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# Affordable housing 'will diminish due to UK planning changes'

**National Housing Federation criticises idea of developer levy replacing obligation to provide social housing**

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Big changes to the planning system that provides nearly half of England’s affordable housing were criticised on Thursday as “potentially disastrous”, as moves to

radically overhaul planning also created unease among some in the Conservative ranks.

Changes envisaged in a long awaited White Paper published on Thursday were criticised by the umbrella body for London councils, which joined others in warning that the amount of new affordable housing could be reduced.

A fresh spotlight also fell on the Tory party's relationship with developers as [Robert Jenrick](#), the housing secretary, found himself once again on the defensive over a recent personal controversy involving the billionaire Richard Desmond.

The publication of Planning for the Future, a plan aimed at delivering a target of 300,000 new homes a year in England, kickstarted a 12-week consultation process.



England's planning changes will create 'generation of slums'

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Details revealed included a measure to exempt developers of smaller sites from payments to local infrastructure such as affordable housing and schools. The fees, called Section 106 payments, are often a condition for permission being granted but the proposals envisage temporarily lifting a “small sites threshold”, below which developers will not need to contribute to affordable housing, to up to 40 or 50 units.

A new national levy would replace the system of developer contributions and be charged according to the final development value of the project.

Insisting that more social housing would be the outcome, Boris Johnson told reporters on a visit to a housing development in Warrington: “This solution gives [builders] a much simpler infrastructure levy that enables them to go ahead and build a much bigger chunk of affordable housing and help people on to the property ladder.”

But the National **Housing** Federation called for clarity on what would replace the Section 106 agreements, which last year delivered almost 28,000 affordable homes, about half of the total. Kate Henderson, the chief executive, questioned how a replacement national levy would enable the “levelling up” of communities.

The local government association for Greater London warned that the changes were potentially disastrous and could reduce the amount of affordable housing built.

“London is suffering the most severe homelessness crisis in the country and the chronic shortage of affordable housing is at the heart of this,” said Darren Rodwell, executive member for housing and planning at London Councils.

He also warned that lower-quality and fewer affordable homes could arise from a “planning free-for-all”, as critics rounded on the plans for new homes, hospitals and schools to be allowed automatically in areas designated for “growth”..

Jenrick dismissed allegations that the proposals to speed up building could create a new generation of low-quality homes, calling them “complete nonsense”. He insisted local people would be able to make “a meaningful contribution”, despite confirming there was nothing that could be done to halt disliked projects in areas zoned for growth.

Jenrick again admitted that he **wished he had not sat next to the developer Desmond at an event which subsequently saw him embroiled in controversy this year**. The tycoon donated £12,000 to the Tories after a new housing development was given a green light by Jenrick the day before a new community infrastructure levy was introduced. In court, the housing minister accepted that his decision was “unlawful by reason of apparent bias”.

Labour sought to apply fresh fire to Jenrick on Thursday over the controversy, alleging he was “supremely arrogant to think he has any moral authority to lead these reforms, which put power in the hands of the developers that bankroll the Conservative party”.

Steve Reed MP, the shadow secretary of state for communities and local government, said: “Robert Jenrick moved heaven and earth to help a multi-billionaire Tory donor, Richard Desmond, avoid paying vital infrastructure funding to one of the most deprived boroughs in the country - now he wants to legislate to prevent more of the Tories’ developer friends from paying their dues.”

Jenrick told BBC Radio 4 he had no idea how much property developers had donated to the Tories in the past year. **An investigation by Open Democracy** found the party had received more than £11m from some of the UK’s richest property developers since Johnson became prime minister.

Also flagged in the newly published document are proposals to fast-track buildings considered “beautiful”. A new body would be set up to help deliver design codes at a local level in line with the work of the late Conservative philosopher Sir Roger Scruton.

But the Tory MP Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, who represents the Cotswolds, said he was concerned about the quality of new homes which could be built. He told BBC Radio 4’s World At One: “Whilst I’m all in favour of building more houses they need to be good-quality houses, we have got to be really sure that we are not building slums of tomorrow by building today at low quality.”

Bob Colenutt, a housing expert, also suggested that new red tape might be produced with the addition of the administrative criterion of “beauty”.

He added: “The design codes will be front loaded, so consultations take place at the outset, with local people having little chance to change them then over a 10-year period. It purports to create more democracy but actually it reduces it.”

Other proposals promise to make greater use of technology to give individuals and neighbourhoods a greater say in the planning process, such as by standardising plans and applications and making them easy to access on smartphones.

There was a warm welcome from the National Federation of Builders (NFB), which said the moves vindicated its evidence and solutions.

Rico Wojtulewicz, of the NFB’s housing building division, said: “For the last five years we have campaigned for design codes, flat-rate planning contributions, better land assembly, especially through Homes England, digitised planning, a greater appreciation of what the best builders, our SMEs, deliver, and a certain planning system. This consultation delivers all that and more.”

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