
2024/2025 Place Review



Executive Summary



Introduction The East Suffolk Place Review 2024/2025 presents a comprehensive evaluation of design quality and placemaking across the district. This evidence-led assessment examines past and present development practices, aiming to inform future policy, design codes, and planning strategies. Through detailed site audits, industry surveys, and engagement with key stakeholders, the review identifies successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Recommendations

- **Strengthening Design Codes:** Ensure that East Suffolk's forthcoming design code provides clear standards that reflect the district's unique character and sustainability ambitions.
- **Enhancing Early Engagement:** Improve the effectiveness of pre-application discussions and establish clearer expectations for developers.
- **Capacity Building:** Continue investment in design training for planning officers to enhance their ability to negotiate and secure high-quality development outcomes.
- **Sustainable and Inclusive Design:** Promote green infrastructure, active travel, and climate-responsive design as standard elements in new developments.
- **Improved Collaboration:** Establish formalised knowledge-sharing initiatives between the public and private sectors to foster innovation and best practices.

Key Findings

Development Quality

- Common issues that detract from good design include poor approaches to Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage, a lack of context-driven design, and the impact of parking on housing developments.
- Elements that were being delivered well included accessible facilities, a good housing mix, and strong connectivity.

Challenges in Design and Planning

- Financial pressures and viability concerns were identified as primary barriers to achieving high-quality design.
- Late-stage involvement of design professionals often resulted in compromised outcomes.
- The balance between sustainability and heritage preservation emerged as a key challenge in larger developments.

Public and Private Sector Collaboration

- 100% of surveyed design professionals agreed on the need for stronger collaboration between planning officers and the private sector.
- Developers expressed a strong preference for clearer, more prescriptive design guidance to improve efficiency and predictability in the planning process.
- Pre-application engagement was highlighted as an area for improvement to ensure better design outcomes from the outset.

Role of the Council and Future Strategies

- 89% of planning officers agreed that elected members support good design, but practical barriers remain in delivering high-quality developments.
- Training in design skills has increased significantly, with 61% of planning officers attending design-related training in the past year.
- East Suffolk Council is well-positioned to embed higher design standards through its evolving Local Plan and district-wide design codes.
- The development of Specialist Services, the success of the Healthy Environments SPD, and the creation of the Charter all positively contribute to improving and investing in the quality of places moving forward.

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Disclaimer: Scope and Context of the Site Audit

This document presents the findings of a comprehensive site audit undertaken by East Suffolk Council as part of the 2024/2025 Place Review. The audit encompasses residential development sites that were granted planning permission from 2010 onwards. This includes developments consented through the standard planning process, those approved on appeal, and those permitted where the presumption in favour of sustainable development (commonly referred to as the "Tilted Balance") was applied.

The purpose of this audit is to evaluate completed developments against a consistent set of quality and placemaking criteria, irrespective of the policy framework in force at the time of consent. As such, the assessments are not intended to retrospectively critique planning decisions, but rather to provide evidence-based insights to inform future planning policy, design codes, and strategic decision-making.

01.

Project Overview

1.1

Place Approach

The East Suffolk Place Review is a data-driven initiative designed to enhance placemaking and design quality in housing developments. Led by East Suffolk Council, it moves beyond opinion-based assessments, using robust data to objectively evaluate successes and areas for improvement. The findings will inform policies and design codes that support sustainable, high-quality development across the district.

The Council has undertaken a comprehensive review of East Suffolk’s built environment through:

- Site Audits – Assessing existing developments for effectiveness and alignment with placemaking goals.
- Land Budgets – Evaluating land use to balance development, green space, and infrastructure.
- Design Skills Audit – Identifying strengths and gaps in the Council’s planning service.
- Design Industry Survey – Capturing insights from private sector professionals on design trends and challenges.
- Developer Survey – Gathering feedback to understand the opportunities and constraints shaping growth.

define the policy criteria for design policies in the next East Suffolk Local Plan, ensuring they reflect best practices and support high-quality, sustainable development. It will also directly inform the evolution of East Suffolk’s design codes, strengthening place-specific guidance that prioritises quality, resilience, and community well-being. Furthermore, the review provides a strong evidence base for site modelling in housing allocations, supporting informed land budgeting to ensure appropriate provision of green infrastructure, public space, and high design standards.

By benchmarking against regional and national standards, the Place Review will help East Suffolk adopt best practices, track progress, and drive continuous improvement. This work provides the Council with a clear roadmap for creating resilient, well-designed communities—delivering better places for residents now and in the future.

By reflecting on past developments, the review offers valuable lessons to refine future strategies. It focuses on completed schemes rather than recent or ongoing decision-making, ensuring guidance is informed by real-world outcomes.

The findings will play a critical role in shaping future policy and guidance. The evidence gathered will help



1.2

Policy Context

To understand the evolving context of the sites assessed in this report, it is important to recognise the timeline of key planning and policy influences that shaped their development. Many of these sites, although relatively recently completed, were granted planning permission as far back as 2010—prior to design-focused updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the introduction of the National Design Guide in 2019. Over time, the focus has shifted from simply delivering housing to creating vibrant, sustainable, and well-connected communities.

Past decisions, though well-intentioned, may not align with the higher design standards and sustainability goals now expected by national policy and local communities. The timeline overleaf highlights the major policy developments that have shaped planning decisions for the sites under review.

A further influence is the Local Planning Authority's duty to review its housing land supply annually. If it cannot demonstrate a five-year supply, the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'—or 'tilted balance'—is triggered. This occurred in 2012/13 and 2013/14 in the Suffolk Coastal area, and in 2016/17 in Waveney. Between 2013 and 2018, 10 appeal decisions found the council's five-year supply lacking, allowing the tilted balance to be applied.

Alongside national and local policy, 25 made neighbourhood plans in East Suffolk provide locally specific design guidance, reflecting community aspirations and reinforcing broader objectives.

East Suffolk is now well positioned to build on this momentum. With policy increasingly focused on place quality, there are strong opportunities to embed design principles into future development. The recommendations in this report, combined with a maturing policy landscape, offer a foundation for better outcomes.

As these recommendations are implemented, we can expect more resilient, inclusive communities where people thrive. By focusing on quality, design, and sustainability, East Suffolk has a clear opportunity to set a new standard for well-designed places.

| National | East Suffolk |
|---|---|
| 2012 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First NPPF Introduced - BfHL12 Introduced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First permitted Audit Scheme |
| 2013 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suffolk Coastal Local Plan Adopted - First completed (Built) Audit Scheme |
| 2014 | |
| 2015 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First Made Neighbourhood Plan (Rendlesham) |
| 2016 | |
| 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NPPF upated | |
| 2018 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NPPF upated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suffolk Design Launched |
| 2019 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NPPF upated - National Design Guide Introduced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Waveney District Local Plan Adopted |
| 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suffolk Coastal Local Plan Adopted - Last Permitted Audit Schemes |
| 2021 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NPPF upated | |
| 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First Design Skills Audit Undertaken - Suffolk Design Streets Guide Introduced - Sustainable Construction SPD - Cycling and Walking Strategy |
| 2023 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NPPF upated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suffolk SuDs guidance (Flood Rick Management Strategy) |
| 2024 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Healthy Environments SPD - Developers Charter - Last Completed (built) Audits Schemes |

1.3

Design Expectations

Good design is fundamental to creating sustainable, high-quality development. It goes beyond aesthetics—shaping places that are attractive, functional, inclusive, and adaptable to the evolving needs of residents. The Place Review has considered good design in relation to two key pillars:

Form: Creating Attractive and Contextually Relevant Places

A well-designed place should be visually appealing, reflect local character, and integrate seamlessly into its surroundings. The Place Review has assessed developments against the following principles:

- **Attractive and distinctive design** – Development should contribute positively to the local identity, drawing on the best aspects of East Suffolk’s architectural and landscape heritage.
- **Contextual relevance** – Proposals should respond to their setting, whether urban, rural, or coastal, ensuring a sense of place that feels authentic and enduring.
- **Tenure-blind housing** – Affordable housing should be indistinguishable in design and quality from market housing, fostering cohesive and integrated communities.
- **High-quality materials and detailing** – Developments should use durable, sustainable materials that enhance longevity and complement local character.

Function: Designing for Well-Being, Accessibility, and Sustainability

Beyond appearance, good design must support the practical needs of all who live, work, and move through East Suffolk. The Place Review has considered the extent to which developments:

- **Meet the needs of all ages and abilities** – Places must be inclusive, ensuring accessibility for people of all mobility levels and life stages.
- **Facilitate healthy lifestyles** – Good design should encourage walking, cycling, and access to nature, promoting physical and mental well-being.
- **Create legible and navigable environments** – Developments should be easy to understand and move through, with clear wayfinding and well-structured layouts.
- **Provide an enabling environment** – Public spaces, amenities, and homes should support social interaction, community-building, and daily needs.
- **Promote sustainability and resilience** – Developments must incorporate climate-conscious design, biodiversity-friendly landscaping, and energy-efficient solutions.

Raising the Bar: Going Above and Beyond

While meeting baseline expectations is essential, East Suffolk encourages developers to exceed minimum standards through innovative, people-focused design. The Developers’ Charter sets out what we consider to be ‘above and beyond’ in design quality, engagement, and the construction process. This includes early and meaningful community participation, responsible construction practices, and a commitment to long-term place stewardship.

Influencing the Future Design Code

The expectations outlined in this document will play a crucial role in shaping East Suffolk’s Design Code project, which is currently being developed to set clear, district-wide standards for design quality. This document provides a foundation for the design principles and objectives that will inform the code’s development, ensuring that all future schemes adhere to high standards of place-making, functionality, and sustainability.

02.

Site Audit

2.1

The Need for an Audit

In recent years, the quality of residential development has become a key concern for local authorities, who are responsible for ensuring that new housing meets high standards of design, sustainability, and liveability. In East Suffolk, gaining a clear understanding of the true quality of development over the past 14 years is essential for shaping future planning and development decisions. To achieve this, a comprehensive audit of completed sites has been carried out, with each development scored against a set of criteria that measure not only its physical attributes but also elements that impact the well-being of residents and the wider community. The criteria used in this audit go beyond the planning policies and guidance that were in place at the time decisions on these developments were made, providing a broader evaluation of their long-term success.

For East Suffolk Council, this audit is far more than an assessment of past projects; it is a necessary step in laying the foundation for informed, evidence-based planning decisions going forward. The audit allows the Council to assess whether recent residential developments align with broader ambitions for high-quality placemaking and sustainable growth in the district. For example, are developments achieving high standards in environmental sustainability, design quality, or accessibility? Are they fulfilling the needs of the community, fostering a sense of place, and supporting the broader ambitions for sustainable growth in the district?

Understanding the quality of past developments provides valuable insights into what has worked well and where improvements are needed, which can be used to shape future planning and development

guidelines. When the Council can clearly identify which developments have successfully enhanced community life and which have fallen short, it creates an opportunity to refine policies, prioritise high-quality design, and ensure that future developments align more closely with the district's goals.

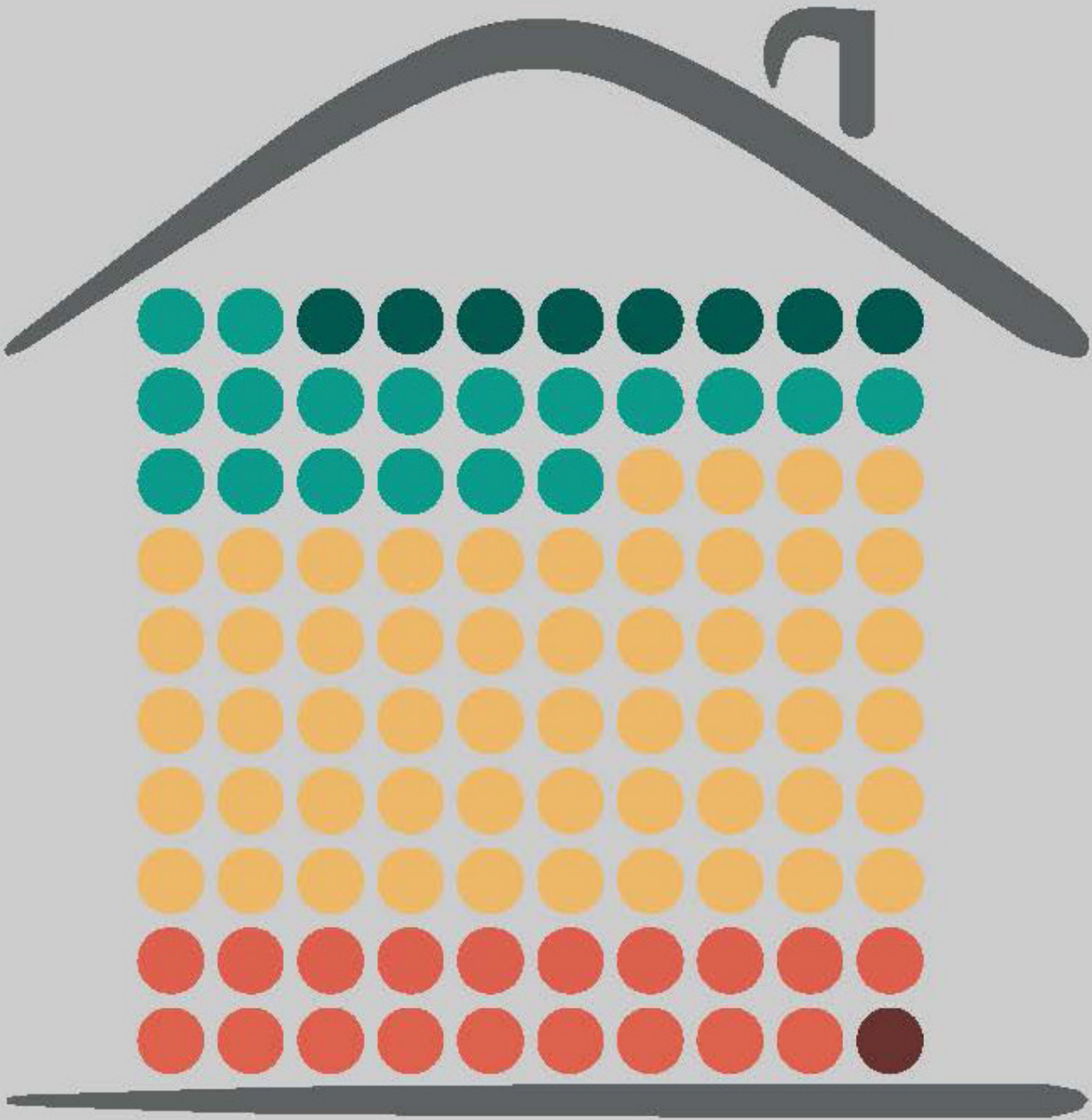
Finally, the audit acts as an important feedback mechanism between the local authority, developers, and the community. It highlights positive outcomes, such as increased community satisfaction, enhanced property values, and the promotion of healthier, more sustainable living environments. By fostering

a more transparent, data-driven understanding of development quality, East Suffolk is taking proactive steps to ensure that new housing genuinely contributes to the area's long-term vibrancy, resilience, and overall quality of life.

This commitment to monitoring quality represents a significant step towards securing a sustainable, high-quality built environment for current and future residents of East Suffolk. The insights gained from this audit will guide planning practices to ensure that East Suffolk's legacy is one of excellence, sustainability, and community value.

Fig 2.11 Residential Development, Framlingham

A HOUSING DESIGN AUDIT FOR ENGLAND



2.2 National Picture

The 2020 Housing Design Audit for England, conducted by Place Alliance and its partners, highlighted critical findings about the quality of residential development across England. This national audit assessed 142 large-scale developments, focusing on external design quality, community integration, environmental impact, and placemaking. Results revealed that while there has been slight improvement since prior audits, the overall standard remains subpar, with the majority of projects rated as “mediocre” or “poor.”

The approach and methodology of the East Suffolk Audit largely replicated the national audit to ensure a clear comparison of data. This allowed for an understanding of how the district compared to both regional and national data, providing valuable insights into local design quality.

Several national trends underpin the urgency for local audits, especially at the district level. First, while “place quality” can profoundly influence social, economic, and environmental outcomes, inconsistent design standards across regions and developers have led to widespread issues in the quality of new housing. These issues include poor

architectural character, dominance of car-focused layouts, minimal community facilities, and inadequate environmental considerations. Notably, poorer communities are more likely to experience substandard design, as cost-cutting often results in developments that neglect placemaking principles.

The findings also reveal that while positive design outcomes are possible, achieving high-quality development requires proactive governance, such as design codes, effective planning reviews, and refusal of poor-quality schemes. These strategies help align developments with the local community’s needs, ensuring that new housing contributes positively to the area.

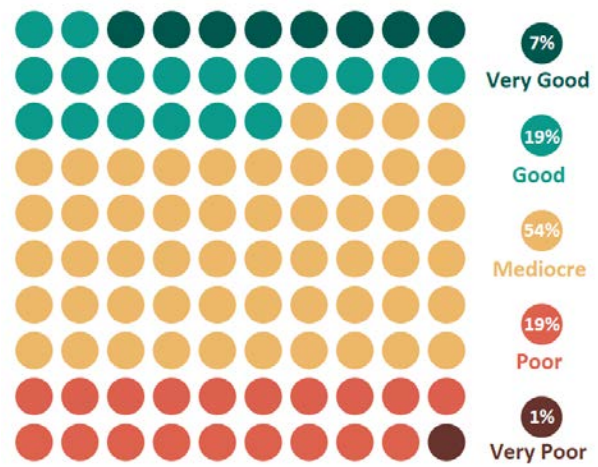


Fig 2.21 Place Alliance, National Scoring

2.3 Scoring Criteria

The audit utilised a structured, five-tier qualitative scoring system to evaluate each criterion and development site. This system provided a transparent and standardised approach for assessing the quality of residential developments in East Suffolk. Each development received an overall score, calculated as a percentage of the total available score, which determined its placement within one of the following categories:

Very Poor Scoring less than 20% of the total available points, these developments significantly failed to meet expectations, displaying major shortcomings in design, sustainability, or community impact. They demonstrated minimal alignment with planning objectives and posed challenges for residents' quality of life.

Poor Scoring 20% to 39% of the total available points, these developments fell short in key areas, offering limited success in addressing design quality, sustainability, or accessibility. While basic standards were met, substantial improvements were required to meet strategic goals.

Mediocre Scoring 40% to 59% of the total available points, these developments performed adequately but lacked distinction. While functional, they missed opportunities to enhance community value and environmental impact.

Good Scoring 60% to 79% of the total available points, these developments exceeded minimum standards, demonstrating effective design, sustainability, and integration with community needs. They contributed positively to East Suffolk's objectives.

Very Good Scoring 80% or more of the total available points, these developments excelled across all assessed criteria, showcasing innovative design, robust sustainability, and strong contributions to community well-being. These sites set a benchmark for excellence and served as exemplars for future projects.



Fig 2.31 Residential Development, Halesworth

2.4

Audit Criteria

The East Suffolk site audit adapts the Building for a Healthy Life (BfHL) framework to the district's needs, incorporating principles such as natural connections, green and blue infrastructure, and well-defined streets and spaces. While the sites assessed were approved under previous policies and not evaluated against BfHL criteria at the time, the audit highlights the importance of updated guidance to ensure future developments meet the highest standards of design and sustainability.

The audit uses a structured scoring system, evaluating developments against BfHL criteria and the expertise of the auditing team, ensuring rigorous and contextually relevant assessments. Linked to the Place Alliance's national housing design audit, this approach emphasises region-specific evaluations to capture development quality.

East Suffolk's audit, inspired by BfHL, focuses on district-specific factors, such as "Back of Pavement, Front of Home" to integrate public and private spaces, and "Design Quality" to maintain high architectural and craftsmanship standards. This tailored methodology ensures that new housing aligns with both national quality standards and local priorities, serving as a benchmark for past projects and a guide for future planning.



- 1. Natural Connections**
Integration with surrounding areas for easy access by foot, bike, or public transport.
- 2. Facilities and Services**
Proximity to essential amenities for community convenience.
- 3. Homes for Everyone**
A mix of housing types to serve varied community needs.
- 4. Making the Most of What's There**
Effective use of existing features like landscape and views.
- 5. Memorable Character**
Unique architectural features creating a distinctive sense of place.
- 6. Well-Defined Streets and Spaces**
Clear boundaries between public and private areas.
- 7. Easy to Find Your Way Around**
An intuitive layout that's simple to navigate.
- 8. Healthy Streets**
Streets that encourage walking, social interaction, and low vehicle speeds.
- 9. Cycle and Car Parking**
Convenient, well-integrated parking for bikes and cars.
- 10. Green and Blue Infrastructure**
Green spaces, water management, and biodiversity support.
- 11. Back of Pavement, Front of Home**
Attractive and practical frontage between the street and home.
- 12. Design Quality**
High standards of construction and detailing throughout.

2.5

Audit Sites

The East Suffolk site audit was carried out to assess a representative sample of residential developments completed across the district since 2010. A total of 21 sites were selected, chosen to ensure a balanced assessment of developments in terms of scale, location, developer type, and application type. This approach ensures that the audit results provide a broad understanding of development quality across East Suffolk and allow insights into trends among different types of projects.

To cover various project sizes, the selected sites are evenly distributed across five categories based on the number of homes:

- 10–20
- 20–50
- 50–100
- 100–200
- 200+ units

This size-based categorisation enables the audit to consider developments ranging from smaller, community-scale projects to larger, strategic neighbourhoods. Such a distribution ensures that the audit can capture the unique challenges and strengths of each development size, providing insights into how scale impacts design quality, connectivity, and amenity provision.

The selected sites also represent an even mix of regional and national developers. This balance allows the audit to compare different development approaches, including those from large-scale national developers and more regionally focused builders, providing a comprehensive view of design and construction practices. The sample includes both full and reserved matters applications, covering the full scope of planning approvals to reflect differences in how initial designs translate into final construction.

Geographically, the sites are spread across the north, central, and southern planning areas of East Suffolk. This distribution captures potential geographical variations in design preferences, local authority guidance (Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans), and environmental context. Each site selected was completed after 2010, ensuring the audit reflects varying past design standards, regulations, and trends that have influenced residential developments over the past decade or so.



| Development Size (dwellings) | |
|------------------------------|------------|
| 10 > 20 | 4no. sites |
| 20 > 50 | 4no. sites |
| 50 > 100 | 6no. sites |
| 100 > 200 | 4no. sites |
| 200+ units | 1no. site |

| Application Type | |
|------------------|-------------|
| Full | 12no. sites |
| Outline | 9no. sites |
| Allocated | 6no. sites |
| Windfall | 15no. sites |

| District Spread | |
|-----------------|------------|
| North | 5no. sites |
| Central | 9no. sites |
| South | 7no. sites |

| Developer | |
|-----------|-------------|
| National | 11no. sites |
| Regional | 10no. sites |

| Date Completed |
|---------------------------|
| Spread between: 2013>2024 |

| Date Permitted |
|---------------------------|
| Spread between: 2012>2020 |

| Development Type | |
|------------------|------------|
| Urban | 3no. sites |
| Suburban | 9no. sites |
| Rural | 9no. sites |

2.6 Results

This section presents an overview of the overall site scores, comparing them against national, regional, and district benchmarks to assess how local developments align with broader standards. Each development has been evaluated based on a set of criteria designed to measure various aspects of quality, including design, sustainability, liveability, and accessibility.

The audit also includes detailed scores for key factors such as the number of dwellings and development density, which are important for understanding the balance between housing provision and the potential impact on the local environment and community. Additionally, the developer scoring

highlights the performance of individual developers in meeting the Council’s objectives for high-quality residential outcomes, while area-based scoring provides a snapshot of how different regions within East Suffolk are performing in relation to each other.

The audit results reveal a mixed performance in residential development quality across East Suffolk.

These findings highlight that, while most developments meet expectations, a notable proportion suggest that future projects must not repeat past shortcomings to ensure alignment with the district’s goals for high-quality, sustainable housing.

Overall Site Scores District Wide

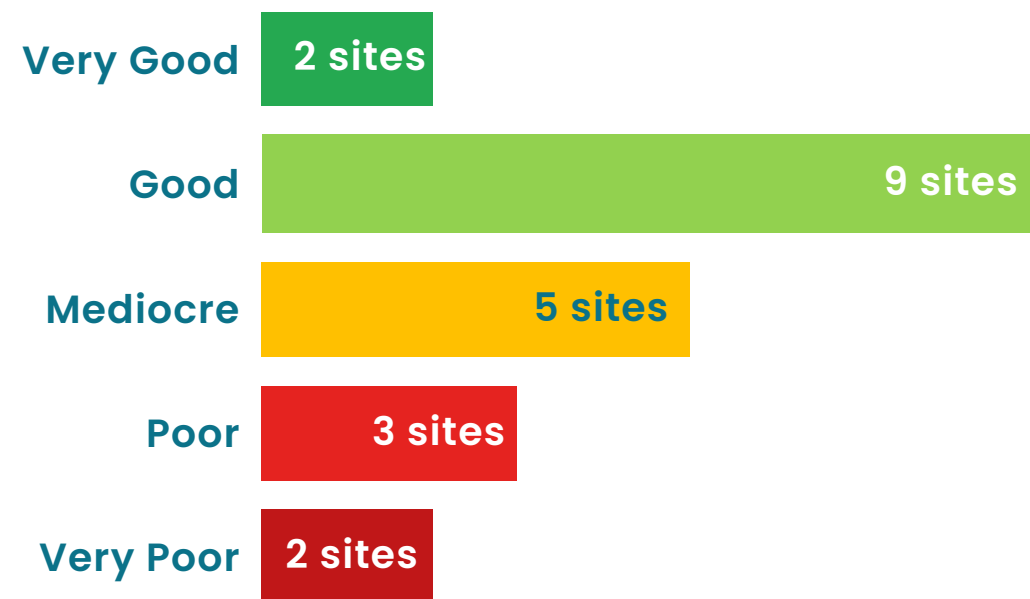


Fig 2.61 Data of site audit scoring

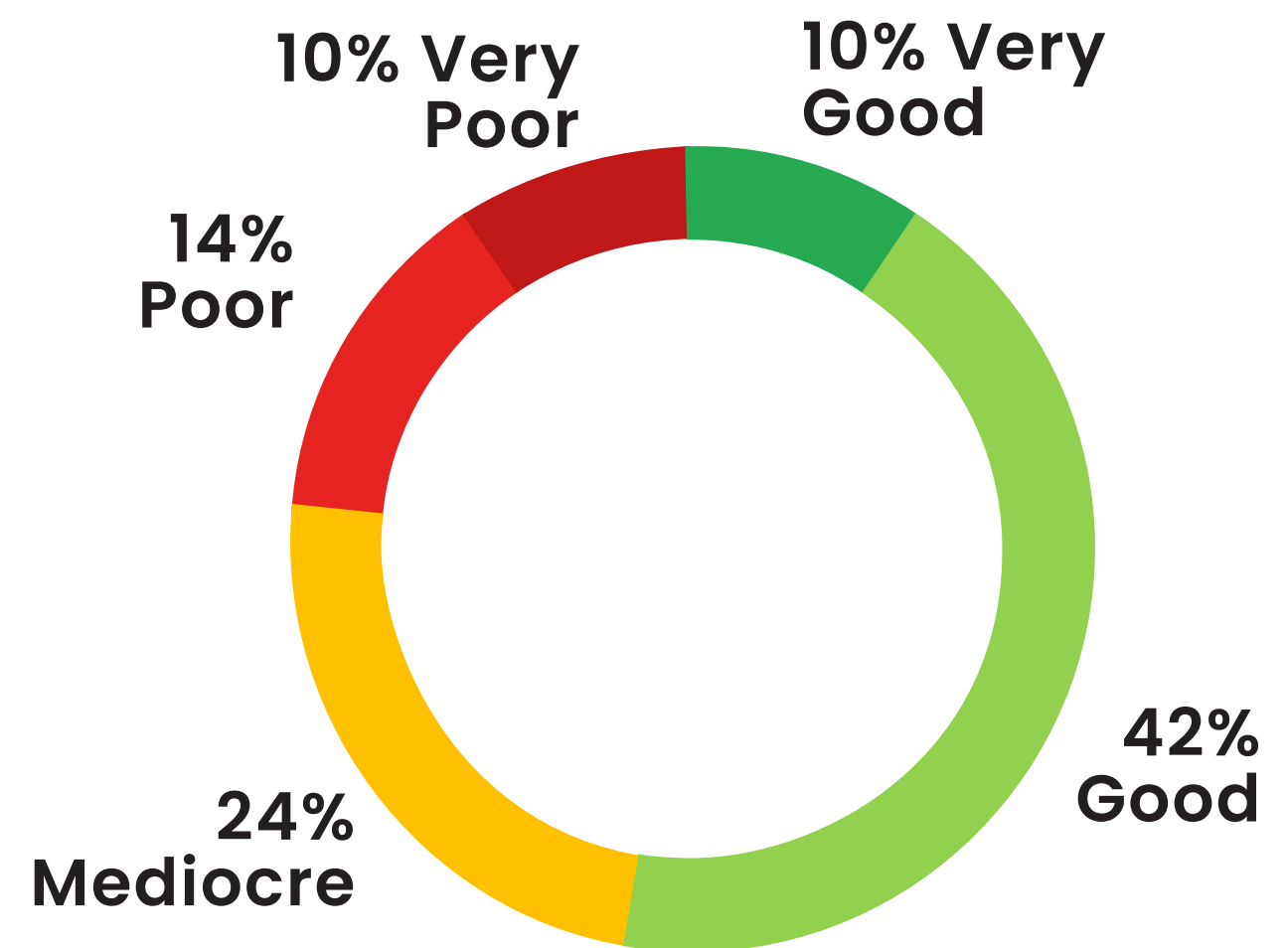


Fig 2.62 Data of site audit scoring

National, Regional and District Comparable Scoring

Combined, East Suffolk's "Very Good" and "Good" ratings encompass 52% of all residential developments, reflecting that over half of East Suffolk's developments are regarded as high quality. In contrast, only 6% of developments in the East of England and 26% in England as a whole reach these top two categories.

The combined "Poor" and "Very Poor" ratings make up 24% of developments in East Suffolk, compared to 11% in the East of England and 20% nationally. This suggests that while East Suffolk excels at achieving higher quality in some areas, a quarter of its developments still fall into lower-rated categories.

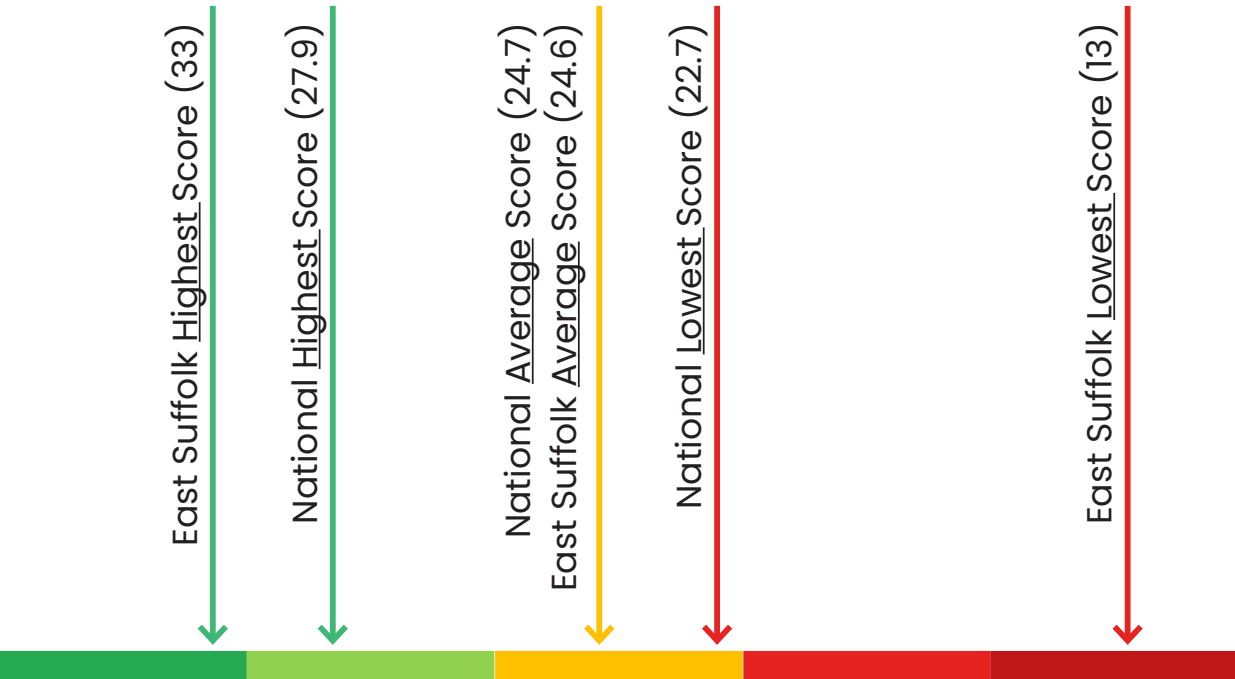


Fig 2.63 Scale bar of comparable scoring

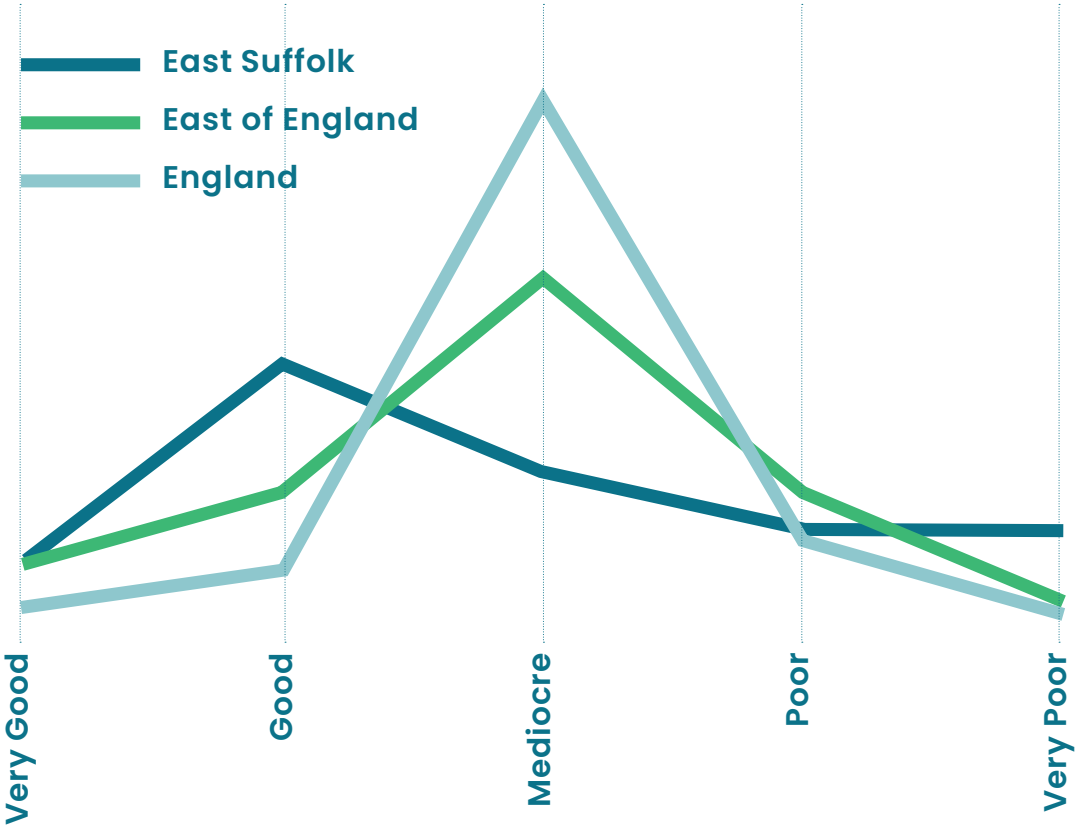


Fig 2.64 Graph showing relationship between district, region and national scales

| | East Suffolk | East of England* | England* |
|-----------|--------------|------------------|----------|
| Very Good | 10% | 0% | 7% |
| Good | 42% | 6% | 19% |
| Mediocre | 24% | 83% | 54% |
| Poor | 14% | 11% | 19% |
| Very Poor | 10% | 0% | 1% |

* Regional and national data sourced from Place Alliance Homes Audit 2022

Fig 2.65 Comparison table

Criteria Results

Audit Site Scoring

The results highlight both strengths and areas for improvement across the district. High-performing areas demonstrate success in providing accessible amenities, inclusive housing, and attractive, functional neighbourhoods. Public spaces are generally well-planned, ensuring ease of navigation and usability. However, there is room for improvement in promoting walkability, reducing congestion, and enhancing architectural quality.

Challenges include creating distinctive identities for some areas and better utilising existing assets. The review also identifies gaps in ecological design, with a need to better integrate green spaces, pathways, and natural features to strengthen connections with nature and improve urban resilience. While the district performs well in accessibility and community-focused design, addressing these issues will help align future developments with sustainability goals and support the creation of vibrant communities.



Fig 2.64 Residential Development, Darsham

- Often Successful
- Varied
- Problematic

- 1. **Facilities and Services**
Proximity to essential amenities for community convenience.
- 2. **Homes for Everyone**
A mix of housing types to serve varied community needs.
- 3. **Back of Pavement, Front of Home**
Attractive and practical frontage between the street and home.
- 4. **Well-Defined Streets and Spaces**
Clear boundaries between public and private areas.
- 5. **Easy to Find Your Way Around**
An intuitive layout that's simple to navigate.
- 6. **Healthy Streets**
Streets that encourage walking, social interaction, and low vehicle speeds.

- 7. **Design Quality**
High standards of construction and detailing throughout.
- 8. **Memorable Character**
Unique architectural features creating a distinctive sense of place.
- 9. **Cycle and Car Parking**
Convenient, well-integrated parking for bikes and cars.
- 10. **Making the Most of What's There**
Effective use of existing features like landscape and views.
- 11. **Natural Connections**
Integration with surrounding areas for easy access by foot, bike, or public transport.
- 12. **Green and Blue Infrastructure**
Green spaces, water management, and biodiversity support.

Numbers & Density Results

Audit Site Scoring

The review highlights that medium-sized developments (21 to 50 units) and those with 51 to 100 units consistently outperform both smaller and larger developments. These projects appear to strike a balance between manageable scale and adequate resources, which likely contributes to their success. Smaller developments (10 to 20 units), while performing better regionally, fall short of both district and national expectations. There is a need to identify and address the challenges unique to this category to improve their performance.

The most significant concern lies with larger developments (101 to 200 units), which score below all

benchmarks. These projects may face particular difficulties related to scale, community integration, and infrastructure. A detailed analysis of these challenges is recommended, with a focus on improving project execution, sustainability, and the ability to deliver high-quality outcomes.

In summary, while medium-sized developments are performing well across all benchmarks, there is an opportunity to learn from these successes and apply best practices to both smaller and larger developments to improve overall performance in the future.

| Dwelling Range | Average Score | District Average (3.40) | Regional Average (3.10) | National Average (3.35) |
|----------------|---------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 10 to 20 | 3.16 | Below | Above | Below |
| 21 to 50 | 3.75 | Above | Above | Above |
| 51 to 100 | 3.50 | Above | Above | Above |
| 101 to 200 | 3.00 | Below | Below | Below |

Fig 2.66 Dwelling number scoring



Rural 10 to 30dph

● (Score 3.22) Varied Quality

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Total number of homes (audit sites) | 258 homes |
| Average number per site | 29 homes |
| Average site area (Ha) | 1.28Ha |
| Average Density (dph) | 21dph |

- Back of pavement, front of home
- Easy to find your way around
- Green and blue infrastructure



Suburban 31 to 50dph

● (Score 3.11) Below district, regional and national averages

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Total number of homes (audit sites) | 1145 homes |
| Average number per site | 127 homes |
| Average site area (Ha) | 3.53Ha |
| Average Density (dph) | 37dph |

- Varied quality across all criteria



Urban 51dph+

● (Score 3.66) Above district, regional and national averages

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Total number of homes (audit sites) | 167 homes |
| Average number per site | 56 homes |
| Average site area (Ha) | 0.87Ha |
| Average Density (dph) | 66dph |

- Facilities and Service
- Homes for everyone
- Healthy Streets
- Easy to find your way around
- Cycling and Parking

Developer Results

Audit and District Scoring

21 sites across the district were assessed, involving 14 developers. The audit provides important insights into the developers' performance in delivering housing sites and highlights areas of strength and improvement at the time.

50% of Developers Scored "Good"
Half of the developers performed well, meeting expectations in terms of quality, and overall site delivery. These developers demonstrate a strong ability to manage projects effectively and consistently meet standards.

28% of Developers Scored "Mediocre"
A significant portion of developers showed inconsistent performance. While sites are being delivered, challenges such as quality concerns may be affecting their overall effectiveness. These developers may need additional support to improve delivery.

14% of Developers Scored "Poor"
These developers are struggling to meet key requirements, with issues such as quality problems, or planning difficulties impacting their performance at that time.

7% of Developers Scored "Very Poor"
A small percentage of developers demonstrated deficiencies in delivery, with significant quality issues at that time.

While half of the developers are performing well, a notable portion of developers (49%) could enhance practices. The 21% of developers in the "Poor" or "Very Poor" categories pose risks to housing delivery, and immediate action is needed to address these issues. Working with these developers are essential to ensure that the district maintains high-quality developments.

60% of audited developers scored above national, regional and district average scores

40% of audited developers scored below national, regional and district averages

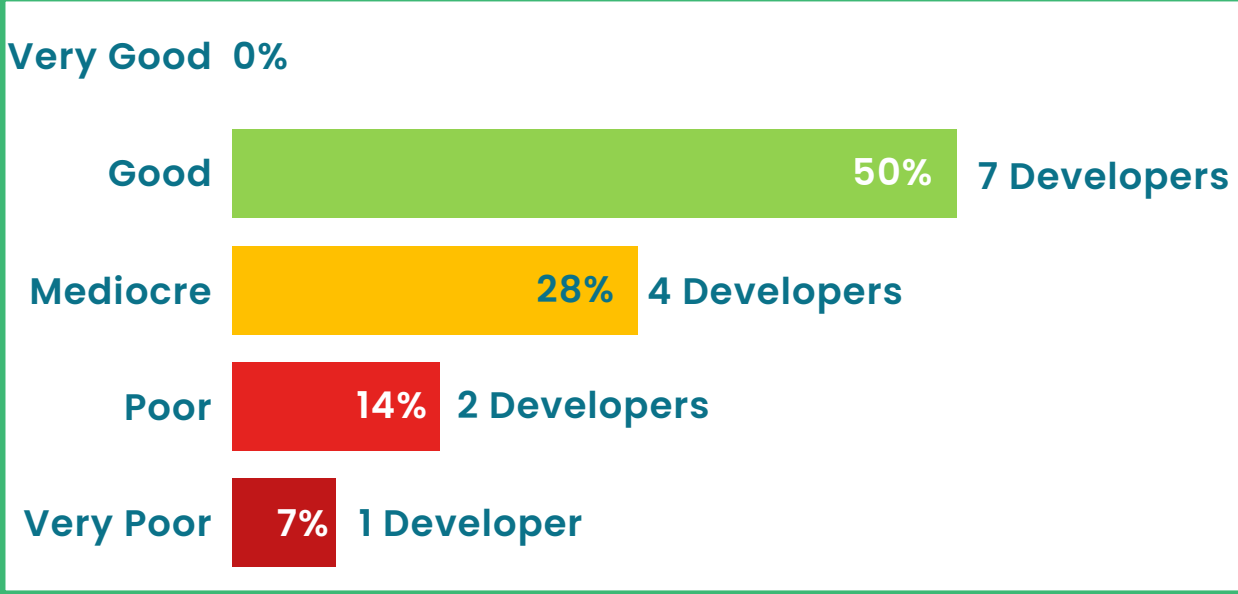


Fig 2.67 Developer Scoring against audited sites

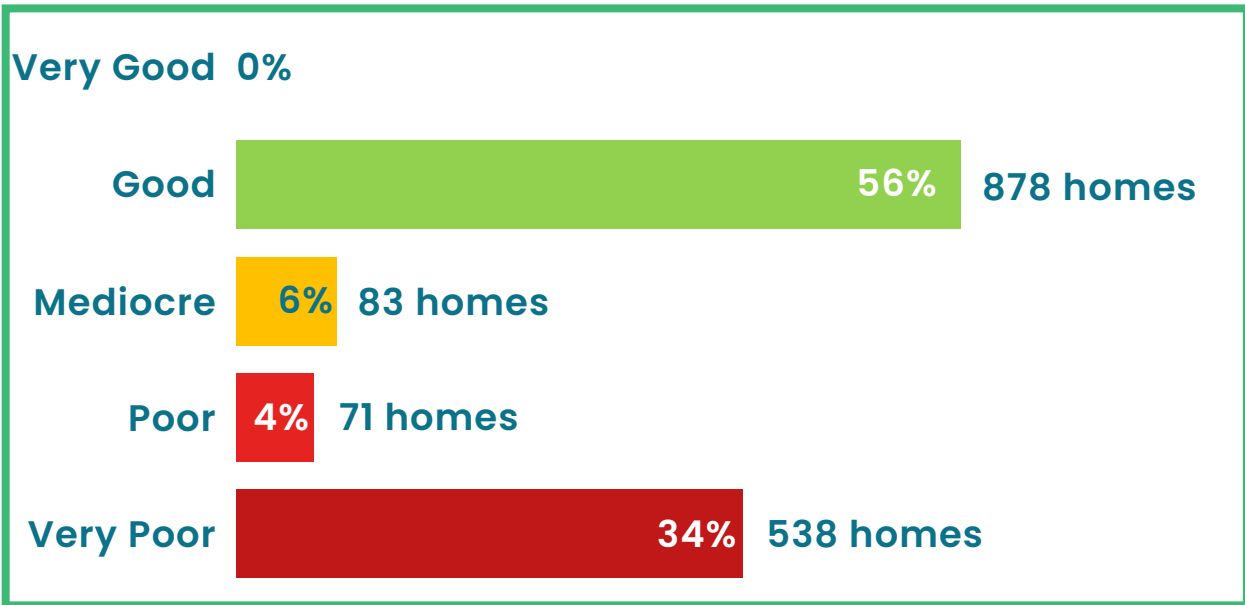


Fig 2.68 Developer Scoring against homes delivered across the audited sites

While 50% of developers are delivering housing effectively, accounting for 878 units, 49% of developers (scoring "Mediocre," "Poor," or "Very Poor") are responsible for 692 units.

By improving the performance of those in the "Mediocre," "Poor," and "Very Poor" categories, the district can ensure that the overall quality of developments is maintained across East Suffolk.

District Results

Audit Scoring

The audit results also reflect how developers’ performance varies across different areas of East Suffolk. The district is divided into three regions: North, Central, and South, each receiving an area-specific performance score based on the site assessments. While these scores provide valuable insights into regional trends, it is important to note that they are based on a relatively small sample of assessed sites and should be interpreted with this context in mind

North: 3.40

The North region scored 3.40, indicating strong performance by developers in this area. This score aligns closely with the district average of 3.4, suggesting that the North is performing on par with the district overall.

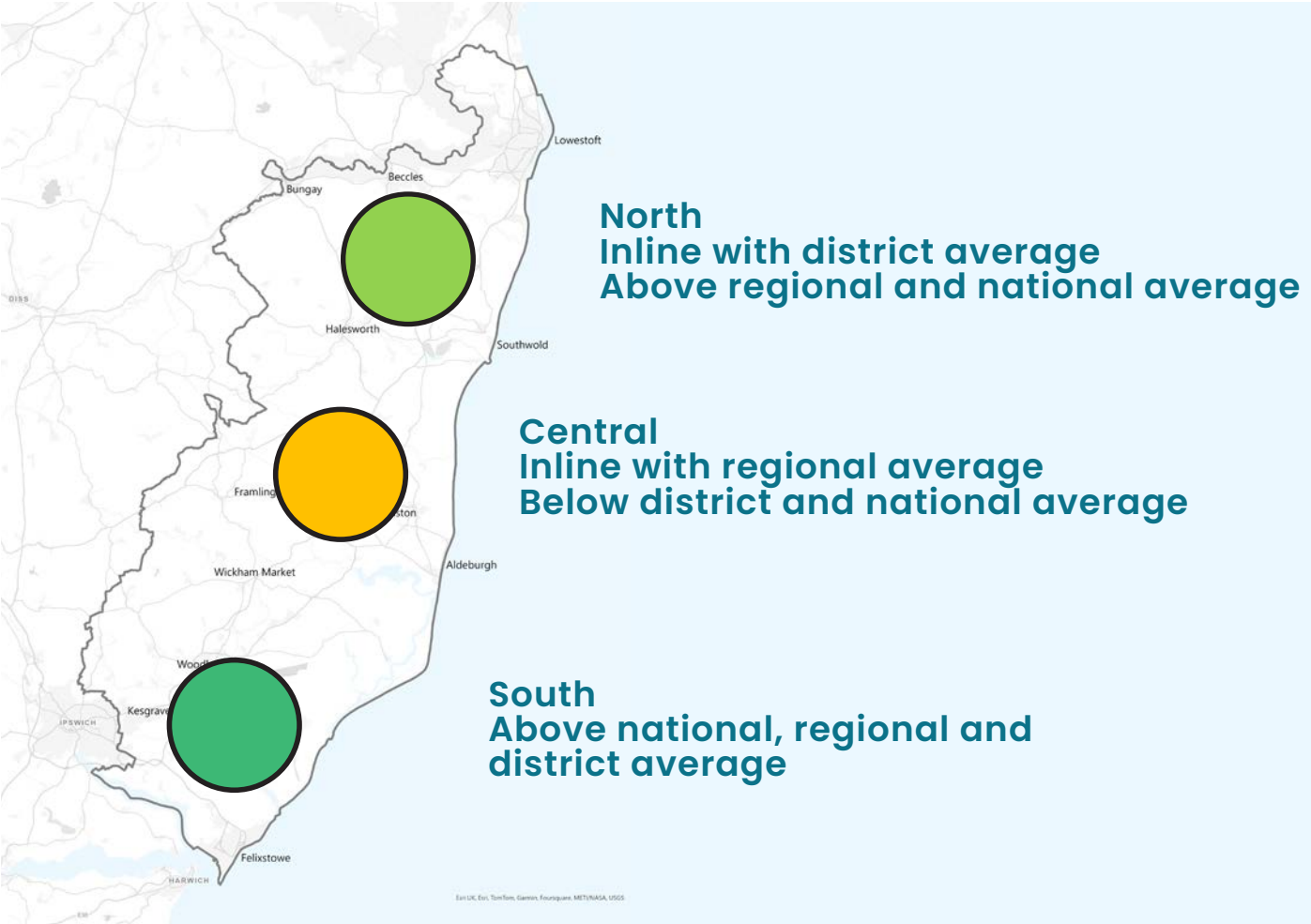
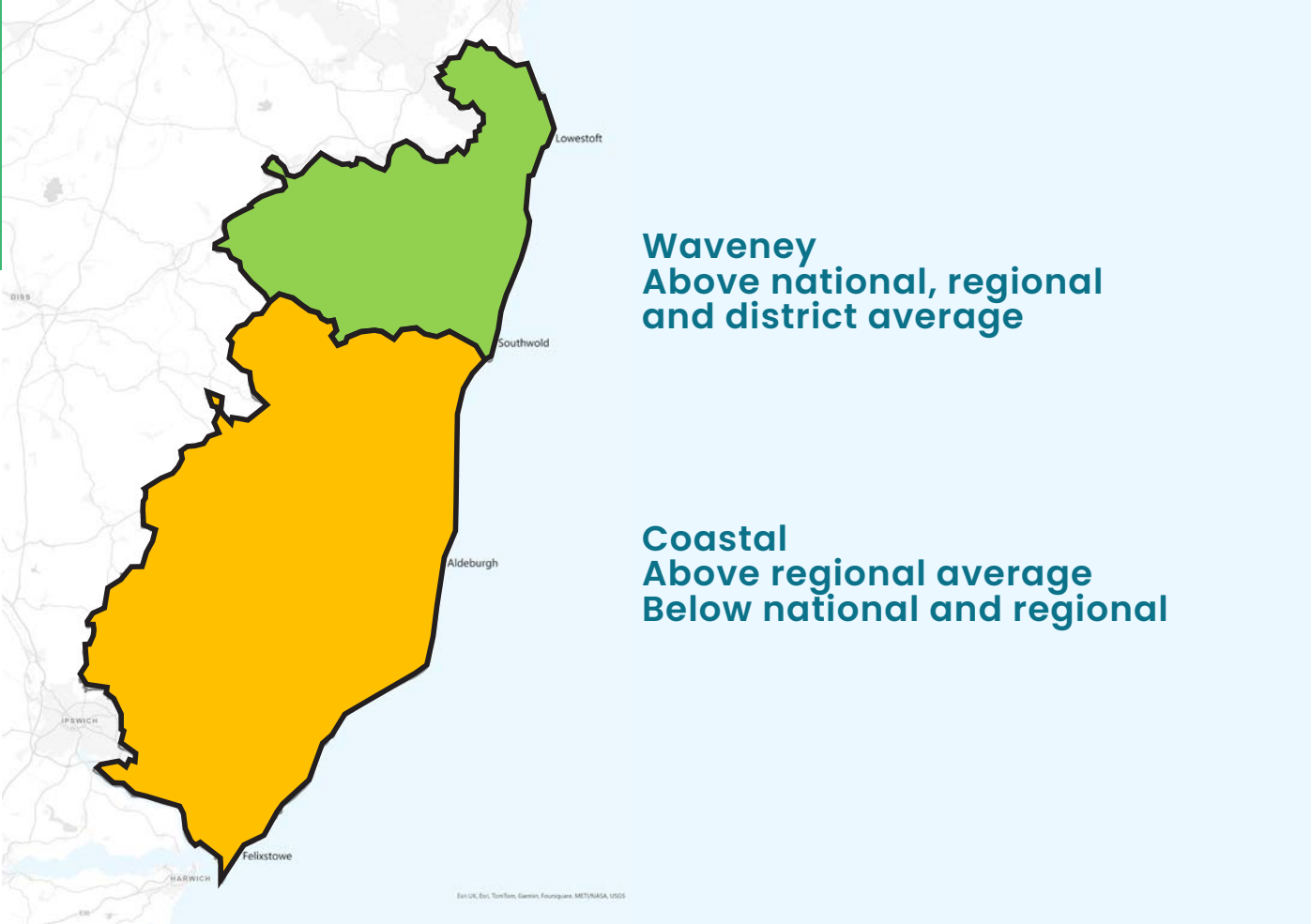
Central: 3.11

The Central region scored 3.11, which is below both the district average of 3.4 and the national average of 3.35. This highlights some challenges in developer performance in the Central region, with room for improvement to meet the overall district and national standards.

South: 3.43

The South region achieved the highest score of 3.43, surpassing both the district average of 3.4 and the national average of 3.35. This indicates that developers in the South are performing better than both the district and national averages, contributing positively to housing delivery in this area.

Addressing the challenges faced by under performing developers, particularly in the Central region, and ensuring that the South region’s high standards are maintained will be essential for ensuring consistent quality across East Suffolk.



Health, Wellbeing and Sustainability

Audit Scoring

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how different locations support health, wellbeing, and sustainability, this assessment considers spatial variations in key indicators across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. The analysis helps to distinguish between factors influenced by development design and those that reflect broader contextual conditions. It is based on an 800m offset from the development sites, providing a representative picture of the local environment surrounding these locations.

Design plays a fundamental role in shaping people’s wellbeing, health, and sustainable lifestyles. By assessing a range of indicators, this work highlights how the built environment can support active and healthy communities, reduce environmental impacts, and create more equitable places. While some indicators provide direct insight into the impact of development design, others offer a broader understanding of the surrounding context, which can inform planning and policy decisions.

AHAH Index (Active, Healthy, and Happy Index)

The AHAH Index measures place-based health and wellbeing by evaluating multiple indicators, including air quality, access to retail, and the quality of the natural environment. This assessment examines how these indicators vary across urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Energy Performance

Energy efficiency in residential and commercial properties is a key consideration in sustainable development. This assessment reviews the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings of buildings in different locations, considering variations in building stock, insulation, and renewable energy integration.

Health Assessments

Health indicators, including the prevalence of depression and broader mental health trends, are assessed alongside the IMD, which evaluates deprivation across multiple domains such as income, employment, education, and health outcomes. This assessment focuses on identifying differences across urban, suburban, and rural areas.

- Meets and exceeds district average scores
- Fails to meet district average scores

Urban Sites

| AHAH Index | Health | Energy Performance |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| ● Air Quality | ● Estimated prevalence of depression | 77% - EPC 'B' |
| ● Retail Outlets | ● Mental Health | 23% - EPC 'C' |
| ● Natural Environment | ● Index of Multiple Deprivation | |
| ● Health Services | | |

Suburban Sites

| AHAH Index | Health | Energy Performance |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| ● Air Quality | ● Estimated prevalence of depression | 95% - EPC 'B' |
| ● Retail Outlets | ● Mental Health | 5% - EPC 'C' |
| ● Natural Environment | ● Index of Multiple Deprivation | |
| ● Health Services | | |

Rural Sites

| AHAH Index | Health | Energy Performance |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| ● Air Quality | ● Estimated prevalence of depression | 92% - EPC 'B' |
| ● Retail Outlets | ● Mental Health | 8% - EPC 'C' |
| ● Natural Environment | ● Index of Multiple Deprivation | |
| ● Health Services | | |



2.7 Findings

Split in quality

There is a split in the quality of development across the district. 52% good to very good, with 48% mediocre to very poor.

Showcase good design in the district

High scoring sites were above and beyond the national average. The district can showcase many well designed communities in the district.

Patchy Practice

Across the district there was a wide selection of development. Distribution of good or poor scoring sites could not be pin pointed to location in the district.

Green development missing

Green and blue infrastructure was a consistent poor scoring theme across the sites. Often overlooked and contributing poorly to communities in East Suffolk.

Fig 2.71 Residential Development, Framlingham

2.7 Lessons Learnt

Accessible facilities and services

Audited sites were generally in sustainable locations to local services and facilities.



Housing for all

The mix of housing delivered provided options from terrace through to detached homes. Affordable was well located and tenure blind.



Green Infrastructure

Approach to green infrastructure was consistently poor, from open spaces, to tree lined streets. Landscaping was not a priority.



Sustainable Drainage

As well as green infrastructure, SuDs was a consistently low scoring theme across all sites. Poor consideration and integration into communities.



Connectivity

Many sites scored poorly on the ability to connect to the local network or develop better connections to the settlements they were built in. This created car-focused developments throughout the district.



Context driven design

Many of the sites lacked the ability to provide characterful design connections to their contexts. Whether this was landscape, built or historic links.



Parking

Many poor approaches to dealing with parked vehicles in many of the communities. This led to vehicle focused communities and cluttered streets.

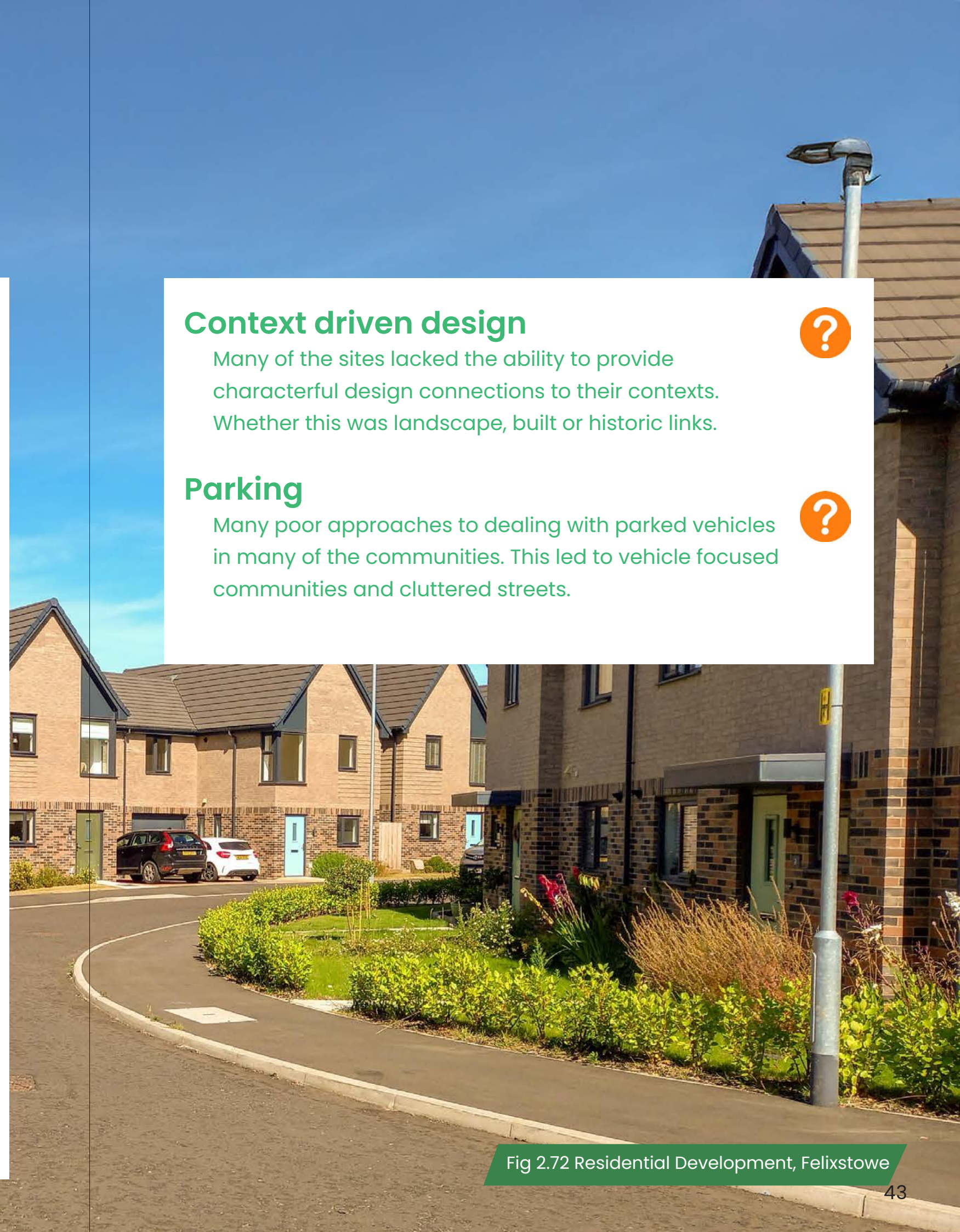


Fig 2.72 Residential Development, Felixstowe

03.

Land Budget

3.1 Findings

Increase Active Travel Infrastructure

Prioritise higher allocations for cycling and walking routes, especially in suburban and rural areas where space permits, to promote active travel and reduce reliance on private vehicles.

Prioritise Sustainable Drainage Systems

Ensure that future developments incorporate Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS) to effectively manage surface water risks, enhance the permeability of the landscape, and mitigate flooding.

Optimise Parking Strategies

Consider reducing parking space allocations in urban areas where public transport and active travel options are readily available, to discourage car dependency and promote more sustainable modes of transport.

Balance Private and Public Space

Encourage developments to allocate adequate public open spaces, ensuring equitable access to green infrastructure for all residents, thus improving the quality of life

Fig 3.11 Google Earth Image

3.2

Survey Approach

The East Suffolk Council Land Budget Study was conducted to assess and quantify the existing and potential land use patterns across selected sites in the district. This structured approach allowed East Suffolk to gain a clear understanding of each site’s current land use composition and its potential suitability for future development or conservation. The study methodology provided a comprehensive breakdown of land usage, represented in quantifiable percentages, across key categories relevant to sustainable, community-oriented growth.

Assessment Process and Steps

The study followed a structured assessment process, applying a consistent methodology across all sites to quantify land use elements accurately and ensure comparability. This approach centred on site audits and spatial analysis, with a focus on detailed land-use quantification.



Buildings

This category includes the footprint of all constructed buildings on the site, such as residential, commercial, or industrial structures.



Private Amenity Space

This category refers to privately owned outdoor spaces directly associated with individual dwellings, including gardens.



Parking

This includes designated parking areas for vehicles, both for residents and visitors, as well as any structured or surface parking spaces.



Roads

Roads encompass all on-site highways intended for vehicular movement, including main access roads, internal streets, and any shared vehicular paths.



Footpaths and Cycle Lanes

This category refers to paved paths designed for pedestrians and cyclists, often connecting different parts of a site and supporting active travel options.



Green Open Space

Green open space includes public and semi-public outdoor areas dedicated to recreation, relaxation, and ecological value, such as parks, landscaped areas, and play areas.



Verges and Buffers

Verges and buffers refer to landscaped areas located along highways, between property boundaries, and in transitional areas. They serve as visual, noise, and safety barriers between different land uses.



Internal Garages

Internal garages refer to enclosed parking spaces attached to residential buildings, either integrated into the building footprint or as stand-alone structures within the site boundary.



Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS)

SuDS include engineered features designed to manage surface water runoff sustainably, such as rain gardens, swales, and retention basins.

3.2 Survey Results

Expected Development Patterns Revealed: Key Indicators Highlight Opportunities for Improvement in Sustainability and Land Use

The results closely align with expectations based on the different types of development assessed, reflecting the distinct characteristics of urban, suburban, and rural areas. However, the findings also highlight clear opportunities for improvement, particularly in areas such as green infrastructure, parking provision, and the integration of sustainable design solutions. These indicators suggest a need for a more balanced approach to development that prioritises both environmental sustainability and efficient land use.

| | Rural 10 to 30dph | Suburban 31 to 50dph | Urban 51dph+ |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Total number of homes (audit sites) | 258 | 114 | 167 |
| Average number per site | 29 | 127 | 55 |
| Average site area (Ha) | 1.28Ha | 3.52Ha | 0.86Ha |
| Average Density (dph) | 21dph | 37dph | 66dph |
| Land Use | | | |
| Soft Surfaces | 58% | 48% | 42% |
| Hard Surfaces | 28% | 35% | 31% |
| Built Form | 14% | 17% | 27% |
| Per dwelling Ratio | | | |
| Soft Surfaces | 256m2 | 132m2 | 65m2 |
| Hard Surfaces | 123m2 | 97m2 | 48m2 |
| Built Form | 62m2 | 47m2 | 42m2 |



Fig 3.21 Residential Development, Beccles

3.2 Survey Results

The following analysis examines land use distribution across urban, suburban, and rural areas in East Suffolk. The data highlights key differences in building coverage, green space, parking provision, and hard surfaces, providing insight into the spatial characteristics of these areas.

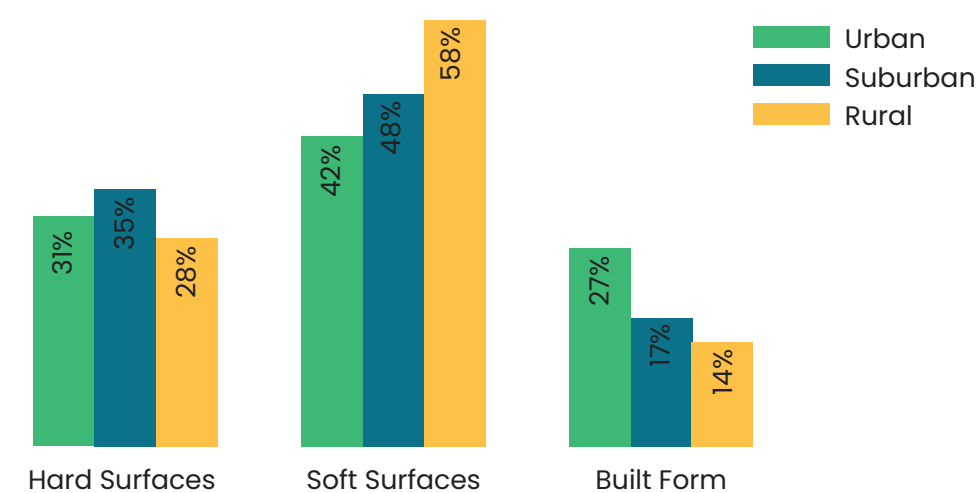


Fig 3.21 Development Type Land Use Breakdown

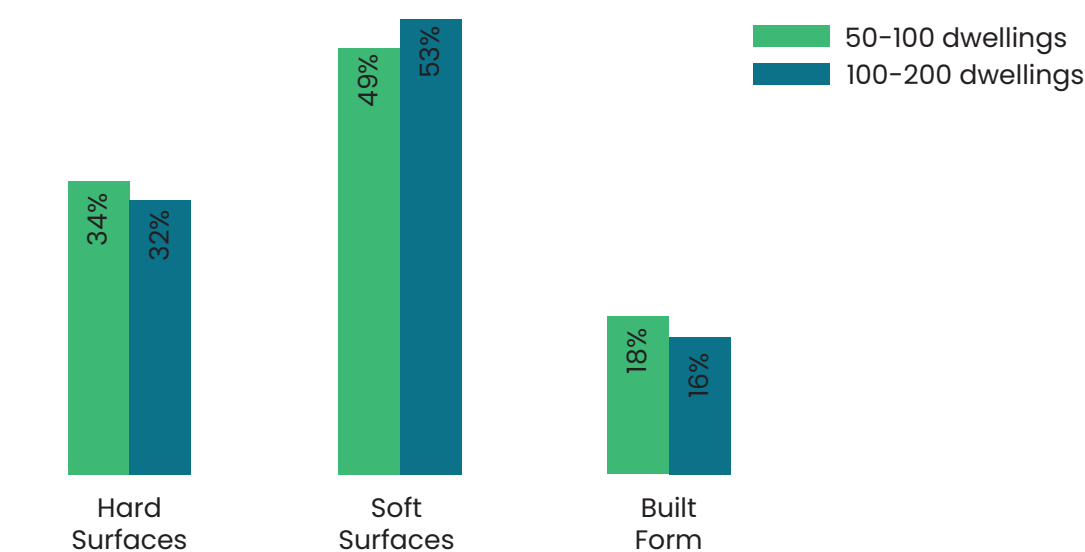


Fig 3.22 Development Size Land Use Breakdown

1.0 Built Form and Density

Urban sites exhibit the highest built form coverage, with an average of 27%, indicating a focus on compact development. Suburban sites allocate 17%, while rural areas allocate the least at 14%.

Private amenity space increases as density decreases, from 17% in urban areas to 39% in rural areas. This suggests that less dense developments are more likely to incorporate larger outdoor spaces.

Overall, the data reveals a trend where urban areas prioritise built form to accommodate higher housing density, whereas suburban and rural areas provide more private amenity space due to their lower density.

2.0 Transport Infrastructure and Parking

Suburban areas allocate the highest proportion of road space, at 15%, compared to 11% in urban areas and 12% in rural areas, which could reflect a greater reliance on road-based transport in suburban settings or the delivery of lower density sites.

Parking space remains a notable feature in all developments, with urban sites allocating 14%, suburban sites 12%, and rural sites 9%.

Despite policy support for alternative transport, the provision for cycling and walking infrastructure remains low across all settings, with an average of only 6%.

The data highlights that, while parking continues to dominate land use, there is significant potential to improve infrastructure for active travel, particularly in suburban and rural developments.

3.2

Survey Results

3.0 Green Infrastructure and Open Spaces

Urban areas allocate the least green infrastructure, at 14%, compared to 16% in suburban areas and 19% in rural areas, reflecting a greater emphasis on landscaping and buffer zones in lower-density developments.

Open space provision is also more limited in urban areas (11%) than in suburban (6%) and rural areas (5%). However, these figures should be interpreted with caution, as the appropriate level of open space depends on local context and development patterns. In dense urban settings, a lower percentage of open space does not necessarily indicate poor design—well-planned spaces, even in compact developments, can still deliver high-quality public realm and biodiversity benefits.

The findings highlight the need to enhance green infrastructure and open space provision, particularly in urban areas, while also ensuring that assessments consider local constraints and opportunities rather than relying on percentage allocations alone.

4.0 Surface Composition and Land Use Allocation

Urban developments allocate 31% of land to hard surfaces, including roads, parking, and footpaths, to support the infrastructure needs of high-density living.

Suburban areas allocate the highest proportion of hard surfaces, at 35%, reflecting the balance between residential areas and the infrastructure needed for moderate-density living.

Rural developments allocate the least amount of land to hard surfaces, at 27%, with the majority of surfaces being soft (61%). This aligns with the lower density and larger open spaces typical of rural settings.

The varying surface compositions across these categories underscore how land use prioritises built infrastructure in urban areas, a mix of built and open spaces in suburban areas, and more natural landscapes in rural settings. These distinctions are influenced by the density of developments and the corresponding need for infrastructure versus green or open spaces.

5.0 Parking Solutions and Future Mobility

Parking remains a significant land-use consideration across all residential types, with urban developments allocating 14%, suburban sites 12%, and rural sites 9%.

Despite a strong emphasis on reducing car dependency, particularly in urban areas, parking spaces continue to occupy a substantial portion of land.

There is an opportunity to rethink parking provision, particularly in urban areas where alternative transport options are more readily available. Introducing shared or car-free developments could be a potential solution.

Innovative parking solutions, such as underground or multi-storey parking, could help optimise land use and support more sustainable development.

3.3

Example Site 01

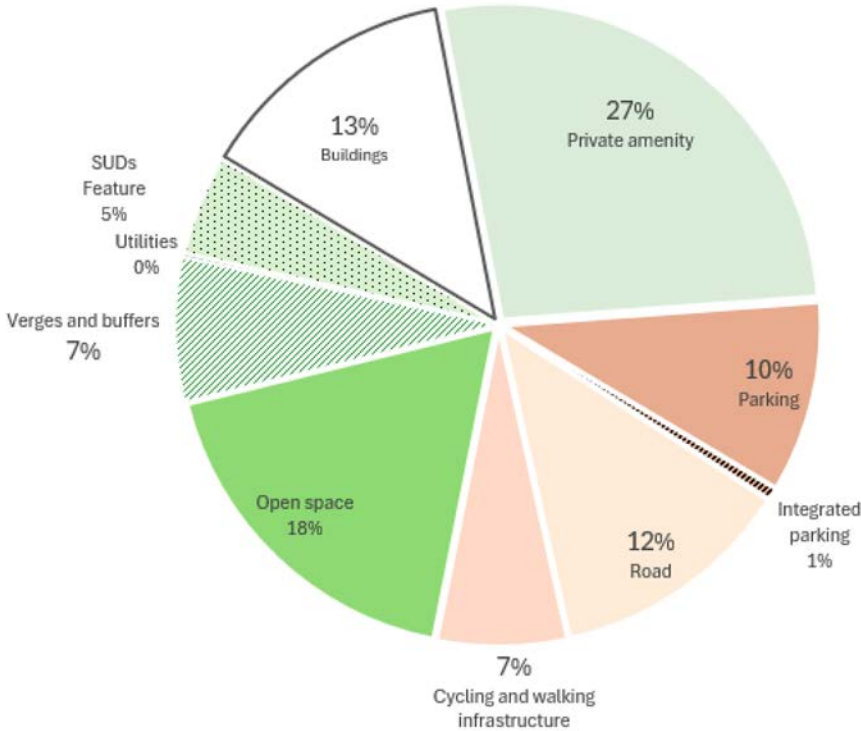


Site Area: 5.05Ha
Number of Dwellings: 187
Density: 37 dph
Parking ratio: 1.7 spaces per dwelling (312 total)

Land Budget:
Residential: 51% - below suburban average (61%)
Highways: 12% - below suburban average (16%)
Green Infrastructure: 30% - above suburban average (16%)
Cycling and Walking: 7% - meets suburban average (7%)

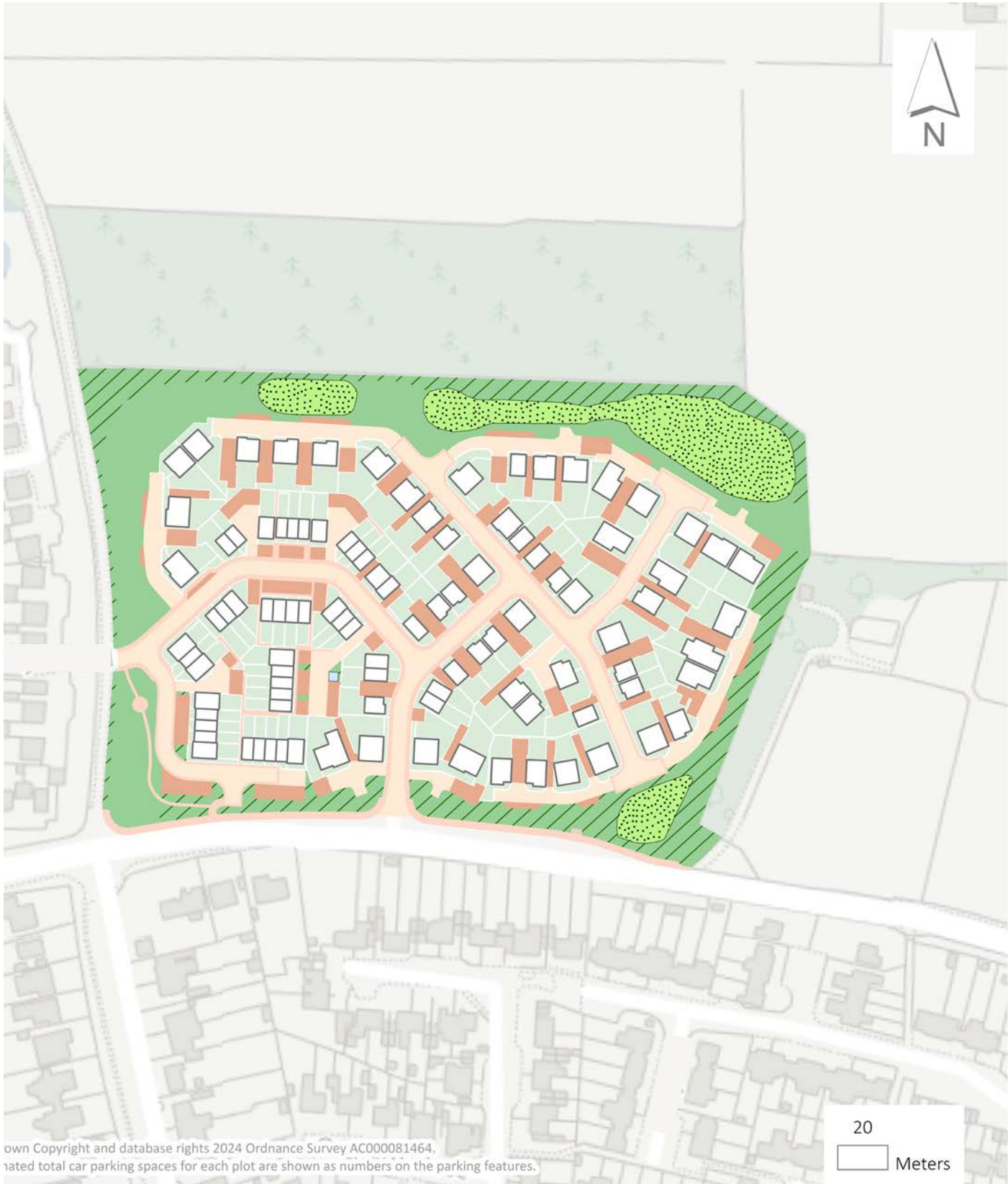
Hard Surfacing: 29% - below suburban average (35%)
Soft Surfacing: 57% - above suburban average (48%)

* average percentages are based on the audited sites within East Suffolk as part of this study. These provide a comparison rather than a benchmark of success.



3.3

Example Site 02

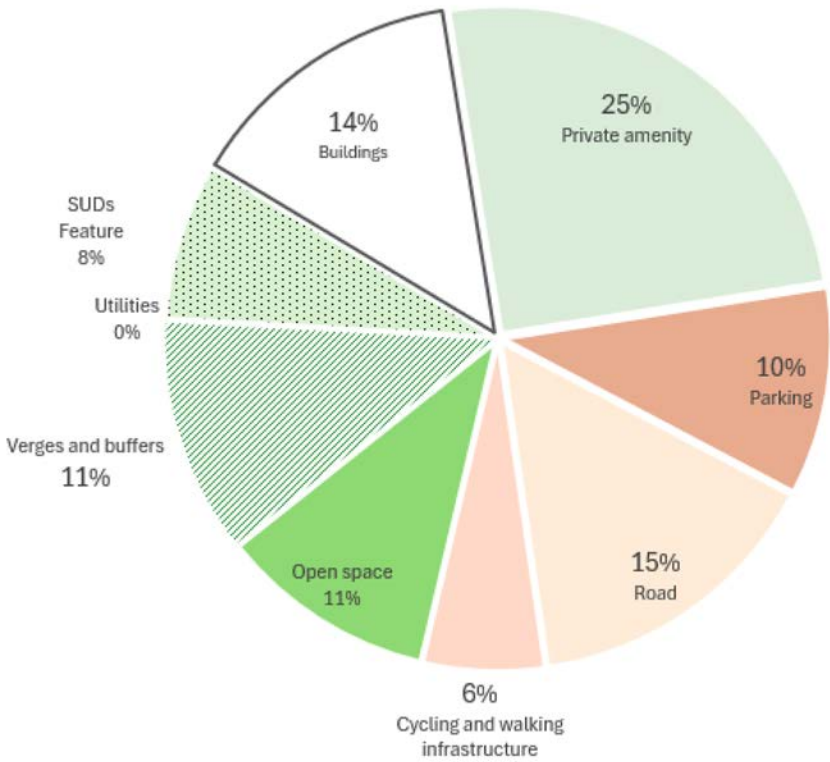


Site Area: 3.1 Ha
Number of Dwellings: 107
Density: 35 dph
Parking ratio: 2 spaces per dwelling (215 total)

Land Budget:
Residential: 49% – below suburban average (61%)
Highways: 15% – below suburban average (16%)
Green Infrastructure: 30% – above suburban average (16%)
Cycling and Walking: 6% – below suburban average (7%)

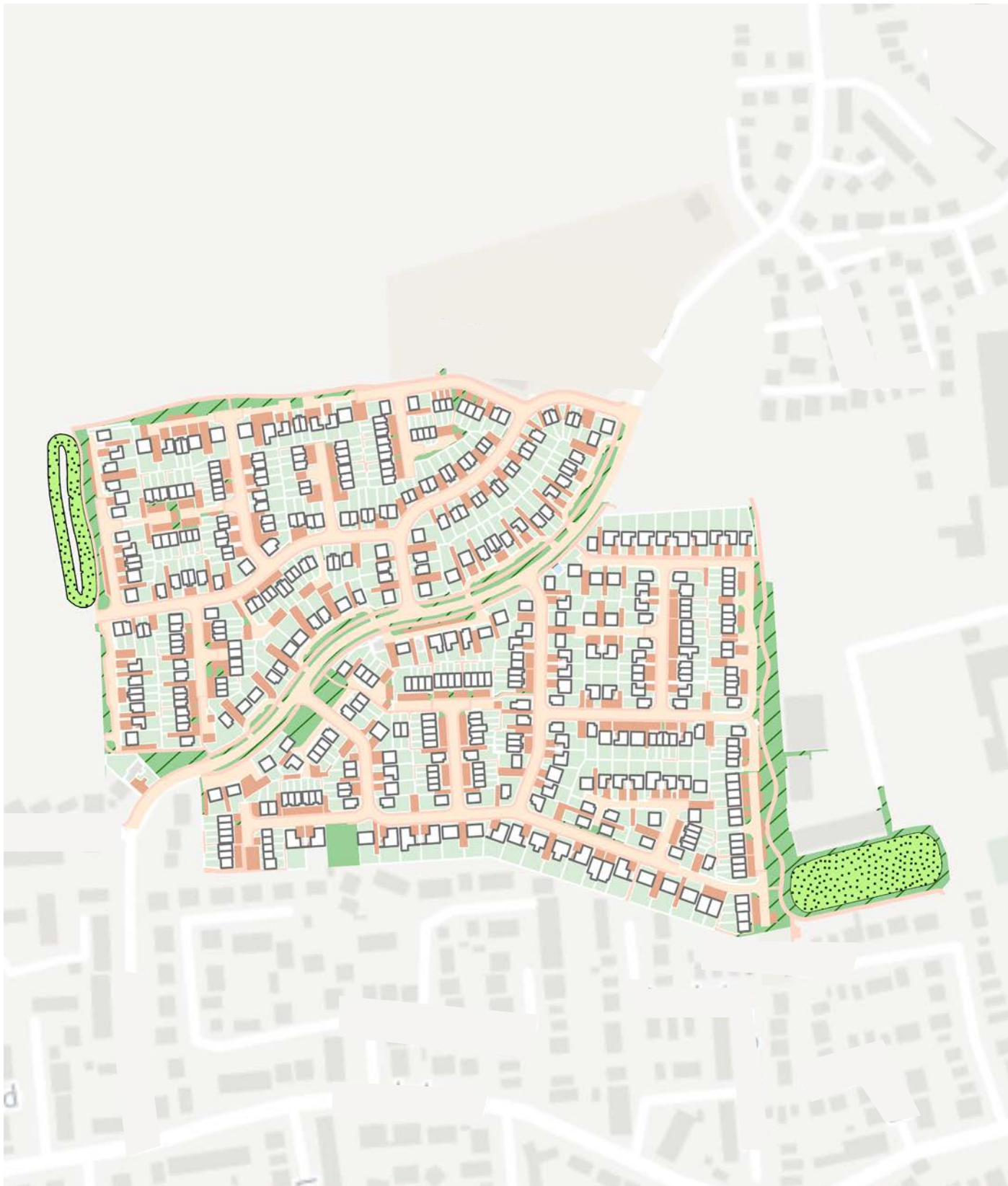
Hard Surfacing: 31% – below suburban average (35%)
Soft Surfacing: 55% – above suburban average (48%)

* average percentages are based on the audited sites within East Suffolk as part of this study. These provide a comparison rather than a benchmark of success.



3.3

Example Site 03

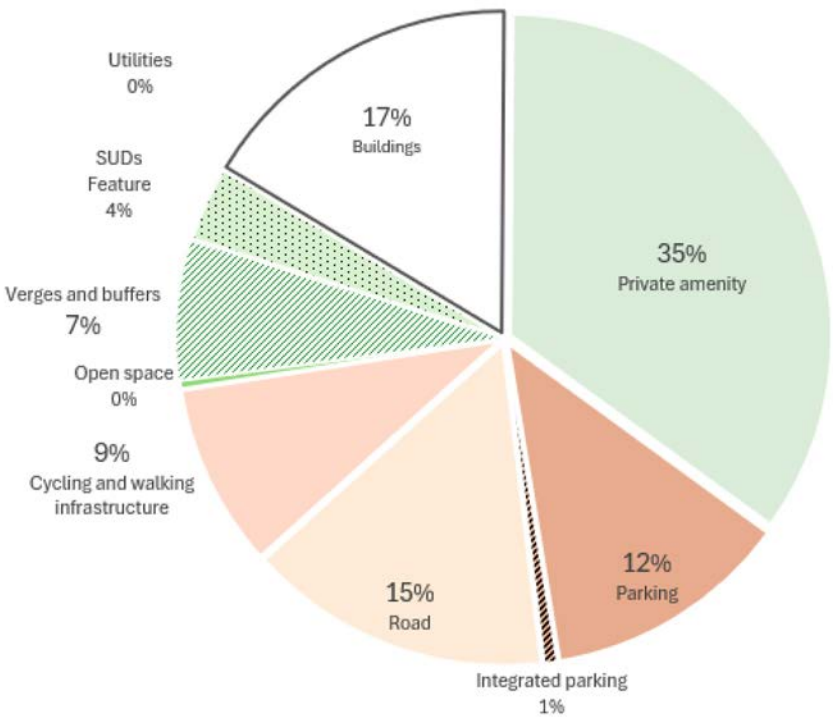


Site Area: 13.55 Ha
Number of Dwellings: 256
Density: 35 dph
Parking ratio: 2.3 spaces per dwelling

Land Budget:
Residential: 65% – above suburban average (61%)
Highways: 15% – below suburban average (16%)
Green Infrastructure: 11% – below suburban average (16%)
Cycling and Walking: 9% – above suburban average (7%)

Hard Surfacing: 36% – above suburban average (35%)
Soft Surfacing: 46% – below suburban average (48%)

* average percentages are based on the audited sites within East Suffolk as part of this study. These provide a comparison rather than a benchmark of success.



04.

Design Skills Audit

4.1 Findings

Confidence

76% of DM Officers are confident in providing design related advice to an applicant, a fall of just 2%.

Design Officers

90% of planning officers engage with design officers on a regular basis on design related matters. Constant from 2022.

Priorities

81% of DM officers stated that design quality is a priority but not the most important.

Training

Design training increased by 27% since 2022 with 61% of planning officers attending design related training over the past 12 months, this is compared to just 34% in 2022.

Design Policy

Opinions on the local plan design policies changed since 2022 with a drop of 22% of DM Officers considering the local plan policies provide suitable weighting to promote high quality design.

Member Support

89% of planning officers consider members recognises and support good design. This is an increase of 20% since 2022.

Development Quality

Opinion of the quality of residential development in East Suffolk has increased from mediocre to good by planning officers.

Design Codes

Officers consider Codes provide further quality to development with 92% of officers supporting this.



Fig 4.11 Suffolk Design visit to Lavenham

4.2

Approach to the Audit

In 2022, East Suffolk Council conducted its inaugural Design Skills Audit to establish a benchmark for the understanding and application of design across its Planning Service. This comprehensive review provided valuable insights into the skills, resources, and attitudes towards design within key teams, including Development Management, Planning Policy, and Energy Projects. Given that there have been staff changes since the previous audit, the purpose of this review was to assess skills across the service as a whole, identifying both continuity and areas of development. It served as a diagnostic tool, identifying strengths such as the reliance on and respect for Design Officers, as well as areas requiring improvement, including limited training opportunities, inconsistent access to design resources, and varying levels of confidence in promoting and negotiating high-quality design.

The findings from the 2022/2023 audit highlighted a strong willingness among council officers to engage further with design principles, alongside notable systemic challenges:

- **Training Gaps:** While many officers expressed a desire for additional design training, opportunities were limited and inconsistent.
- **Inconsistent Use of Resources:** The availability and utilisation of Design Officers and tools varied, often hindered by capacity constraints.
- **Confidence Levels:** Senior officers were generally more confident in advocating for design improvements, whereas junior staff faced difficulties asserting their authority in design negotiations.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Officers often encountered challenges in aligning development stakeholders around the council's aspirations for well-designed places.

These insights have informed initial steps to address the gaps, including plans for enhanced training programmes, the creation of a centralised Design Resource Hub, and fostering a council-wide network of Design Advocates. However, the journey towards embedding design excellence at every level of decision-making remains ongoing.

The decision to repeat the Design Skills Audit in 2023/2024 reflects the council's dedication to continuous improvement. This year's audit aims to build upon the groundwork laid previously, measure progress against the original benchmarks, and refine strategies to overcome persistent challenges. By doing so, East Suffolk Council seeks to ensure that its officers are fully equipped to champion design quality and that its vision for placemaking is consistently realised.

MARCH 2023

DESIGN SKILLS AUDIT

2022/2023

PLANNING SERVICE



4.3 Results

Importance of Design in Planning

Design remains a key consideration in planning, despite marginal decline in focus.

The 2024 audit reveals that while design remains an important consideration in planning decisions, its prominence has slightly declined compared to 2022. The proportion of respondents viewing design as the most important priority fell from 46% in 2022 to 28% in 2024, although it continues to be recognised as a priority by all respondents (increase of 18%). Similarly, confidence in refusing applications based solely on design matters decreased from 83% to 76%, indicating a growing hesitancy among staff. Despite these shifts, the majority (80%) consistently consider design frequently or always when assessing applications.

While there is a marginal decrease in some areas, the overall stance remains positive, with design still being well considered across the planning service as an important factor. These trends highlight an opportunity to reinforce the importance of high-quality design through more ambitious policies, targeted training, and a focus on staff to confidently defend design considerations in decision-making processes.

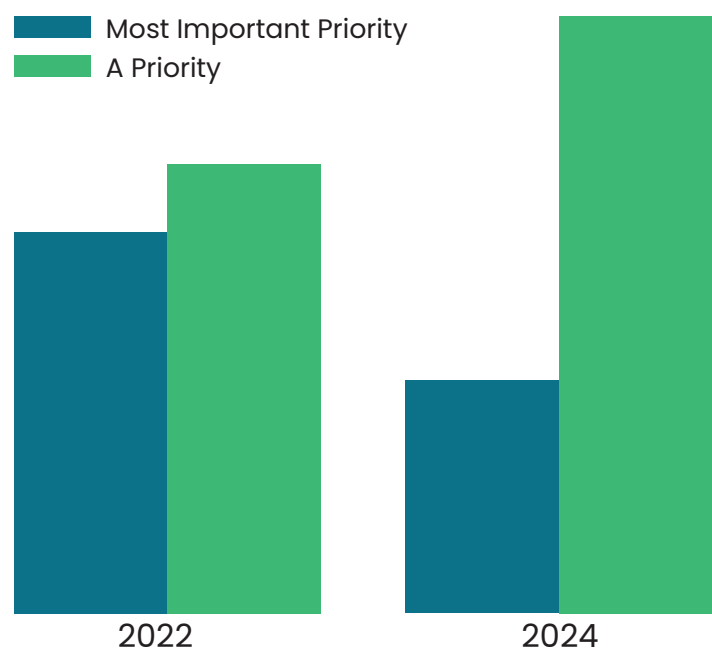


Fig 4.31 Question 1 - Importance of design in place making.

Confidence and Challenges in Providing Design Advice

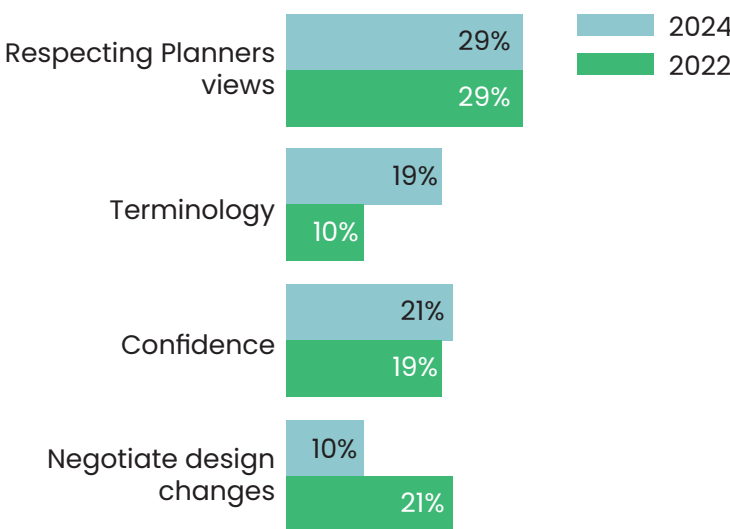
Planners face growing challenges in providing design advice amidst private sector pressures.

The 2024 results show a slight decline in planners' confidence in providing design advice, with 64% feeling comfortable, down from 72% in 2022. This suggests a need for further support and training to help planners guide applicants more effectively.

Challenges in communication remain, with 29% citing agents, architects, and applicants not respecting planners' design views, a figure unchanged since 2022. Confidence as a challenge has increased slightly to 21% from 19%, while issues with terminology have risen to 19%. The difficulty in negotiating design changes has dropped significantly to 10%.

Respect for planners' design opinions has also declined marginally, with 57% of planners feeling their views are respected, down from 59% in 2022. The "Not Applicable" responses have increased to 22%, suggesting a shift in the nature of interactions with design professionals.

Overall, while planners continue to face challenges in communication and confidence, these findings highlight areas for improvement, including clearer communication and greater support in design advisory roles.



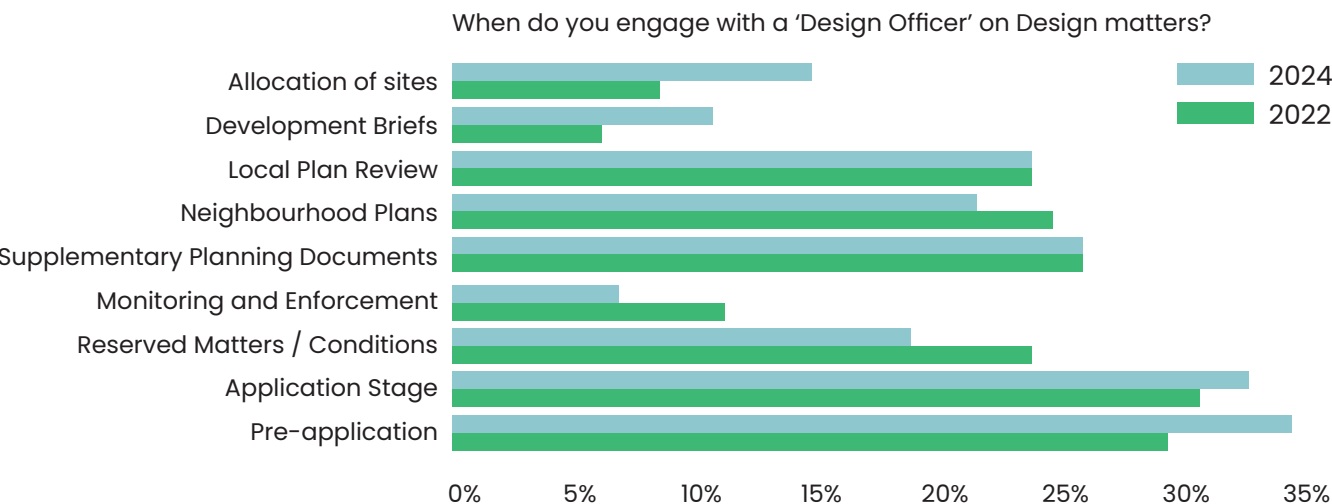
Collaboration with Design Officers

Planners Maintain Strong Engagement with Design Officers, Shifting Focus Across Planning Stages

The 2024 results indicate strong and stable engagement with the Council’s Design Officers, with 90% of planners engaging with them on design matters, a slight increase from 89% in 2022. Most planners also report a high level of confidence in interpreting and communicating Design Officer responses, with 92% feeling they understand and can engage with applicants on the feedback provided, up from 90% in 2022.

In terms of when planners engage with Design Officers, Pre-application engagement saw a slight increase to 20% in 2024, compared to 19% in 2022. However, Application Stage and Reserved Matters/Conditions engagements have seen small decreases, falling to 19% and 11%, respectively. Monitoring and Enforcement engagement decreased to 4%, down from 8%.

These results suggest a consistent and high level of engagement with Design Officers, with only slight variations in the stages at which this engagement occurs. The increase in Pre-application and Supplementary Planning Documents engagements highlights areas of active involvement, while the decline in certain other areas may offer opportunities for further improvement and a more consistent approach across the planning process.



Topics of Design Advice

Planners Confident in Design Advice, but Sustainability, Green Infrastructure, and Connectivity Remain Key Challenges

The 2024 survey results highlight planners’ confidence in providing design advice and common design issues that arise in applications.

Planners reported strong confidence in advising on Residential Extensions, Elevations, Height, and Materials, with an increase in confidence around Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), Design Codes, and Green Infrastructure. However, Garden Community Principles and Sustainable Neighbourhoods showed lower confidence, indicating areas for further training.

Recurring design topics include Scale, Massing, and Contextual Fit, with planners focusing on proportionality, avoiding overdevelopment, and respecting local character. Materials and Aesthetic Quality also feature prominently, with a focus on selecting appropriate materials and avoiding generic designs.

Landscaping and Ecology is another key theme, with planners prioritising the integration of green spaces, tree preservation, and SuDS. There is also emphasis on multifunctional green spaces.

Infrastructure and Connectivity remains a concern, with planners highlighting the need for improved pedestrian and cycling connectivity, better active travel infrastructure, and reducing parking and hard surfacing. Functionality and Planning issues, such as balancing form and function in energy infrastructure, were also noted.

These findings show that while planners are confident in providing advice on core issues, sustainability, connectivity, and green infrastructure remain areas of focus for training and growth.

Design Training and Development Needs

Planners show strong demand for design training, with shift toward external learning opportunities.

The 2024 survey highlights key trends in the design training and development needs of planners. While there has been some progress, particularly in external training, challenges remain.

The majority of planners, 79%, received external training, a significant rise from 50% in 2022, while in-house training dropped to 14%, down from 19%. The trend towards external training suggests a preference for specialised, formal learning.

Interest in further training remains high, with 92% of planners expressing a desire for more opportunities, particularly in areas like Street Design, Sustainability, and Masterplanning. Notably, 61% of planners attended the Urban Design Learning programme in 2024, up from 34% in 2022, showing growing engagement with structured design education.

In conclusion, while the uptake of design training is improving, there is still a need to expand and diversify training options, particularly in-house, to ensure all planners have the skills required to address current design challenges.

Design Review Panels

Design Review Panels prove effective, but awareness and involvement see slight decline

The 2024 survey results indicate a slight decline in awareness and involvement with Design Review Panels compared to 2022. In 2024, 39% of respondents reported being aware or involved with the panels, a decrease from 46% in 2022. Despite this, the perception of the impact of Design Review Panels has improved significantly. 100% of respondents in 2024 agreed that the process enhanced the proposals presented, compared to 83% in 2022, with no respondents in 2024 indicating a negative impact.

This suggests that while involvement with Design Review Panels has slightly decreased, their effectiveness in improving design proposals has become more widely acknowledged, presenting an opportunity for increased engagement and further strengthening of the process.

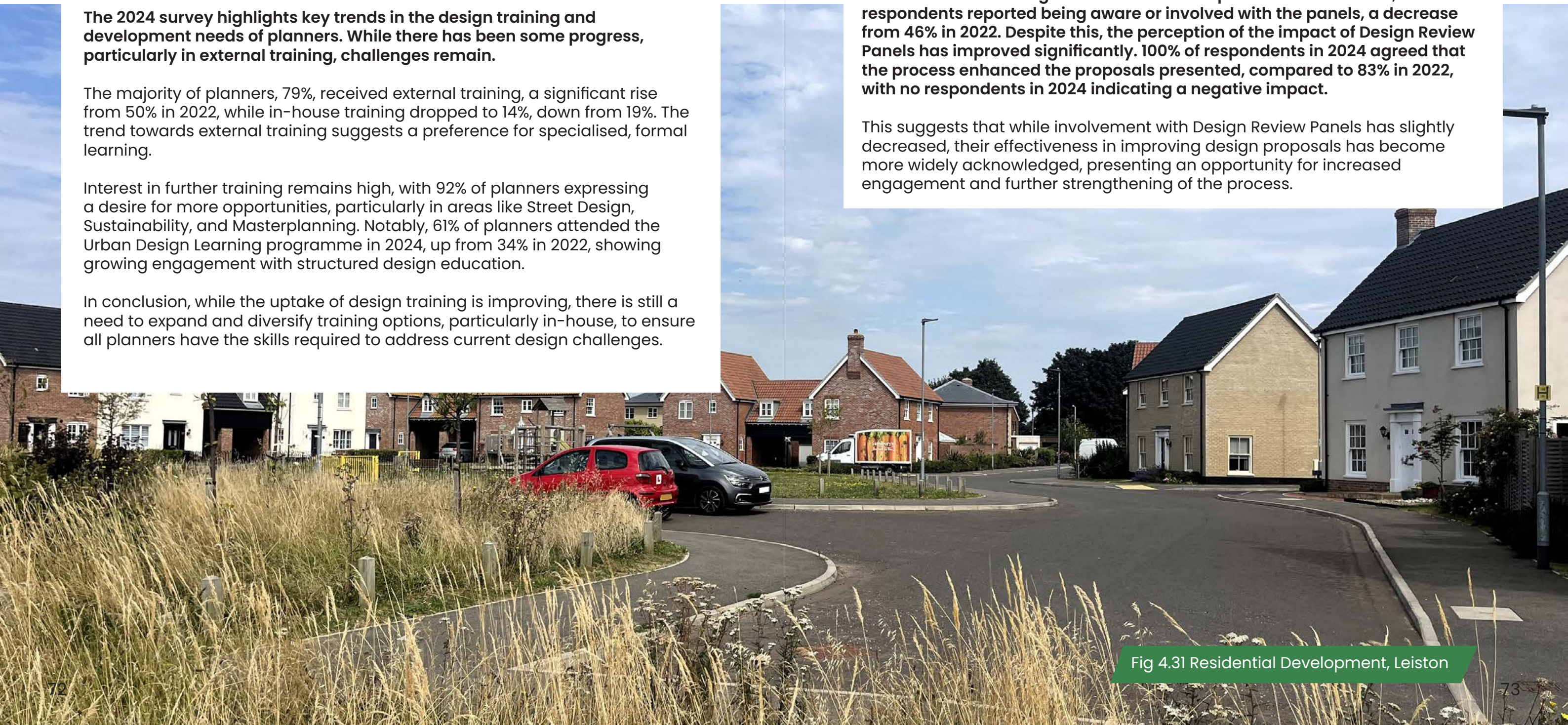


Fig 4.31 Residential Development, Leiston



Fig 4.32 Residential Development, Darsham

Barriers to Achieving Good Design

Strong member support for design, but developer pressures and design barriers impact outcomes.

The 2024 survey highlights key barriers to achieving good design within the planning process, despite strong support from council members.

Support for Good Design: While 89% of respondents agree that council members support good design—up from 68% in 2022—obstacles remain in translating support into outcomes. This suggests political backing does not always lead to practical solutions.

Lack of Clear Guidance: 71% of respondents believe the council still needs further guidance on design aspirations and placemaking, slightly down from 74% in 2022. Barriers identified include lack of clarity in expectations, weak design policies, and cost pressures from developers prioritising financial viability.

Key Barriers to Good Design: Specific challenges include:

- Financial constraints: Developers' focus on reducing costs undermines design quality.
- Lack of early engagement: Delayed designer involvement leads to missed opportunities.
- Client-led proposals: Developers prioritise profit over design quality.
- Poor design precedents: Mediocre designs influence subsequent applications.

While council members support good design, barriers such as financial pressures, late designer engagement, and insufficient policies remain. Addressing these with clearer guidance and stronger policies can help improve outcomes.

05.

Design Industry Survey

5.1 Findings

Strong Support for Design Codes in East Suffolk

Professionals overwhelmingly agree that a design code should prioritise consistency, sustainability, and the preservation of local character to ensure high-quality developments in East Suffolk.

Collaboration Between Public and Private Sectors Crucial for Improving Planning Outcomes

Respondents advocate for greater collaboration between the private sector and local planning authorities, believing it will enhance design quality and streamline planning processes.

Design Professionals Seek More Council Engagement to Foster Innovation

Many respondents urge East Suffolk Council to engage more with designers during the planning process and to better understand the role of innovative and sustainable design in shaping the district.

Professionals Call for Clearer Design Guidelines and Greater Flexibility

Respondents stress the importance of clear, flexible design guidelines that balance consistency with innovation, ensuring new developments align with local character while embracing modern practices.

Local Workshops and Discussions Seen as Key to Improving Design Standards

Survey results show unanimous support for future workshops and multi-sector design events, with professionals eager to collaborate and share insights to improve design outcomes in East Suffolk.

5.1

Survey Approach

As part of the East Suffolk Place Review, a comprehensive survey was conducted among design professionals working within the district. The aim of this survey was to understand the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of architects, urban designers, landscape architects, and other design professionals involved in residential development in East Suffolk. Through their responses, the council sought to gain a deeper insight into how private practices approach placemaking and design quality, as well as the specific support they require from the council to achieve high standards in development.

The survey covered a range of topics critical to the district's development, including the key challenges faced by design professionals, the level of support currently provided by East Suffolk Council, and the types of resources or changes that could better facilitate high-quality design. Respondents were asked to identify the primary obstacles they encounter, such as planning regulations, community opposition, or budget constraints, and to suggest improvements in council practices, such as quicker planning processes or better access to design guidance.

A significant focus was placed on the potential for stronger collaboration between the private and public sectors, with questions exploring how the private sector could support planning officers in improving

design quality and fostering more innovative, sustainable practices. The survey also explored the concept of district-wide design codes, asking design professionals for their views on creating consistent guidelines to ensure high-quality, context-sensitive developments across East Suffolk.

By gathering these insights, the survey has provided valuable feedback that will inform the council's strategies for enhancing placemaking and design quality in the region. The results emphasise the importance of ongoing dialogue between the public and private sectors, as well as the need for policies and resources that support the creation of sustainable, community-oriented places in East Suffolk.

1. About Your Practice

This section aimed to gather basic information about the respondents' practices, including their profession, the geographical scope of their work, and the types of clients they serve. This helped contextualise the feedback based on the respondents' areas of expertise and engagement in East Suffolk.

2. Experiences in Designing for East Suffolk

This section focused on identifying the challenges faced by design professionals when working in the district, such as planning regulations, environmental constraints, and community opposition. It also explored how well East Suffolk Council supports design quality and where improvements may be needed.

3. Improving Design Quality Support

Respondents were asked to identify ways in which East Suffolk Council could better support high-quality design in the region. This included suggestions for improved planning processes, access to resources, and incentives for sustainable or innovative design.

4. Responsibility for Promoting Design Quality

This section explored who respondents believe should hold primary responsibility for promoting design quality in East Suffolk, whether it be the council, design professionals, developers, or other stakeholders. It also assessed the level of engagement from East Suffolk Council in encouraging innovative and sustainable design.

5. Public and Private Sector Support Opportunities

Respondents were asked about the value of private sector support for planning officers in local authorities, exploring potential collaborations and the skills that could be shared to enhance design outcomes.

6. Design Codes

This section explored the potential for district-wide design codes to ensure consistency and quality across developments. Respondents were asked to suggest design elements or guidelines that should be included, as well as those that should be avoided.

7. Additional Feedback

The final section allowed for additional comments and feedback, providing respondents an opportunity to express any further thoughts on the design process, challenges, or opportunities for improvement in East Suffolk.

5.2 Results

Respondent Profile

Survey Highlights Design Professionals' Strong District Focus in East Suffolk

The survey received responses from a variety of professionals within the design industry, including architects (46%), landscape architects (23%), and other roles such as urban designers and planning consultants (8% each). The respondents are primarily from firms in Suffolk, with notable representation from local authorities and private practices.

In terms of the primary client industries, housing developers were the most common clients (46%), followed by private homeowners (31%), local authorities (38%), and commercial sectors (31%). The diversity in client industries reflects a broad range of design work, from residential projects to public sector work.

As for the frequency of working in East Suffolk, 46% of respondents reported that East Suffolk comprises 50% or more of their project work, indicating a high level of regional involvement. Another 46% work occasionally in the area (10–49% of their projects), showing that East Suffolk is an important and recurring area of practice for most respondents.

This profile demonstrates that the majority of participants have substantial experience working in East Suffolk, with a strong focus on housing development and public sector projects, which will inform the subsequent analysis of design challenges and support needs.

Challenges and Current Support

Design Professionals Cite Obstacles Due to Planning and Legal Requirements and Call for Stronger Council Support in East Suffolk

Respondents identified several significant challenges when working in East Suffolk. The primary barriers include planning regulations, environmental or heritage constraints, and budget limitations from clients. These challenges often require trade-offs, such as compromising on design quality to meet planning or legal requirements or financial constraints. There is also a noted tension between sustainability goals and heritage preservation, which complicates design processes, especially for larger developments.

Despite these obstacles, the support provided by East Suffolk Council is perceived as somewhat positive, with 33% of respondents considering the council “very supportive” and another 33% viewing them as “somewhat supportive”. However, 33% of respondents felt the support

was neutral, suggesting room for improvement. The council’s engagement in promoting innovation and sustainability was seen as somewhat lacking by some professionals, with only 22% indicating the council was “very engaged” in encouraging innovative design. Meanwhile, the majority (67%) felt the council was “somewhat engaged”, signalling a desire for greater proactive involvement.

In summary, while East Suffolk Council provides some level of support, respondents highlighted a significant gap in assistance, particularly when it comes to encouraging innovation, navigating regulatory constraints, and addressing sustainability challenges. Strengthening engagement in these areas could better align council efforts with the professional needs on the ground.

Recommendations for Council Action

Design Professionals Call for Stronger Council Support to Elevate Design Quality in East Suffolk

Respondents provided valuable insights into desired council actions to promote high-quality design, emphasising the need for clearer communication, realistic expectations, and increased engagement in the planning process. Many suggested that the council should focus on materials and architectural detailing, as well as ensuring pre-application discussions are more thorough and collaborative. The pre-app process (89% of respondents) was particularly highlighted as an area where further support could make a significant difference.

In terms of specific support needed, respondents highlighted the importance of regular feedback sessions with planning officers (78%), access to design resources (67%), and incentives for sustainable or innovative designs (67%). These forms of support would help bridge the gap between regulatory requirements and the aspiration for high-quality design.

When considering the importance of council support for design outcomes, respondents overwhelmingly viewed it as “essential” or “important” (89%). This underscores the critical role the council plays in shaping the design quality of new developments.

Finally, respondents noted that shared responsibility for design quality should be upheld by both the council and the design professionals. Many suggested that East Suffolk Council should take a more proactive role in setting high standards while allowing design teams the freedom to innovate within those parameters. By fostering a balanced and supportive environment, the council can significantly enhance the quality of development in the area.

In conclusion, the feedback suggests that professionals would greatly benefit from more direct collaboration, clearer expectations, and more targeted support from East Suffolk Council to ensure that development projects achieve high-quality design outcomes.

Collaboration Between Public and Private Sectors

Design Professionals Advocate for Stronger Collaboration Between Public and Private Sectors to Improve Planning Outcomes

The survey revealed a strong consensus among respondents regarding the value of collaboration between the private sector and local planning authorities. All respondents (100%) agreed that there are great opportunities for the private sector to support planning officers in placemaking and design, highlighting the importance of sharing knowledge and experience to improve planning outcomes in East Suffolk.

Respondents identified several skills and knowledge areas where the private sector could help enhance planning officers’ capabilities, including sustainable building practices, innovative design solutions, and community engagement techniques. Additionally, some professionals emphasised the importance of fostering digital design tools and software and ensuring planning officers have a broader understanding of the design legacy. This indicates that private sector input could greatly enhance the ability of planning officers to manage diverse and complex design

challenges in a rapidly changing environment.

In terms of best methods for private sector support, respondents suggested various approaches, with joint knowledge-sharing forums or roundtable discussions and mentorship programs or one-on-one consultations being the most popular methods. Additionally, hosting site or project visits was seen as an effective way for private sector professionals to engage with planning officers directly, offering practical insights into the design process and development challenges.

Overall, the feedback suggests that collaboration between the public and private sectors is seen as crucial for improving design quality and planning outcomes. By fostering knowledge exchange and creating structured opportunities for engagement, the private sector can play a pivotal role in supporting planning officers and enhancing the overall quality of design in East Suffolk.

Future Standards and Engagement

Design Professionals Call for Flexible, Innovative Design Codes and Ongoing Collaboration to Shape Future of East Suffolk

Respondents expressed a strong interest in the development and implementation of design codes in East Suffolk. The majority agreed that the primary purpose of a design code should be to ensure consistency and quality across all developments (63%), while also promoting sustainability and environmental responsibility (50%) and preserving local character and heritage (88%). This highlights the importance of balancing modern design with local identity and environmental concerns to maintain a sense of place in new developments.

When asked about specific guidelines or elements to include in a design code, there was broad support for architectural styles and materials that reflect local character (50%), along with standards for sustainable building practices (38%) and public spaces and community amenities (63%). Respondents also highlighted the need for green and blue infrastructure (38%) and guidelines for integrating new developments with existing neighbourhoods (50%). These elements are seen as essential to ensuring that future developments are not only functional

but also socially and environmentally responsible.

However, there were also concerns about what design codes should exclude. Respondents warned against including overly generic design elements that do not reflect or reference the distinct character of local areas. Many also stressed that design codes should avoid specific material or style mandates that could limit innovation and flexibility in design. Instead, the focus should be on setting clear, high-level principles that allow for creative interpretations, rather than rigid prescriptive rules.

Looking ahead, professionals expressed a strong desire to participate in future workshops or discussions focused on design and placemaking. All respondents (100%) showed interest in engaging in multi-sector design events, recognising the importance of fostering ongoing collaboration and dialogue. Such platforms would provide valuable opportunities to share ideas, align on expectations, and improve design outcomes across both the public and private sectors.



Fig 5.52 Residential Development, Lowestoft

06.

Housing Developer Survey

6.1 Findings

Challenges in Achieving High-Quality Design

100% of developers cite cost pressures as a major barrier to achieving high design quality, with 75% also highlighting time constraints, suggesting that these factors significantly hinder design excellence.

Limited Flexibility in Consultant Use

Although 80% of developers use a mix of internal and external consultants, 20% rely solely on external consultants, indicating a lack of internal resources and potentially limiting control over the design process.

Preference for Bespoke Design Over Standard House Types

67% of developers favour a mix of bespoke and standard house types, while 33% use a set package of house types, reflecting a balance between uniqueness and cost-efficiency

Positive Perception of East Suffolk's Planning System

67% of developers rate their experience with East Suffolk's planning system as very positive, with 33% feeling neutral about the system's effectiveness in supporting design quality

Strong Interest in Future Collaboration

67% of developers express interest in participating in future discussions and workshops on design and placemaking, demonstrating a strong desire for ongoing public-private sector collaboration.

6.1

Survey Approach

As part of the East Suffolk Place Review, a developer survey was conducted to gain insights into the practices, challenges, and perspectives of developers working in the district, particularly in relation to design and placemaking. The primary goal of the survey was to better understand how developers approach residential development in East Suffolk, and to identify opportunities for improving design quality and collaboration across the public and private sectors.

The survey was designed to gather feedback from developers who operate within East Suffolk, exploring the various factors that influence their decisions around design, planning, and placemaking. It sought to understand how developers manage design within their projects, whether through internal teams or external consultants, and to identify the challenges they face in delivering high-quality design. Key themes included the role of design guidance, the importance of design quality in attracting buyers, and the barriers developers encounter, such as cost constraints and planning restrictions.

To explore the relationship between design and customer priorities, the survey examined how developers define “good design” and the aspects of a development that influence property value, such as landscaping and community spaces. It also considered the factors that drive developers to either standardise house types or pursue bespoke designs, and whether bespoke designs lead to higher-quality outcomes.

Another important aspect of the survey was understanding the developer experience with the local planning system. The survey sought feedback on the effectiveness of the East Suffolk planning process, particularly in relation to design considerations, and how the planning authority could better support developers in achieving high-quality outcomes. The value of design officers, review panels, and public sector collaboration were explored, with the aim of improving communication and collaboration between the public and private sectors in future development projects.

The feedback from this survey is intended to inform future initiatives, helping to establish clear design standards and processes that support high-quality, sustainable development in East Suffolk. By understanding the needs and challenges faced by developers, East Suffolk Council aims to create a more supportive environment for delivering outstanding residential developments that meet the needs of the community.

1. Company Information

This section gathered details about developers’ companies, including the regions they operate in, the size and types of residential developments they specialise in, and the housing projects they focus on in East Suffolk (e.g. affordable housing, first-time buyers, high-end housing).

2. Design and Consultants

This section examined how developers approach project design, particularly their use of internal versus external consultants. It covered the roles of internal design teams, the process of appointing external consultants, challenges in this area, and the criteria for selecting consultants. It also explored whether companies have design briefs or guidance for external consultants and whether consultants are retained for ongoing project sign-off.

3. Design

This section focused on the challenges developers face in achieving high design quality, including cost pressures, planning restrictions, and stakeholder conflicts. It also examined how developers define “good design” and whether they have internal guidance or standards for new developments.

4. House Types

This section explored whether developers use standard house type packages or bespoke designs, how often house types are updated, factors influencing their design, and whether bespoke designs are seen as producing better outcomes.

5. Customer Experience

This section investigated what customers prioritise when purchasing new homes, including the importance of design quality (architecture) and features that increase property value, such as landscaping, open spaces, and tree-lined streets.

6. Planning and Engagement

This section explored developers’ experiences with East Suffolk’s planning system regarding design, challenges with the local system, potential improvements, and the role of design and landscape officers and Design Review Panels.

7. Public-Private Sector Collaboration

This section assessed collaboration between the public and private sectors in housing development and design in East Suffolk. Developers were asked to evaluate current collaboration and suggest improvements, including views on public sector involvement in the design process.

6.2 Results

Company Profile and Operational Scope

The survey respondents represent a diverse range of residential development companies, primarily operating within East Suffolk, with some extending into wider Suffolk, Norfolk, and occasionally Essex. Their specialisation ranges from mid-sized developments (10–50 homes) to larger projects, including those exceeding 200 homes. The types of housing developed include market-standard housing, first-time buyer properties, affordable housing, and high-end homes, reflecting a varied portfolio catering to different market segments. This diversity offers insight into the varying priorities and challenges faced by developers in the region when it comes to design and planning.

Design Processes and Consultant Use

Developers Opt for Hybrid Approach in Design: Balancing Internal Teams and External Expertise

The survey reveals a mixed approach to design within the companies, with the majority relying on a combination of internal and external consultants. While internal teams primarily consist of architectural technicians and layout designers, developers typically bring in external experts when additional expertise is needed, such as urban design or landscape architecture. A significant portion of the companies appoint external consultants based on referrals, their specific expertise, or through established relationships, and use a range of criteria including experience, cost, and delivery timescales to select them.

The use of internal teams is largely driven by the need for continuity in design details and closer management of bespoke projects. However, challenges in appointing consultants are often linked to capacity issues, particularly regarding time constraints. While external consultants are not retained for site monitoring, chartered architects are typically preferred due to their experience. Notably, the companies generally do not use set design briefs or formal guidance for external consultants, which may reflect the flexibility of their design processes.



Fig 6.21 Residential Development, Saxmundham

Design Quality and Customer Priorities

Balancing Quality and Customer Expectations: Developers Highlight Challenges in Achieving High Design Standards

The theme of design quality and customer priorities explores the challenges developers face in achieving high-quality design while responding to customer needs and market demands. Developers highlighted cost pressures, time constraints, and conflicting stakeholder interests as significant barriers to delivering high design standards. Despite these challenges, “good design” is often defined by developers as something that is site-specific, adaptable, and sensitive to the surrounding environment, although no single definition fits all developments.

The use of internal design guidance is limited, with most developers employing a mix of standard and bespoke house types to suit the specific demands of each project. Factors such as the location, material availability, and customer expectations play a crucial role in shaping the design and architecture of housing developments. For example, developers noted that a focus on maximising natural light and appealing aesthetics in the design of homes is crucial to meeting customer preferences.

When it comes to customer priorities, developers indicated that location, price, and the quality of the design and specification are the most important factors for buyers. Sustainability, particularly with regard to running costs, is increasingly becoming a priority, reflecting growing consumer awareness of environmental impact. Additionally, features such as landscaping, open spaces, and tree-lined streets are recognised as having a significant impact on property value, with developers noting that the external environment is just as crucial as the homes themselves in creating attractive, desirable developments.

In conclusion, while achieving high design quality remains a challenge, developers are focused on striking a balance between meeting market demands and delivering developments that are both aesthetically pleasing and functional, ensuring that they resonate with customers’ aspirations and expectations.

Interaction with the Planning System

Developers Praise East Suffolk’s Planning System but Call for Clearer Guidance and Faster Decisions

This theme delves into developers’ experiences with East Suffolk’s planning system, focusing on the efficiency of the planning process, the role of design officers and panels, and opportunities for improvement. A significant portion of developers (67%) rated their experience with East Suffolk’s planning system positively, with some highlighting it as “best in class” for handling major applications. However, challenges still exist, particularly in dealing with conflicting stakeholder requirements, including those from the Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFA), highways, and design officers.

Despite these challenges, developers are keen on aligning design guidance across various sectors to enhance the process. The feedback points to a desire for clearer communication between planning and adoption officers within the County Council. Developers are also looking for improvements in the overall planning framework, advocating for a better reflection of the additional costs of high-quality design in policies and

viability assessments.

Regarding the involvement of design and landscape officers, developers generally value their input. Two-thirds of developers (67%) consider their contributions valuable, with many emphasising the importance of building strong relationships to ensure smoother processes. However, there is some scepticism regarding the necessity of Design Review Panels. All respondents agreed that the panels do not add value and may slow down the planning process, especially when planning officers are well-equipped to make decisions on their own.

The findings suggest that improvements in collaboration, design guidance alignment, and empowering planning officers to make decisions could streamline the development process, leading to more efficient and high-quality outcomes for all stakeholders.

Collaboration and Future Engagement

East Suffolk Developers Advocate for Improved Public-Private Partnerships in Design and Planning

The responses highlight the importance of collaboration between the public and private sectors in East Suffolk, with developers generally reporting positive interactions but noting areas for improvement. A strong theme in the feedback is the desire for clearer, more aligned design guidance, which would enhance cooperative efforts and streamline processes. Several respondents suggested that greater communication and early-stage planning workshops would be beneficial in fostering more

productive partnerships. Developers expressed particular interest in future workshops, discussions, and multi-sector design events, indicating a willingness to continue engaging in dialogue aimed at improving placemaking. The overall sentiment reflects a commitment to creating high-quality developments through effective collaboration, while also seeking greater empowerment and trust from public sector partners to make decisions that align with both community needs and development goals.



Fig 6.52 Residential Development, Halesworth

07.

Findings & Outcomes

7.1 Place Review Findings

The Place Review findings have been presented in five categories...

1. Development Quality
2. Planning and Design
3. Council Expertise
4. Collaboration and Industry Feedback
5. National and Regional Benchmarks

Development Quality

Split in Quality:

A marked division in development quality was identified. While 52% of developments were rated good to very good, showcasing excellence in some areas, 48% were assessed as mediocre to very poor. This indicates room for improvement. High-performing sites exceeded national averages, underlining East Suffolk's potential to deliver high-quality, well-designed communities.

Green and Blue Infrastructure:

A recurring theme across developments was the lack of sustainable design features. Green spaces, biodiversity enhancements, and effective sustainable drainage systems were often either absent or insufficiently integrated. Addressing these gaps presents an opportunity to improve both environmental and community outcomes, aligning with broader sustainability goals.

Planning and Design

Patchy Practice:

There is an evident lack of geographical consistency in design quality. Both high and low performing developments are distributed across the district, with no clear patterns. This suggests the need for a more uniform approach to achieving design excellence.

Context-Driven Design:

Many developments fail to respond effectively to the local character and context of their surroundings. Generic layouts, often prioritising vehicle access over pedestrian and community needs, result in less liveable spaces.

Affordable Housing:

Affordable housing provisions performed well in terms of location and being tenure-blind, ensuring visual and spatial integration with market-rate homes.



Fig 7.12 Residential Development, Halesworth

Council Expertise

Design Skills Audit:

The audit revealed a strong commitment among council staff to raising design standards, which is encouraging. However, significant gaps remain in terms of access to training, resources, and confidence, particularly among junior planning officers. These gaps limit the council's ability to enforce high standards across all developments.

Engagement Challenges:

While design officers are highly engaged, planning staff face difficulties negotiating design improvements with private developers. This can result in missed opportunities to influence design positively at the pre-application and application stages



Fig 7.13 Residential Development, Saxmundham

Collaboration and Industry Feedback

Private Sector Insights:

Developers and other private sector professionals emphasised the need for clearer, more prescriptive design guidance from the council. Stronger and more consistent engagement was also requested to help navigate the design and planning process more efficiently.

Barriers to Quality:

Cost and time pressures were frequently cited as major barriers to achieving high-quality design. However, private sector stakeholders expressed a willingness to collaborate on innovative, sustainable solutions if frameworks and expectations were better defined.



Fig 7.14 Residential Development, Framlingham

National and Regional Benchmarks

Performance Context:

East Suffolk is performing above regional averages in delivering developments rated good or very good, demonstrating its potential for leadership in quality design. However, the district also has a higher proportion of developments rated poor or very poor compared to national benchmarks. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to elevate the lower-performing developments and bridge the gap with national standards.



Fig 7.15 Residential Development, Felixstowe

7.2 Place Review Recommendations

- ✓ **Enhance Green Infrastructure:**
Prioritise green and blue infrastructure in planning policies to address recurring deficiencies.
- ✓ **Strengthen Training and Resources:**
Expand design training opportunities and improve access to design resources for council staff.
- ✓ **Improve Collaboration:**
Foster stronger public-private partnerships through workshops and regular feedback sessions.
- ✓ **Refine Guidance:**
Develop clear, locally tailored design codes and guidance planning documents to guide sustainable and context-sensitive growth

