

the campaign for healthy homes—making it happen

Fiona Howie introduces the Special Section on the campaign to secure the delivery of all homes against a rigorous set of Healthy Homes Principles

This time last year, those of us based in the UK were in lockdown, with the majority of schoolchildren back trying to cope with virtual learning. The ‘stay at home’ orders meant that many people were spending more time than ever in their homes and, as has been written about many times, the quality of their homes and the importance of access to green spaces were at the forefront of people’s minds once again. Despite frequent Ministerial shuffles, we must not let decision-makers forget the many times that they and their colleagues recognised the importance of housing and community. Back in September 2020, for example, the then Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick MP, said:

‘Through the storms we have weathered, I think we have learned a lot—not least reminding ourselves of the absolutely central role that our homes and communities play in our health and general wellbeing.’¹

More recently, in his Select Committee evidence in November 2021, Michael Gove also put an emphasis on the quality of development, going as far as stating ‘we are looking at what all the levers are to make sure that people can aspire to be in a decent home, can be in a decent home and can then aspire to ownership’.²

The reference to people being in ‘decent homes’ is welcome—but is also why the TCPA will be keeping the pressure on the current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing through its Healthy Homes campaign.

I first wrote about this campaign in my regular ‘On the Agenda’ column in *Town & Country Planning*,

published in the May 2019 issue. As I said back then, too many of the homes being built are not of a high enough quality and risk undermining people’s health, safety, wellbeing, and life-chances. Many of these poor-quality homes were being delivered through permitted development rights (PDR)—but not all.

Since the campaign was launched, research has continued to be published that reinforces our concerns—most notably research conducted by University College London and the University of Liverpool, commissioned by the government to undertake a more thorough assessment of the quality of homes delivered through PDR. The report was published in July 2020³ and drew on site visits to 639 buildings and detailed desk analysis of 240 of those schemes. Its analysis found a ‘slightly more nuanced picture’ about the quality of new homes created through PDR than is suggested by some research and media reports—but it still concluded that homes converted via change of use do:

‘seem to create worse quality residential environments than planning permission conversions in relation to a number of factors widely linked to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of future occupiers’.

But, since then, permitted development rights relating to change of use, and in particular to enable the creation of residential units, have continued to expand.

Quality is not only an issue for homes delivered through permitted development. In 2020, work

carried out by the Place Alliance, and supported by CPRE, based on an evaluation of the design of 142 large-scale housing-led development projects, highlighted that the design of new housing environments were 'mediocre' and 'poor'.⁴

To help deliver *more and better* homes, and to prevent the development of unacceptably poor-quality homes, the TCPA has been campaigning for a Healthy Homes Act. It would raise the bar in terms of the minimum quality of homes that are being built or delivered through conversion or change of use. The proposed legislation would articulate what constitutes a 'decent' home through a suite of purposefully high-level principles (see Daniel Slade's article on pages 32–34). These Healthy Homes Principles cover a range of issues around fire safety, adequate liveable space, access to natural light, the need for resilience to climate change, and freedom from noise pollution. But they also aim to tackle the neighbourhood within which the home is situated—so they include issues around walkability, access to the public realm, and the availability of green and play space. While some of these themes are complex, the quality of a home cannot be considered without reference to the community within which it sits.

As outlined in Daniel Slade's article, the TCPA, with Lord Crisp and signatures from Lord Young of Cookham, Lord Blunkett (a Vice-President of the TCPA), and Lord Stunell, have put forward an amendment to the Building Safety Bill which would be a first step towards the introduction of the Healthy Homes Principles into law. At the time of writing, the debate on the amendment at Committee Stage is awaited (in late February).

While the TCPA's campaign is still working towards the primary legislation that is necessary, the government has made some concessions on policy, amending regulations to require all new homes delivered through PDR to have access to natural light and adhere to minimum space standards. There is clearly much more to do, but these changes to regulations will prevent the replication of some of the worst examples of PDR homes, and might already have improved the living conditions of thousands of people across England.

To build on that progress the TCPA has been thinking hard about how to make change happen. Since the campaign started, the planning system has evolved. Perhaps of most relevance is the emphasis now being placed on local design codes. While there is still a need for national intervention, during 2022 the TCPA will be examining how local authorities and local communities might be able to maximise the use of this new policy lever.

This focus on the tangible differences that can be made at the local level, even without changes to national policy and legislation, is a key subject of one of the centrepieces of this issue—a dialogue

between Lord Crisp, who is leading the Healthy Homes campaign in Parliament, and Nick Raynsford, the TCPA's President (pages 40–48). Their discussion ranges across a variety of themes and across their long careers in the heart of Whitehall, but the government's limited appreciation of the value of properly linking health, planning, housing and other areas of policy is a key theme.

This is also an important theme in both Julia Thrift's article (on pages 35–39), which looks at how the levelling-up agenda could be undermined by the government's stance on public health, and Christine Murray's article (on pages 49–50), which considers the lack of government action in integrating urban planning and public health. A fundamentally important factor here is the public's—rather than the government's—understanding of housing quality and inequality. The Nationwide Foundation's Natalie Tate discusses (on pages 51–53) research that the Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have commissioned to investigate exactly this issue. She outlines their emerging findings, and considers how those campaigning for better-quality housing can more effectively communicate the issues at hand.

The scale of the change that we need is certainly vast. But there is plenty to draw hope from in the final two articles in this Special Section, written by the Church of England's Bishop for Housing, Guli Francis-Deqhani (on pages 54–57) and by Marissa McMahon (on pages 58–59) from the community campaign group Participation and the Practice of Rights. They lay out their organisations' visions for transforming the lives of communities by ensuring access to safe, healthy homes, and, crucially, by putting them in the driving seat on how this is done.

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Notes

- 1 R Jenrick: 'Robert Jenrick's speech to Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) 2020'. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 11 Sept. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/speeches/robert-jenricks-speech-to-chartered-institute-of-housing-cih-2020
- 2 *Oral Evidence: Work of the Department 2021*. HC 818. House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 8 Nov. 2021. In response to Q75. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2980/pdf/>
- 3 B Clifford, P Canelas, J Ferm, N Livingstone, A Lord and R Dunning: *Research into the Quality Standard of Homes Delivered through Change of Use Permitted Development Rights*. University College London and University of Liverpool, for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/quality-standard-of-homes-delivered-through-change-of-use-permitted-development-rights
- 4 *A Housing Design Audit for England*. Place Alliance, Jan. 2020. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/23366ae1-8f97-455d-896a-1a9934689cd8>