

High street revolt over bid to turn city centres into homes from home

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Robert Jenrick is facing growing opposition from high street businesses over government plans to allow town centres to be converted into housing without planning permission.

Business organisations representing 27 different professions and traders including booksellers, butchers, cinema operators and cycle traders have written to the housing secretary urging him to reconsider the policy.

Jenrick's housing department is consulting on plans to extend permitted development rights, to enable more shops, restaurants, gyms and other business premises in town centres to be converted into housing without approval by the local planning authority.

Signatories of a letter seen by *The Times* argue that the proposed policy to reverse the decline of high streets "risks putting the long-term health of our town centres at risk for the sake of a short-term stimulus".

"Putting ground floor housing in a random and uncontrolled manner within high streets does not draw foot-

fall, does not support new businesses, reduces the potential for business growth and will undermine the viability of existing retail, cultural, and commercial activities," the letter states.

The option to convert shops to higher-value residential uses would have negative consequences such as removing convenience stores from local neighbourhoods, it added.

The letter was signed by groups including the British Independent Retailers Association, National Craft Butchers, the Association of Convenience Stores, UK Cinemas, British Business Improvement Districts and the Booksellers Association of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

Permitted development rights were introduced in 2013 to let developers convert offices into flats without planning permission. In 2016 the rights were extended to include shops and some commercial premises, smaller than 150 sq m.

Under the new proposal, properties of any size, including the largest shops on the high street, could be converted without planning permission.

Permitted development rights were

criticised in a government report last year for leading to "slum housing".

The latest proposals would require developers to meet national space standards and ensure the provision of adequate natural light.

The plans have been opposed by the British Property Federation, the landlord group, which warned this month that the policy would exacerbate the decline of high streets and hit local government finances, because council tax paid by residents is typically less than business rates.

The Royal Institute of British Architects has opposed the plans. "There can be no justification for some planning applications having to meet higher standards than others," it said.

A spokesman for the housing department said: "The high street homes permitted development right will support the diversification of our high streets and town centres by allowing more flexibility for much-needed housing."

A consultation on the proposal closed on January 28. The housing department said that it would respond "in due course".