1.0 About the TCPA

1.1 The TCPA (Town and Country Planning Association) is an independent charity working to improve the art and science of town and country planning. Established in 1899, the TCPA puts social justice and the environment at the heart of policy debate and inspires Government, industry and campaigners to take a fresh perspective on issues such as planning policy, housing, regeneration and climate change. Our objectives are to:

- Secure a decent, well designed home for everyone, in a human-scale environment combining the best features of town and country
- Empower people and communities to influence decisions that affect them
- Improve the planning system in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

1.2 Since 2013, as part of the TCPA’s ‘Reuniting Health with Planning’ project, the Association, supported by Public Health England, has organised more than 30 workshops with individual local authorities to help their public health and planning teams collaborate to create healthier places. These local authorities range from urban unitaries to rural counties across all English regions. The aim of this work has been to help local authorities integrate public health considerations into their planning work, and their wider responsibilities such as transport and the environment. The TCPA’s evidence to the Committee is based on what we have learned through holding these workshops and through research associated with this project.

2.0 Summary

2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework¹ (NPPF) is the overarching policy framework for town and country planning in England. Local planning authorities each have to create their own ‘local plan’ that is in accordance with the NPPF. The NPPF sets out the key policy requirements that local plans should take into account, including the joint health and wellbeing strategy (JHWS) and the joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA). In practice many local plans do not refer to the local JHWS and JSNA as part of their evidence base; however all local plans include policies that have a positive influence on improving health.

2.2 In the TCPA’s experience, people working in public health have a limited knowledge of the planning system and many are not aware of the range of planning policy areas currently required in the NPPF that have an influence on public health. Similarly, many current JHWSs do not set out priorities for planning. However, there is evidence of emerging improving practice from local authority public health teams.

2.2 Overall there is some positive evidence of increasing commitment and engagement from public health teams with the planning process after a period of transition and uncertainty post 2013. Public Health England’s commitment to this agenda through its Healthy People Healthy Places team has resulted in more public health teams engaged in addressing the wider environmental determinants of health and seeing planning as having an increasingly important role. This is a positive development.

3.0 Specific response to the Select Committee’s questions
The effectiveness of local authorities in delivering the envisaged improvements to public health

3.1 The NPPF sets out eight policy requirements with relevance to health: principally Section 17 as a core planning principle to ‘take account of and support local strategies to improve health, social and cultural wellbeing for all’; and Section 171 for a health needs assessment to be taken into account as part of local plan evidence. A range of policy areas infer links to health and wellbeing, including regarding the provision of open space and active travel. The Planning Practice Guidance, which supports the NPPF, sets out more explicit guidance on health and wellbeing issues.

3.2 Earlier this year the TCPA was commissioned by the London Borough of Merton, on behalf of the London Healthy High Streets Group, to do a policy review of London borough local plans. The review found that most, if not all, current local plans set out a range of policies that can be considered to help to deliver improved health and wellbeing, for instance policies in which health policy is joined up with other policy areas, such as transport, green infrastructure, or air quality. Some boroughs have opted to have a specific planning policy on health and wellbeing including on hot food takeaways. Unfortunately, no research has been undertaken to compare the effectiveness of these different policy approaches on health improvement, but there is underlying evidence of policy interventions suggesting links to health improvements. However, it is evident that public health teams were more involved in policy development in the instances where specific policies regarding health and planning were created, rather than mainstreamed policies.

3.3 In the same review, the TCPA also looked at the boroughs’ joint health and wellbeing strategies in terms of whether they set out specific planning commitments/ priorities to address the wider determinants of health. It found that 16 of the 33 boroughs had no reference to, or actions regarding, planning and the built environment. As a result it was evident that many local plans have not taken the JHWS into account. This is a concern given the requirement in Section 17 of the NPPF highlighted previously.

3.4 Planning permissions are normally granted in line with policies in the local plan. A permission can include planning ‘conditions’, for instance permission could be granted on condition that a travel plan is created, or that open space is provided. In general we have found little evidence of evaluation to monitor the health benefits of approved developments. This means that we simply have no idea whether the delivery of a specific sustainable development locally will have a positive impact on

2 See: http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/
health in the long term. However, more generally, there is published evidence about the positive impact of health from measures such as the provision of open space and active travel. The lack of specific evidence about the impact of developments on health is starting to be addressed by many academic studies that are beginning to evaluate and monitor the health benefits of development, including the East Village in the Olympic Park.

3.5 We are pleased to see that public health teams are also beginning to explore the benefits of requiring health impact assessments for certain types of planning applications, which will help to reduce health impacts arising from unsustainable developments. Similarly planning and health checklists have been developed in certain councils as a framework for considering the full health impact arising from a proposed development so that policy and other measures can be required to avoid, reduce or mitigate the impacts.

Limited knowledge and understanding of planning

3.6 Since the introduction of the reforms in 2013, the TCPA is pleased to have observed an increased and more focused commitment from public health teams to engage with planning. This can take place in two ways, either by contributing to the development of the local plan; or by commenting on individual planning applications. However, in general public health officers still lack an understanding of the planning process and how and when to engage with it. This is more noticeable in two-tier local authority areas than unitary authorities. (In two-tier local authorities the public health officers work for the county council whereas the planners work for the district councils, making collaboration somewhat more difficult than in unitary authorities where they all work for the same organisation.) The TCPA will continue to provide training and advice to local authorities to ensure that public health is properly integrated into the planning decision-making process.

4.0 References

Information about the TCPA Health and Planning workshops with local authorities can be found here: www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/health-and-planning-with-local-authorities-2014.html

Publications:

[Includes policy review of all 33 London boroughs.]

Ross, A and Chang, M, Planning healthy weight environments, TCPA, London 2015
[Publication supported by Public Health England and is based on seven local authority workshops.]

[Report published with support of Public Health England, based on eight local authority round-table meetings.]

Ross, A and Chang, M, *Reuniting health with planning: healthier homes, healthier communities. How planning and public health practitioners can work together to implement health and planning reforms in England*, TCPA 2012

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