

Critics wade into Jenrick's planning reforms

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RIBA president tells government to “urgently reconsider” plans while consultants argue they will not offer quick fix

Critics including RIBA president Alan Jones have called on the government to reconsider its planning reforms ahead of a policy paper on the new laws due to be published this week.

The sweeping reforms, which will introduce a form of zonal planning allowing automatic permission for developments in certain areas, are set to unleash the most radical changes to the planning system since the Second World War.



Source: Shaun Greene

Alan Jones

The proposals, trailed by housing secretary Robert Jenrick at the weekend, will see all land in England classified for either growth, renewal or protection. Land in “growth” areas will benefit from automatic permission, while land in urban “renewal” areas will benefit from permission in principle.

Jenrick said the government will ensure that new homes are built to high design standards but hasn't said how quality will be enforced.

The government's proposals come in the wake of an extension of permitted

development rights which will allow developers to demolish vacant buildings and replace them with housing without a full planning application. Homeowners will also be allowed to add two storeys to their homes under the same system.

But the RIBA's Jones warned the new laws could do more harm than good.

He said: "We urgently need a broad mix of affordable, age-friendly and sustainable housing – but it looks as though this so-called 'planning revolution' will deliver the opposite."

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Jones added: "The government has missed a huge opportunity to make changes to the planning system for the better and we call for urgent reconsideration. Deregulation is not the way to bring about new homes."

The reforms have been welcomed by some developers. Dean Clifford, co-founder of housebuilder Great Marlborough Estates, said: "These reforms will help support housing delivery in one of the most challenging environments in living memory."

However, others have argued they are unlikely to improve the system for developers quickly, given the reliance of a zonal system on local authorities allocating land in beefed up local plans.

Roger Tustain, managing director of planning consultant Nexus, said he welcomed the commitment to digitise planning, but said he didn't believe a move to zonal system will speed up planning "in the short term".

He said: "Local Plans, or any other statutory planning document, will need to be produced through a democratically inclusive process. Given the powers that these documents will have, the level of detail in terms of policy and design coding will need to be significant to ensure they facilitate socially responsible acceptable development.

"We all know the current Local Plan process is slow but more detailed Local Plans / Zonal Plans could take considerably longer to produce and lead to extended Local Plan Examination processes."

And Kate Henderson, chief executive at the National Housing Federation, said while her organisation supported any reforms aimed at creating affordable, inclusive, sustainable and beautiful communities, she was concerned that "further deregulation could in fact lead to the exact opposite".

Zack Simons, planning barrister at Landmark chambers, said the comments by Jenrick left a host of unanswered questions. He said: "In reality, how "automatic" is this green light to build, build, build? Who's to decide whether or not the scheme meets the design

codes and what happens if they don't? What about environmental impact assessment? Will the green light be subject to scale, height, massing or density parameters, and if so who fixes them and how?

The criticisms of the zonal planning reforms came as Mary Parson, chair of the Town & Country Planning Association, and a commissioner for the government's 'Building Better, Building Beautiful' Commission, wrote to prime minister Boris Johnson, urging him to abandon his proposed extension of permitted development rights.

In the letter, she said that the extension risked "creating what will become the slums of the future, [...] homes that are not fit to live in, to bring up children in – [and] that may have a catastrophic impact on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of the people forced to live in them and a blight on their future life chances."