

The impact of pd office-to-residential conversions

Permitted development rules which allow office to residential conversions to bypass the planning process are having a detrimental impact on communities says Martin Tett

The case has been well and truly made that we desperately need to build new homes and tackle the country's housing crisis. It is one of the most pressing issues facing the country, and the Prime Minister has recognised this by making it a centrepiece of government policy.

One way of creating new housing is through the conversion of offices into residential units. This can be entirely the right thing in some instances, when communities are able to weigh up the various considerations to take on board. But the permitted development rules which allow these conversions to bypass the planning process is having a detrimental impact on communities, by creating sub-standard housing, with no requirement for any of it to be affordable or to consider local infrastructure such as roads, schools and health services. Under permitted development developers are not committed to Section 106 agreements whereby they have to make contributions to essential local infrastructure.

Not only is this a problem for communities, but it gives developers an incentive to prioritise office to residential conversions over developments that need to go through the planning system. Not having to go through the planning process is denying local residents the chance to have their say and voice any concerns, and stopping councils from checking whether or not a development meets certain housing standards, or whether a proportion is affordable. In some parts of the country, in particular London, we are seeing new homes appear which in many cases would not have been given planning permission.

Take Croydon for example, which has seen the highest number of office to residential conversions under permitted development in London. According to Inside Housing, one conversion contains a flat measuring 14.9 square metres – less than half the London Plan's advised 37 square metres. Another five are less than 20 square metres in size, while 80 per cent of Croydon's conversions also include no outdoor space. We are concerned that this could be the tip of the iceberg.

The LGA recently carried out its own analysis to

look at the prevalence of office to residential conversions carried out under permitted development. We found that this accounted for nearly one in 10 of all new homes in England over the last two years.

Since 2015, a total of 30,575 housing units have been converted from offices to flats without having to go through the planning system. This has led to the potential loss of 7,644 desperately-needed affordable homes. Nationally, office to residential conversions under permitted development amounts to approximately 8 per cent of new homes. But in some parts of the country, it is around two thirds, with for example 61 per cent in Sutton during 2016/17. In Hounslow and Harlow the number was more than half. For the LGA and councils, we are

We are calling on the Government to scrap permitted development now

clear as to what we would like the Government to do: abolish the permitted development rules around office to residential conversions and hand back control to councils and the local communities they represent.

This is also not just a housing issue. Losing office space is bad for business. It can risk hampering local plans to grow economies and attract new businesses and jobs to high streets and town centres. A local area aspiring to regenerate itself is also not going to be an attractive proposition for new businesses if it is blighted by poor quality housing. In London, the problem is especially acute.

Figures compiled by London Councils showed that between May 2013 and April 2015, 834,000 square metres of office floor space was swallowed up by permitted development conversions. At least 55,000 square metres have been lost through just 12 schemes alone. Eleven London boroughs also reported at least 10 separate fully occupied office spaces being converted. The numbers are quite stag-



Cllr Martin Tett is leader of Buckinghamshire County Council

gering and show that office to residential conversions under permitted development are spiralling out of control.

There are steps councils can take to address this. They can serve Article 4 directions to revoke permitted development. But this requires the approval of the Secretary of State, and can be a cumbersome, lengthy and uncertain process. Permitted development is preventing local communities from shaping the area they live in. This is why it is vital that all new developments should go through the local planning system.

By allowing permitted development, the Government wanted to make it easier to create new homes. Our view is clear – planning is not a barrier to housebuilding, with councils approving nine in ten planning applications. Councils, which are answerable to their residents, have to have an oversight of local developments to ensure they are good quality and help to build prosperous places. Councils will do everything they can to help get the country building the homes it so badly needs. But this must not be at any cost.

Homes need to be decent and fit for purpose, affordable, and with the right infrastructure in place. Unfortunately under the current rules, this is something many local areas are not seeing, which is why we are calling on the Government to scrap permitted development now. ■

Martin has been Leader of Buckinghamshire County Council since May 2011, having joined the Council in 2005. His responsibilities include overall policy direction and strategy, financial strategy, communications, external relations with Government and representative bodies. He leads on the county stance on HS2 and economic development. Prior to becoming Leader he was Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment.