

home comforts – results from the lockdown stress-test



Lockdown shrank many of our worlds physically to our homes and their immediate neighbourhoods, yet the roles we needed to perform there expanded – from working from home, to home-schooling, to shopping and exercise. Technology has helped to fill key gaps, leading some to ask whether we will ever fully return to the patterns of life that we saw in the pre-COVID era.

On that front, only time will tell, but in the short term the period of lockdown provided a unique opportunity to stress-test our homes and their immediate environments; to gauge how they have performed during this period, whether or not they have supported our everyday needs, and how we might need to design or adapt them in the future to build in a greater resilience and capacity to support happy and healthy lives.

That was the purpose of the *Home Comforts*¹ survey completed by 2,500 households across the UK during the early summer of 2020.

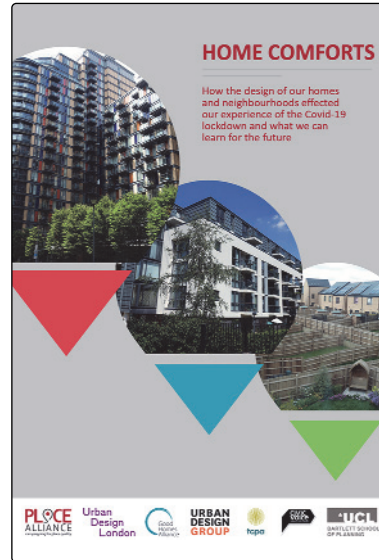
Our experience of lockdown

The good news is that the majority felt:

- comfortable in their homes (two-thirds);
- satisfied with their neighbourhood (three-quarters); and
- a bolstered sense of community during lockdown (five-sixths).

Unfortunately, this still leaves significant populations with a much poorer experience. If extrapolated across the UK, 11 million people were uncomfortable in their homes, 10 million felt no tangible change in community feeling, and 3 million suffered from poorly designed neighbourhoods that did not meet their basic everyday requirements.

Examining these experiences against a range of factors revealed that occupier tenure, building type and neighbourhood age represented consistently the strongest explanatory variables for the discontent. Owner-occupiers were the most comfortable in their



Home Comforts surveyed 2,500 households

homes, most satisfied with their neighbourhoods, and received the strongest boost in community feeling. They were followed by private renters and, some margin behind, by social renters. This is explained partly by the finding that houses were more comfortable than flats, with apartment blocks – more prevalent in the social sector – becoming progressively less comfortable and offering a lower sense of community the higher they were off the ground. Similarly, neighbourhoods where apartment blocks predominate more often failed to meet the everyday needs of residents.

Perhaps most worrying was the finding that the least-comfortable dwellings, least-supportive neighbourhoods (for everyday needs) and weakest sense of community correlated directly with the age of dwellings. Thus the most recently built neighbourhoods (built between 2010 and 2020) recorded the lowest levels of satisfaction against all these factors and the oldest (built before 1919) the highest, with a perfect correlation marking the decades between. Why might this be?

Home factors

Access to private open space from the home was the strongest home-design-based predictor of comfort. Households with a private garden or terrace space

Pictures: Matthew Carmona



Extra care is required to meet everyday comfort needs when building dense and high

were the most comfortable, followed by those with a private balcony or shared garden. Households with no access to any sort of private open space were considerably less comfortable. Space standards were also critical, and dwellings were noticeably more comfortable the more rooms there were per occupant. Dwellings with five or more occupants were noticeably less comfortable during lockdown.

Related to this, good environmental conditions in the home – notably fresh air, daylight and good noise insulation – were widely seen as fundamental, and, alongside a physical lack of space, deficits in this regard were often cited as reasons why home-working was challenging, particularly for social renters. Finally, although preferences for open-plan over cellular arrangements varied, overall the pressures to work at home during lockdown have led to a desire for a greater degree of cellularity, including a desire for dedicated home office space, in order to better separate home and work life.

Neighbourhood factors

Proximity to a park or significant green space (within a five-minute walk) was the strongest predictor of satisfaction with neighbourhoods during lockdown, with satisfaction dropping off markedly the further away open space was, and significantly



Key amenities, including green space, should be within a ten-minute walk

when over ten minutes away. Further support for this five- to ten-minute experience of urban life was found in the need for local facilities (shops and services) also to be within easy reach of the home and for large shops to be not too far away. Again, satisfaction peaked at five minutes' distance and



Access to private open space is critical, even if only to a balcony

dropped away markedly over ten minutes. There has been much talk during the crisis about the benefits of 15- or 20-minute cities. This research suggested that a ten-minute city should be the aspiration.

The availability of less trafficked streets and good walking and cycle routes from the home were particularly prized during lockdown, as were wider pavements where they existed. Many who responded to the survey viewed the crisis of COVID as an opportunity to deliver better environmental standards and clear long-term health and quality of life benefits through a permanent switch in modes of travel, a material change in the quality of streets and open spaces, and a safer and more pleasant environment.

Looking forward

As we look likely to continue to spend more time in the home environment in the future, we need to build our homes and neighbourhoods as decent places where people wish to be. Significantly, each of the critical factors across home and neighbourhood scales are more likely to be sub-standard in new developments, in social housing, and in mid- and high-rise apartment buildings and areas that feature them.

As *A Housing Design Audit for England*² suggested and *Home Comforts* confirms, in recent years we

have let design standards drop. We should learn from the stress test that lockdown has given our homes and build better living environments in the future and retrospectively adapt those we are already living in today.

This means decent space and environmental standards in the home, access to private open space (even if just to a balcony), walkable and cyclable neighbourhoods, convenient access to parks and local facilities (preferably within a ten-minute walk), high-quality streets and public spaces, and particular care to balance all these needs when building high and dense.

● **Matthew Carmona** is Professor of Planning and Urban Design at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. e: m.carmona@ucl.ac.uk. Twitter @ProfMCarmona. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Home Comforts: How the Design of Our Homes and Neighbourhoods Affected Our Experience of the Covid-19 Lockdown and What We Can Learn for the Future*. Place Alliance, Oct. 2020. http://placealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Place-Alliance-Homes-and-Covid-Report_2020.pdf
- 2 *A Housing Design Audit for England*. Place Alliance, Jan. 2020. <http://placealliance.org.uk/research/national-housing-audit/>