

# Four out of five high street properties ‘ripe for resi conversion’

By Joey Gardiner 4th August 2021 in PlanningResource

Four out of five high street properties are potentially able to be converted into homes without planning permission under new rules that came into force at the start of this week. The new “class E” permitted development (PD) right applies to the vast majority of commercial properties in high streets and town centres, as well as light industrial units.

The rules, which have been welcomed by some developers but sharply criticised by architects, planners and other developers, have come into force at the same time as new regulations requiring fire risk of proposed high-rise buildings to be assessed at planning application stage.

The Town and Country Planning Association said detailed research undertaken for it by University College London of four town and city centres showed an average of just over 80% of commercial buildings could be converted into homes under the new PD right. This rose to as high as 89% in one of the centres, Barnet, in north London.

The new rules, which open up many commercial buildings, including restaurants, cafes, offices, gyms, nurseries, day centres and light industrial units for residential conversion for the first time, present a major opportunity for residential developers.

The government says the rules will help high streets adapt to changing consumer patterns in the wake of the covid pandemic, but critics say they could hasten the decline of areas as shops and other services that draw people in are replaced with homes.

The TCPA has been among those campaigning strongly against the rules, which it says mean that government policies on design and local plan ambitions can effectively be ignored. TCPA chief executive Fiona Howie said the expansion of PD rights “contradicts the government’s recent emphasis on high quality design and beauty”.

She said: “We need new homes to be high quality and for town centres to be able to provide a mixture of services and amenity space. This latest expansion of PDRs further reduces the ability of local authorities and communities to shape their local areas. This is not the right approach if government really wants to ‘build back better’”.

**Former RIBA president Ben Derbyshire has said the loss of local democratic control was unacceptable at a philosophical level – and questioned ministers’ claim that the proposal would breathe new life into cities.** Instead he predicted that footfall would plummet with devastating results.

Victoria Hills, chief executive of the Royal Town Planning Institute, said the body remained “deeply concerned” about the policy. “Offering landlords the opportunity to convert commercial units into places to live could diminish the vibrancy of our high streets, the importance of which has become apparent during the pandemic”, she said.

**“Without a place-based planned approach, we also fear that essential local services such as convenience stores, crèches, pharmacies, solicitors and post offices could be wiped out permanently as landlords race to recoup losses accrued during the pandemic in return for higher residential values”.**