

A Housing Design Audit for England. January 2020

We all hear complaints and have views about poor quality developments appearing, not least in the countryside. However, objectively assessed evidence that can make the government pay attention is harder to come by.

CPRE with Place Alliance has now published the results of a national audit of new housing in England, to shine an objective light onto what is actually going on. The work was designed to make direct comparisons with audits carried out in the early 2000s by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

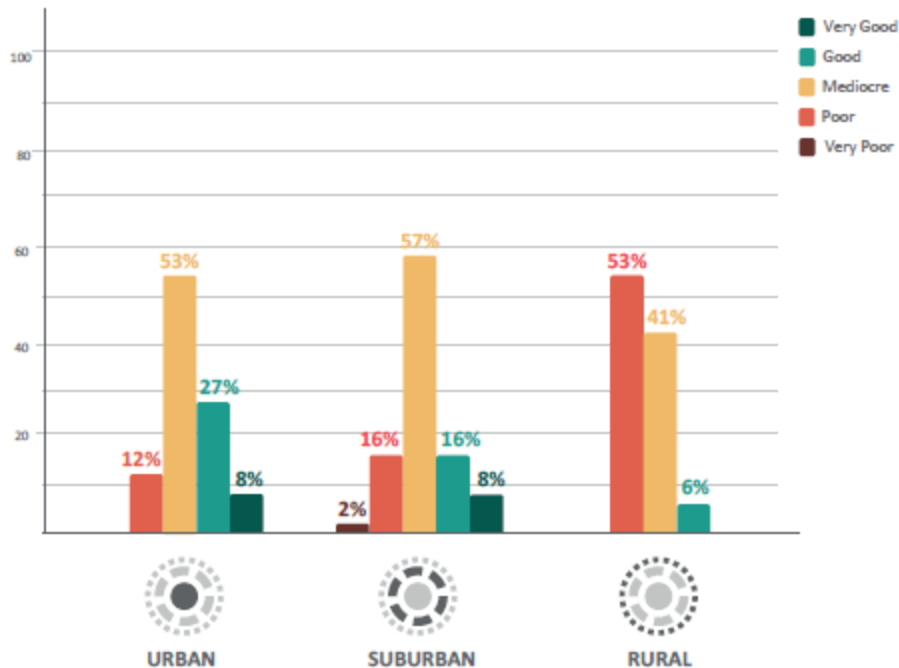
142 larger schemes across all English regions were assessed by a volunteer team of design professionals trained to record evidence and objectively score by 17 separate design criteria. The audit was overseen by a professional advisory group including the House Builders Federation, Urban Design Group, Civic Voice, Green Building Council and Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation.

How are we doing?

The results reveal a patchy picture overall with only a minimal uplift in design quality (8%) since the last audits over a decade ago. The majority of schemes were 'mediocre', with 20% so poor in design terms they should have been refused planning permission. The previous CABE audits found a higher proportion of refusable schemes (29%). It begs the question why, notwithstanding continual declarations by government planning ministers of the importance of good design, such a significant proportion of new housing still remains at such poor standard. '

For countryside campaigners the results are particularly shocking as the proportion of 'poor' schemes was greatest for greenfield and rural sites. Over 53% of rural housing schemes were found 'poor' whereas far fewer 12-16% were poor in urban areas. One explanation for this is that within an urban context there are stronger design references and an existing context which enables more thoughtful designs to result. More designers and architects may be involved in complex urban sites with local residents also more focused on what gets built rather than opposing the principle of any development. Greenfield sites often provide better opportunities to for landscape design and green space so it would appear that much more design emphasis is needed to ensure these design opportunities are realized in rural England.





Public transport was one of the least successful design considerations and in many areas the country continues to provide car reliant dormitories. Location and density were significant factors. Design outcomes deteriorated for sites furthest from the urban centre. Density also correlated strongly with quality; the average density of 'very good' schemes was 56 dwellings per hectare (dph) but 25 dph for 'very poor'.

Interestingly the same house builders were shown to be capable of building both 'very poor' and 'very good' quality schemes, which suggests their approach is strongly tailored to local circumstances which could be the demands being made by the local planning authority. Final development values were found to be much higher, up to 75%, with better design so there is good reason for developers to invest in architects and urban designers.

The audit found marked regional variations; poorer areas had a ten times higher chance of poor outcomes. Greater London, South East and West Midland regions accounted for all the overall improvement in design since the last audits.

What can be done to improve things?

The report makes 18 key recommendations for housebuilders, local authorities and government. Developers are implored to make a giant leap in their efforts to raise design, invest in their own design teams and processes and to jointly commission research on the economics of good design.

The most effective tools for local authorities to use are the site-specific policies such as Design Codes, and the process of Design Review. Design Review was little used even though its costs average no more than 0.005% of the overall value of a project. These two elements are up to 5

times more likely to be associated with the best designs. Local authorities should have clear design aspirations for sites in design codes in advance of sites being proposed and also require design review of all major schemes. They should have the courage of their convictions and refuse poor designs.

Highways design was the aspect that consistently scored lowest and sometimes design quality is set aside in the interests of housing delivery. So local authorities must address the disconnect between highways and planning. A key recommendation to government is that it requires adoption of *Manual for Streets* for more pedestrian friendly street design as well as provide better detailed guidance on parking. Another area for government to act is to encourage Planning Inspectors to reject poor designs at appeal as unsustainable. (This could be require revisions to the presumptions of the NPPF). The government is also asked to be more prescriptive on increased density to raise design standards.

Does good housing design justify green belt development then?

Absolutely not. The protection of Green Belt and open countryside are set out in national policy by the NPPF and cannot be compromised by design considerations. CPRE will continue to campaign against flawed targets and priorities that put housing land growth above the value of the countryside. However, it remains important that when those planning arguments are lost we should still demand the highest design and landscaping standards. Otherwise there is a double injury committed to the countryside.

To conclude, while good design is possible everywhere, too much of it, especially in rural England, is far too poor and fails the countryside. It harms it twice, first by the loss of the open countryside and secondly by the poor outcomes which follow. The Audit has coincided with the *Living with Beauty* report of the BBBBC, commissioned by Government. The combination of these two will surely bring pressure on Government to respond to these concerns. The Housebuilders have held their hands up and said they must do better. CPRE will press to see that as many of its recommendations are taken up. For a copy of the full report.

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/housing-design-2020/>

