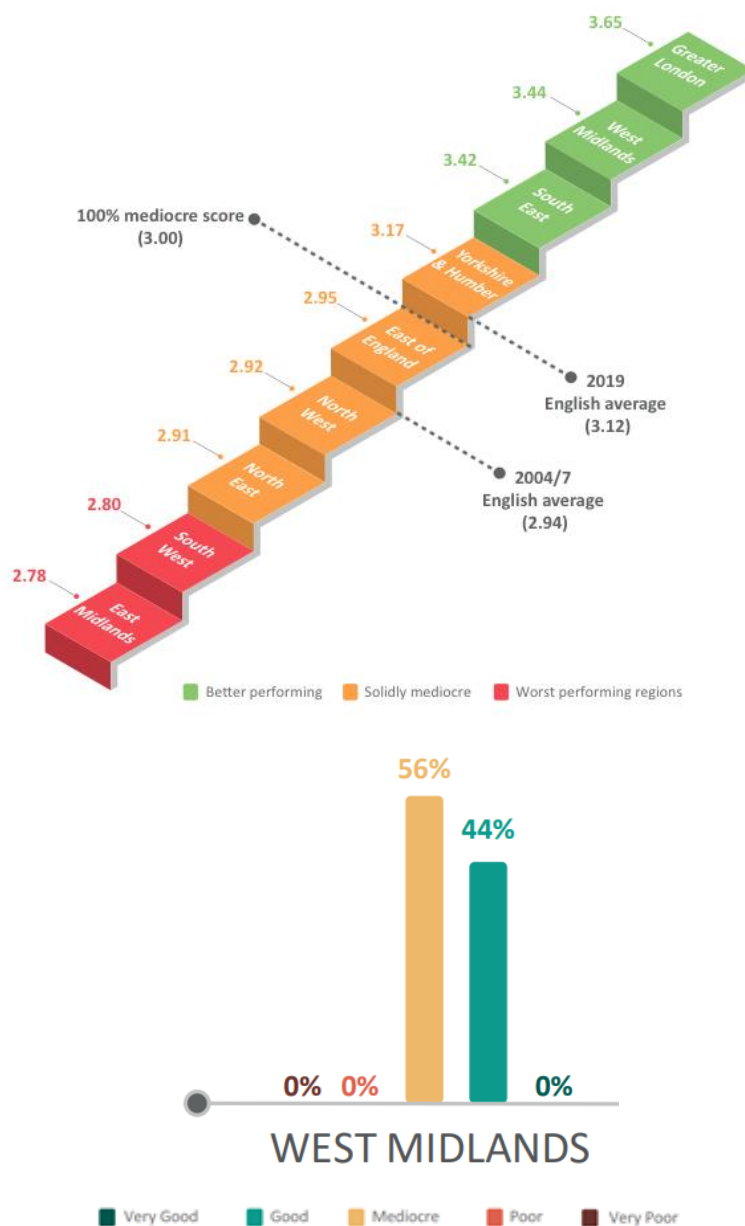
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Results

The West Midlands was the second highest scoring region in the audit, with an average score of 3.44 that is above the national average of 3.12 (classed as 'mediocre'). In total, 44% of schemes in the West Midlands scored across the two highest categories (good and very good).

Comparing the 2019 results to those published by CABE between 2004 and 2007, the West Midlands has improved the most out of all regions in England, with a significant increase in average design quality score from 2.68 in 2006. The proportion of schemes falling into the lower scoring categories (poor and very poor) has declined substantially by 47% between the two audits, while the proportion in the higher scoring categories has increased by 29%.



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?

Schemes in the West Midlands scored particularly well for criteria that assessed 'liveability'. The region came top for safety and security; access to public transport; and provision and integration of storage facilities, such as for bins or bicycles, into developments. Schemes were also ranked second in England for architectural quality, and scored highly for provision of and access to community facilities; design and management of public, open and play spaces; and ease of use for cyclists and pedestrians.

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 West Midlands, and schemes in the region generally scored less well for other criteria, such as providing a mix of housing types and tenures and creating developments with distinctive character (one of the lowest scoring criteria overall).

Case Study

Homes: 300

Setting: Suburban

Site History: Greenfield

Audit Score: 66, Good



The development is situated on the urban fringe of a city and is surrounded by residential and industrial areas.

Selected audit observations:

- Good access to community facilities that are also well-integrated into the urban fabric, with some opportunities to work locally.
- Range of property sizes, from 2- to 4-bedroom houses and flats.
- Reasonable level of integration of different tenures in a manner that obscures tenure identity.
- The overall character of the scheme is not distinctive, but the architectural quality is good with some variety and the creative use of building materials.
- Building layout takes priority over roads, and in some places streets and other spaces have also been designed so that they can be used as social spaces during the daytime.
- Good design and maintenance of public open spaces, maximising recreational and social value.

Planning process



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After outline planning permission was granted, a reserved matters application with details of the development was submitted and approved. A series of pre-application discussions and consultations with council officers, local residents and other stakeholders took place. Various elements of the development's design were informed by national and local policy guidance, including supplementary planning guidance on issues such as sustainability, open space requirements, and walking and cycling. Important aspirations included the creation of a development that was well connected and integrated into the surrounding area and established public transport networks, in addition to providing a high-quality and safe public realm. Whilst the form and architectural design of the individual dwellings are traditional and modest, the completed phase strongly benefits from the investment made in the design and management of the streets, spaces and the landscape.

Schemes Assessed

Scheme	Location
Seacole Wey	Shrewsbury
Sutton Grange	Shrewsbury
Booths Lane	Birmingham
Dovedale Road	Birmingham
Wilmot Drive	Birmingham
Alma Way	Birmingham
Cherry Orchard	Worcester
Kilbury Drive	Worcester
Bullingham Lane	Hereford
Homler	Hereford



Above: Map of schemes assessed in the West Midlands.