

Industry reacts to Boris Johnson's Covid-19 recovery speech

By [Emma Shone](#) | Tue 30 June 2020

Boris Johnson's post-Covid-19 recovery speech has been met with mixed reactions from the real estate industry, after the prime minister committed to the "most radical reforms of our planning system since the end of the Second World War" this afternoon.



Boris Johnson

Source: Chris Harvey/shutterstock

Johnson said his £5bn recovery plan would "end [the] chronic failure of the British state decade after decade in which we have failed to build enough homes".

A new task force called 'Project Speed', to be headed by chancellor Rishi Sunak, has been tasked with getting projects through the system faster.

“Time is money and the newt-counting delays in our system are a massive drag on the prosperity of this country,” the prime minister said.

“And so we will build better, build greener and we will also build faster. That is why the chancellor and I have set up Project Speed to scythe through red tape and get things done.”

The reformed planning system announcement comes after housing secretary **Robert Jenrick outlined proposals to introduce new types of permitted development rights in March.**

The report said that the government would consult on a new right which would let developers take down vacant commercial, industrial or residential buildings for housing schemes.

It also said the government intended to encourage building upwards in urban areas with the introduction of a PDR that would give developers the right to extend residential blocks by up to two storeys, “increasing density in line with local character”. This will take effect on 1 August.

Local authorities were promised more support on how to use their CPO powers “and will consult on legislative reforms to speed up the decision-making progress”.

In his speech this afternoon Johnson pledged to build “fantastic new homes on brownfield sites and other areas with better transport”, referencing the register of brownfield sites government has compiled to encourage local authorities to prioritise developing them.

This is to be backed by £400m of funding to move the land back into use.

“Totally unclear”

Town and Country Planning Association chief executive Fiona Howie slammed plans for the new permitted development rights.

“While the Prime Minister’s references to building beautiful, low carbon homes, his re-commitment to ‘levelling up’ and his desire to ‘fix the problems that were illuminated during COVID’ are positive, it is totally unclear how the associated announcements around extending permitted development rights will achieve these priorities,” she said.

“In the past, ‘radical’ planning reform has meant taking democratic accountability out of the system, but you can’t build without community consent. And we can’t aim to revitalise town centres without involving local communities. Steam rolling over people’s views will be divisive and counterproductive. What we have heard from the government today is campaign rhetoric, not real leadership to enable meaningful change to tackle our health, housing and climate crises.”

Commenting on the prime minister’s announcements, Pocket Living chief executive Mark Vlessing said: “We await further detail, but hope this provides a real opportunity to tackle the housing crisis and boost delivery of new homes.

“The lockdown has further exposed our country’s housing divide, with many young people and key workers priced out of affordable housing and living in cramped houseshares with next to no private space. Our planning system is slow and complex and we are too reliant on larger housebuilders, which has meant we have not delivered the homes the country needs for decades.

He added that “the planning system needs substantial reform, but this will require legislation and take years”. “In the meantime,” Vlessing suggested, “government could make minor changes to existing policy, particularly for small sites in well-connected and sustainable locations.”

Cushman & Wakefield head of UK development Keith Hardman said measures that would speed up development were welcome, but that “helping to accelerate the pace of change shouldn’t however, come at the expense of ‘good planning’”.

He said: “The need for enhanced social infrastructure, amenity and open space are key if our towns and city centres are truly to become fit for purpose. Less haste, more speed.”

“Build smarter”

Audley Group chief executive Nick Sanderson said Boris Johnson’s speech would be full of “empty promises” if government doesn’t “build smarter”.

“To renew the focus on building more homes and helping first time buyers is wrong. It was wrong before, and is wrong again now. We have enough houses, but they are under-occupied: a report from CASS Business School this month found that we will have 20 million surplus bedrooms in this country by 2040, many in houses owned by people who would like to downsize. It’s abundantly clear then that the focus should be on specialist housing where there is a severe under-supply.”

Moda Living chief executive Johnny Caddick commented: “We welcome today’s much needed steps toward a review of the planning system, and a renewed focus on the property sector as an important part of our country’s economic recovery. As a business focussing both on the provision of residential and commercial projects, we’ve seen the importance of a joined-up approach at close quarters.

“Reforming planning systems to encourage housebuilding in locations where people want to live, will be vital in our post-Covid-19 landscape.”