

Robert Jenrick's impending planning reforms gets mixed response

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Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick is due to unveil radical reforms to the planning system this week, according to an article in the Telegraph on Saturday.

The promised reforms have provoked a mixed reaction from the industry, who welcome cutting red tape but fear the scissors are being put in the wrong hands.

Centred on slashing bureaucracy, along with fast-tracking certain applications, the new regulations will give greater freedom for buildings and land in town centres to change use without planning permission and create new homes from the regeneration of vacant and redundant buildings.

Under the new process land will be designated in one of three categories: for growth, for renewal or for protection. On land designated for growth, new homes, hospitals, schools, shops and offices will be allowed automatically.

Plans are also afoot to make the planning system more accessible online, giving the community a greater voice in planning decisions. Jenrick has also hinted at design codes which would pave the way for swift planning approvals.

Ken Dytor, founder and executive chairman of Urban Catalyst, said: "It's encouraging that the government has put social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals alongside housing in its plans to speed up development.

"While the housing secretary is right the uninspiring design of some developments fuels

NIMBYism, concerns over additional pressure on existing public services are typically another major driver behind local opposition to new development.

“Similarly encouraging is the drive to harness greater community participation in the planning process by embracing a more 21st century tech-savvy approach. This should hopefully lead to a wider range of voices being heard, resulting in more inclusive, balanced developments.

“However, if the government’s ‘build build build’ agenda is to align with its ‘levelling up’ promise we need to see regionally driven infrastructure linked to housing delivery to kick start both national and local growth.

“A great example are the strategies focused on unlocking the potential of the Thames Estuary region, such as the Thames Estuary Growth Board’s Green Blue plan and Thames Production Corridor, which seek to marry private and public sector expertise and tap into the growing power of industries such as the artistic, creative and media sectors.”

Dean Clifford, co-founder of London-focused developer Great Marlborough Estates, added: “Together with other initiatives such as extending Help to Buy and the stamp duty holiday, these reforms will help support housing delivery in one of the most challenging environments in living memory.

“The emphasis on placing good design at the heart of future development is especially welcome as the quality of some recent developments has been questionable to say the least.

“The focus on outdoor and green spaces is equally welcome, with the pandemic underlining just how valuable these are to people’s wellbeing.

“It is important the design codes that will underpin this new system are not overly prescriptive, favouring certain architectural styles over others and stifling creativity. It is also important that local planning departments have the proper funding and resources to enforce any new rules and avoid a streamlined planning process resulting in poor quality developments.”

However, concerns have been raised that by cutting bureaucracy, standards will also fall. Tom Fyans, director of campaigns and policy at CPRE, the countryside charity, said: “The government’s intended reforms sound like a gross oversimplification of the planning system. First and foremost, our planning process must respond to the needs of communities, both in terms of providing much-needed affordable homes and other vital infrastructure, and green spaces for our health and wellbeing.

“The planning process as it stands may not be perfect but instead of deregulating planning, the government must invest in planning. Quality development needs a quality planning system with community participation at its heart.

“The Secretary of State has claimed that these planning reforms will still be very much ‘people-focused’ but that flies in the face of what has been outlined today by the government. We eagerly await more details and will be joining forces with a range of other housing, planning and environmental campaigning bodies to push back hard on the deregulation agenda, which has never been the answer to the question of how best to boost economic growth.”