

# Planning reform 2020: What changes is PM Boris Johnson making to the UK's planning system?

From repurposing empty shops to building more affordable housing, Melissa York reports on the prime minister's proposals



Boris Johnson has pledged sweeping reforms to enable faster building of new homes

GETTY IMAGES

This week the prime minister announced a long-awaited shake-up of England’s planning system. From a podium bearing the slogan “Build, Build, Build”, he promised the changes [would provide “better homes where people want to live”](#) as part of a post-coronavirus push to improve national infrastructure.

Dubbed “project speed”, the planning reforms, which will be set out in more detail in a policy paper this month, will be the most radical the country will have seen since the Second World War, the government says. The housing industry has been crying out for an overhaul of planning laws for decades, but what has been announced and how have Boris Johnson’s plans been received?

### **Homes for high streets**

Under rules due to come into force in September builders will be able to convert a wider range of commercial premises, such as offices, cafés or shops, into homes without needing planning permission or local authority approval. Previously such permissions, known as permitted development rights, had been restricted to conversion of office buildings and had proved controversial in some boroughs.



The number of homes on high streets could increase as empty shops are redeveloped  
ALAMY

Developers will not need to apply to demolish commercial buildings if they plan to rebuild them as residential properties. The reduction in “unnecessary red tape” is intended to boost the number of homes, but it is also a quicker way to repurpose empty buildings on ailing high streets where businesses may have closed down or landlords are struggling to let out offices.

In his speech on Tuesday Johnson said Britain is “slow at building homes by comparison with other European countries”. He said: “I tell you why – because time is money, and the [newt-counting delays in our system](#) are a massive drag on the productivity and the prosperity of this country and so we will build better and build greener, but we will also build faster.”

However, the rules will not apply to buildings that are considered “essential to the lifeblood of communities”: pubs, libraries and village shops are listed as examples.

The proposals have come under fire from Alan Jones, the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), who said he was “extremely concerned” that they would lead to a drop in standards.

“The government’s own advisory panel referred to the homes created by this policy [of permitted development rights] as ‘slums’,” he said. “It is hard to reconcile the commitment to quality with expanding a policy that has delivered low-quality, unsustainable and overcrowded homes across England.”

### **Freeing up land**

The government’s statement says developers will still have to adhere to present building standards and regulations, but it hopes that plans to make it easier to convert existing commercial buildings on brownfield sites into residential ones will reduce pressure to build on greenfield land.



The government plans to make it easier to build on brownfield sites than to develop greenfield land  
GETTY IMAGES

Prior to its spending review, the government says it plans to carry out an audit on publicly owned land to see if it can be managed more effectively or put to “better use”. The land could be released for a number of reasons: for homebuilding, or if it contributes towards the environment and the UK’s net-zero goals, or provides growth opportunities for the local community.

Johnson also repeated his pledge to plant more than 75,000 acres of trees every year until 2025.

### **Flats reach new heights**

Plans are also underway to allow freeholders to add one or two storeys on top of existing blocks of flats. The [new permitted development right](#) could add “billions” to the value of these buildings, according to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership (LKP), an advisory group, although leaseholders are likely to be the ones putting up with the construction work.

Sebastian O’Kelly, from the LKP, said: “The obstacles opposing leaseholders seeking to buy the freeholds of their homes were acknowledged at considerable length by the Law Commission earlier this year. It proposed to make enfranchisement ‘simpler, easier and more cost-effective’. This ill-conceived gimmick has trashed that work, and the efforts of all who seek to empower consumers in the property process. This is a massive handout to rich, anonymous punters who have hitched a ride on UK residential property, very often through offshore vehicles.”

The regulations say the new homes must be flats and the total height of the extended building must not exceed 30m. Rooftop extensions can only be added to purpose-built, detached blocks of flats that were built after July 1, 1948 and before March 5, 2018.

Any extensions will be subject to a “fast-track approval process, subject to neighbour consultation”, which comes into force on August 1.

### **Affordable housing**

A £12 billion homes programme was announced to help deliver 180,000 new “affordable” homes to buy or rent over the next eight years.

Part of this package includes a pilot of the [First Homes scheme](#), which was mentioned in the Queen’s speech. It will offer 1,500 houses initially to be sold to first-time buyers at a 30 per cent discount that will be locked into the property and passed on to the next eligible buyer.

“The lockdown has further exposed our country’s housing divide, with many young people and key workers priced out of affordable housing and living in cramped houseshares with next to no private space,” says Marc Vlessing, chief executive of Pocket Living, a developer that sells homes at a 20 per cent discount. “Our planning system is slow and complex, and we are too reliant on larger housebuilders, which has meant we have not delivered the homes the country needs for decades.”

Cash has been released from the £400 million brownfield land fund to support about 24,000 homes being built in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Liverpool, Sheffield, and north of Tyne and Tees Valley.

There will also be extra money for smaller developers, with £450 million added to the Home Building Fund to help them to deliver about 7,200 homes.

The financial help was welcomed by Brian Berry, the chief executive of the Federation of Master Builders, who says: “Builders have been concerned for years that the planning system needs updating so as to alleviate workloads for stretched departments, but also to speed up decisions. More money for the Home Building Fund is positive, but this must now be open to micro builders delivering five homes or fewer, often on small brownfield sites.”

Thangam Debbonaire, Labour’s shadow secretary of state for housing, said the plans were “just another example of the Tories doing favours for their property developer mates”.