

UK government clears the path for “slums of the future”

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A major change to UK planning law coming into force at the end of this month allows more non-residential premises to be converted into housing without planning permission. Achieved through the expansion of highly controversial “permitted development” (PD) rights, this will open the floodgates for more substandard, “rabbit-hutch” housing to be created. Developers will use their vacant and redundant office and commercial buildings to profit from the wave of working-class people who are losing their homes along with their livelihoods due to the COVID-19 crisis.

On August 23, the moratorium on new evictions in England and Wales ends, threatening homelessness for the near quarter of a million people who have fallen behind with their rent since the start of the pandemic. On August 31, PD rights will be extended, as part of what Prime Minister Boris Johnson has called “the most radical reforms to the planning system since the end of the second world war,” which, he boasts, will “scythe through red tape.”

PD was introduced in 1948 as a bypass for the normal planning process, intended for minor property modifications such as the installation of fences, porches, and small home extensions. In recent years, it has been extended far beyond this purpose and, since 2013, has allowed the conversion of entire office blocks into housing. Since 2015, more than 60,000 flats have been created through PD in England, with almost 90 percent coming from office conversions.

Now, a wider range of commercial and industrial buildings will be allowed to switch to residential use, such as empty premises on Britain’s ailing high streets, including the 245 department stores that have closed over the past eight years.

Defunct buildings may also be demolished and rebuilt

as housing, again with no need for planning permission or accompanying scrutiny. Permission is granted directly by parliament, and local authorities may only assess limited issues, such as flood risk, the impact on transport and highways, and external appearance.

Upward expansions of up to two storeys on existing buildings will be approved via the same route.

On the same day the government made its announcement, it published a report exposing the appalling quality of new housing created via PD. “Research into the quality standard of homes delivered through change of use permitted development rights” was carried out by University College London and the University of Liverpool on 3,156 housing units across 11 local authorities. The study concluded that PD creates “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.”

The housing units studied were found to be incredibly small. Only 22.1 percent complied with the “nationally described space standard”, which states that a single unit must not be smaller than 37m². Many were well below half that size, at 16m², which Labour MP Clive Betts pointed out is “about the size of the base of the ministerial limousine that [Johnson] gets driven around in each day.”

The flats often had poor window arrangements and little natural light. Some had no windows at all. They were more likely than planning permission schemes to be situated in desolate, under-resourced areas, such as business parks or industrial estates, and just 3.5 percent had access to any private amenity outside space.

In response to the announcement to extend PD rights, the author of the report, Dr. Ben Clifford, said, “We could see even more poor-quality, tiny flats being

crammed into commercial buildings lacking amenities and green space...what others have rightly called the slums of the future.”

An infamous example of an office-to-residential PD project is in Harlow, a town in which over half of all new homes in 2018/2019 came from office conversions. With its 214 units, Terminus House is referred to as a “human warehouse,” where a “double studio” starts at just 14.7m². This is only marginally larger than the 10m² recommended by the Association for the Prevention of Torture as the minimum size of a double prison cell. With no room to move, many residents live—eating, drinking, sitting, and sleeping—in their beds. Crime, violence, drug abuse, and all the other brutal, tragic social problems that come with poverty and inhumane living conditions are rife. Suicide is common. Last June, a man was found in his room in a state of decomposition, five to six weeks after he had taken his life.

In Watford, the Wellstones PD site had been an upholstery firm, warehouse, and petrol station. A typical industrial building with concrete structure, corrugated roof, and tiny slit windows, directly abutting main roads on three sides, it was approved to be turned into 15 flats, ranging from 16.5m² to 21m². Seven flats would have no windows whatsoever, and those on the upper floors no means of escaping in the event of a fire.

It was only with the outpouring of public outrage over Wellstones and other such projects that the government made the reluctant caveat that PD flats must have “adequate” natural light.

PD schemes are exempt from contributing to social or affordable housing, making them an even more profitable option for developers, while further starving communities of housing for those who urgently need it, including the nearly 277,000 recorded homeless people in England.

The government announced yesterday that it was extending this exemption to all small sites, not only PD developments.

Several MPs have expressed outrage about PD and its effects, and former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn said he would scrap it altogether. But despite the handwringing, all three major parties have worked together to destroy social housing protections for working people over the past 40 years. Since Margaret

Thatcher’s opening shot in the 1980s, with her boast of creating a “home-owning democracy,” the attack on social housing has continued unabated.

Fewer council homes were built during the New Labour years than in a single year of Thatcher’s government. Instead, the door was opened to the private sector in the form of non-profit housing associations. With the Housing and Regeneration Act of 2008, it was Gordon Brown who welcomed profit-making in social housing. Since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010, the building of housing for social rent has dropped by 80 percent, and PD has expanded. Johnson’s further deregulation of the private rental sector completes the handover of society’s most vulnerable individuals and families to some of its most cutthroat capitalists.

Labour’s hypocrisy knows no bounds. Croydon Central Labour MP Sarah Jones has called on the government to scrap PD, despite Croydon having the largest number of office-to-residential conversions in the country, some of which have been commissioned *by the council itself*. Its cabinet member for housing, Alison Butler, recently said the council is considering further such conversions.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a genuinely socialist housing policy. The SEP insists that everyone has the right to a safe, affordable, and comfortable home—one that promotes, rather than destroys, physical and mental wellbeing. The profits of property developers, along with those of the entire ruling class, are squeezed directly from the lifeblood of the poor. Their billions must be expropriated and used to fund decent homes, quality public services, and infrastructure that meets 21st century needs, and provides a high standard of living for every member of society.



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