

EVALUATING URBAN DESIGN GOVERNANCE

BACKGROUND

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that “the creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve”. Between 2004 and 2007, the housing audits conducted by CABE brought light to the poor standards of housing design. The 2019 Housing Design Audit for England set out to address this by evaluating the design quality of new housing developments across England, using a sample of 142 schemes.

For the Laidlaw research, which run in parallel to the audit, 18 case studies - two for each region - were chosen from the original list of 142 schemes to illustrate good vs poor examples of design quality scores and a range of development contexts: greenfield / brownfield, urban / suburban / rural, and so on. The purpose of the case studies was largely to determine the impact that local authority design governance processes had on the designed outcomes as audited. These have been anonymised and are included in batches throughout this report where they help to illustrate the design considerations that were audited.

DESIGN GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS

Design governance is the public sector's role in shaping and responding to development proposals through policy, guidance and other advisory arrangements used to influence design outcomes.

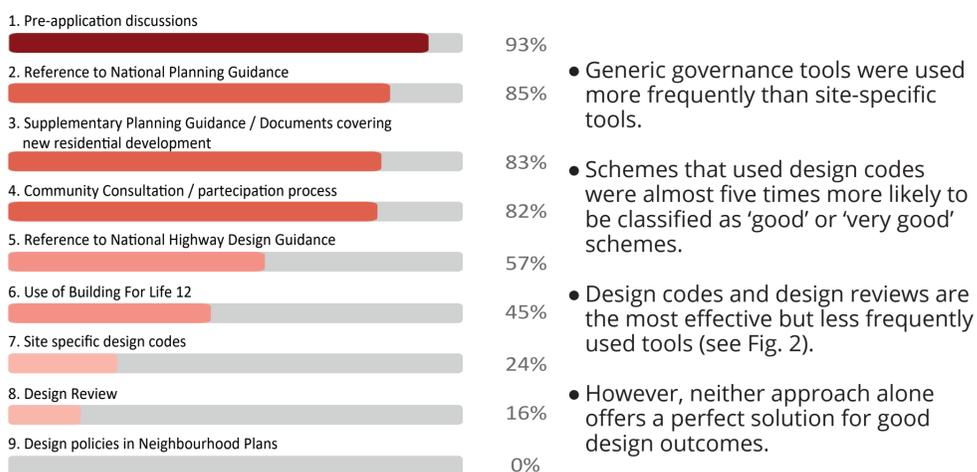


Fig.1 | Frequency of use of design governance tools across all developments



Fig.2 | Varying impacts of design governance tools

While governance plays an important role, other external factors can influence the pursuit of good design quality in housing across England.

MARKET INFLUENCES

Housing developments in more affluent areas scored higher than those in less affluent areas. Poor schemes were almost 10 times more likely to be located in the least affluent areas.

CONTEXTUAL DIFFERENCES

More urban, higher (although not necessarily high) density and brownfield schemes all seemingly better able to simultaneously address the seventeen design considerations.

CASE STUDY SAMPLES

CASE STUDY 1 Yorkshire and the Humber 170 dwellings	CASE STUDY 2 North West 206 dwellings	CASE STUDY 3 West Midlands 249 dwellings	CASE STUDY 4 London 149 dwellings	CASE STUDY 5 South East 117 dwellings
4.50 5.00 5.25 2.75	2.75 4.25 5.25 3.00	2.75 3.00 3.75 1.50	1.50 1.50 2.50 1.25	1.50 1.50 2.50 1.25
Range of housing types and sizes provided with segregated tenures.	Limited range of housing types and sizes; no affordable housing.	Limited range of housing but tenure blindness achieved to a good level.	Good mix of housing types with good energy efficiency ratings.	Lack of community facilities and public transport infrastructure.
Community facilities and public transport are well integrated and easily accessible.	Streets and spaces are attractively designed with robust and varied materials.	Highway design is fairly poor with secondary streets being somewhat pedestrian friendly.	Attempts to create a distinctive character were undermined by the poor quality of the public realm.	Roads and tarmac dominate street scene to an unacceptable degree.
Attractive hierarchy of streets and shared spaces.	Architecturally distinct, reflecting the area's heritage.	Poor design and management of public open space; undermines recreational and social value.	Insufficient car parking; cars dominate key areas and undermine pedestrian friendly environment.	Good range of dwellings but a lack of character and townscape interest.

METHODOLOGY

1. Reviewed planning applications for 134 housing developments using local authority planning portals
2. Designed a short survey to identify design tools and guidance referenced in the planning applications
3. Correlated this data with housing audit scores to identify the relationship between design governance and design outcomes
4. Case study analysis of 18 developments for a more detailed understanding the role of design governance in influencing design outcomes

AUDIT CRITERIA & SCORES

The housing design audit was limited to design considerations concerned with the external built environment. Seventeen of these design considerations were audited across the four categories below. Each design consideration was scored on a five point scale ranging from 'very good' to 'very poor'.

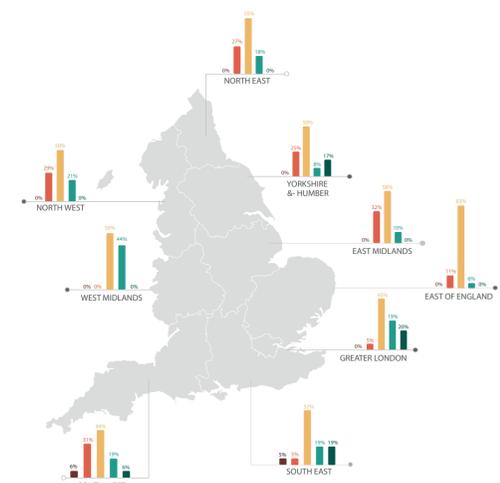
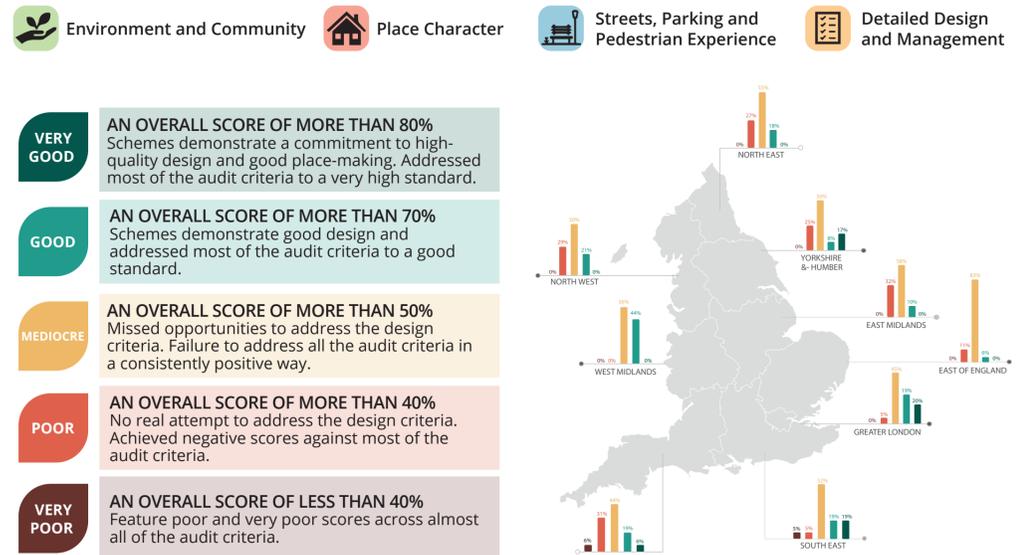


Fig.3 | Breakdown of scores by region

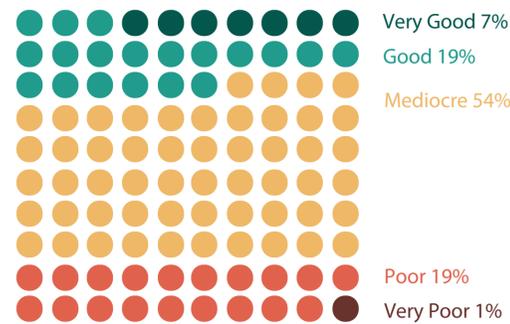


Fig.4 | The national picture

- A small improvement in the quality of housing design nationally since 2007 with regional variations in performance.
- Despite the minimal improvement, the majority of housing developments were classed as 'poor' or 'mediocre'.
- Greater London was the best performing region, followed by the West Midlands.
- East Midlands and South West were the worst performing regions.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Mapping the Audit scores nationally shows that the best and worst scores are widely distributed. It is clearly possible to deliver both high quality design and placemaking, as well as poor quality, across the country, in all regions.

Good design outcomes will not be achieved by simply checking against a list of generic design principles; it requires a proactive and site-specific process of guidance and accompanying peer review. It requires a design governance process that is consistently applied, not only at the start when the masterplan is approved, but through all reserved matters applications and in relation to how developments are phased on site.