

Healthy homes? Commercial-to-residential permitted development in England

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Health Impacts
of Converted Housing

Adaptive reuse

- The conversion of under-utilised or vacant (obsolescent) commercial buildings (particularly offices) into other purposes (particularly housing) is commonly proposed in relation to combating urban decline (Wilkinson and Remøy, 2018)
- Often now being linked to sustainability debates, e.g. better use of resources (Armstrong et al, 2021). Buildings a significant source of global carbon emissions and as they become more energy efficient during their operational phase, embodied carbon becomes a greater concern



Permitted development

- In the UK, 'development' requires permission (usually granted by the local authority) following the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act
- The definition of development, in place since the 1947 Act, is wide-ranging so to avoid the system becoming clogged-up with minor matters, there has always been a category of development which does not require planning permission expressly granted by the local authority but are rather 'permitted development' (PD)
- This was based on proportionality principle, because state intervention should be based on likelihoods of impact or harm. PD traditionally small and temporary structures

Extending permitted development

- Since May 2013, the government have allowed the change of use of offices-to-residential use as permitted development
- Initially experimental but made permanent in 2015, followed by additions to allow light industrial to residential, retail to residential and agricultural to residential PD also
- Size limit of 150m² per scheme applied to retail to residential, no size limit at all for office to residential
- Estimate over 100,000 new dwellings created under these Permitted Development Rights across England to date
- Questions about impact of such deregulation of urban planning regulation

Understanding PD impacts

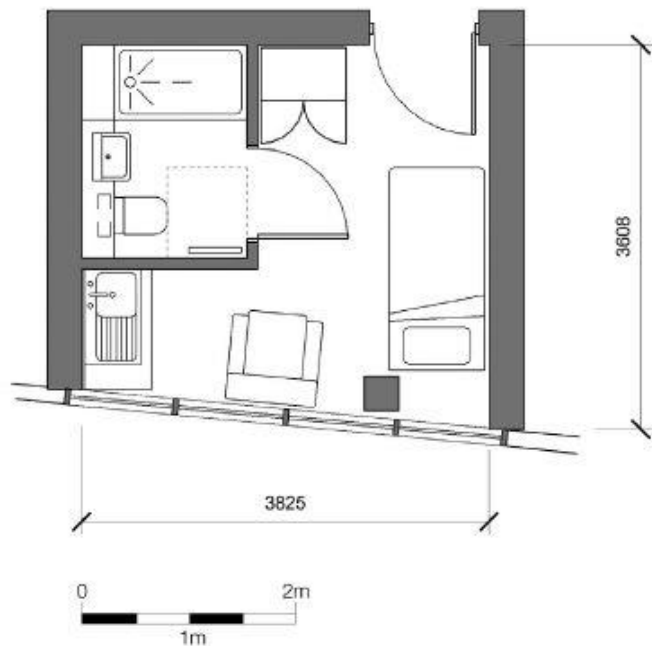
- Clifford et al (2018) (funded by RICS) and Clifford et al (2020) (funded by MHCLG) investigated through examining what was happening for office-to-residential PD in five English local authorities (2018) and all commercial-to-residential PD in eleven English local authorities (2020) including site visits to 1,207 buildings proposed for, or actually, converted and detailed examination of floorplans and other documents relating to 285 implemented conversion schemes
- A range of concern including economic impacts (occupied commercial space sometimes turned into housing), loss of planning gain contributions and affordable housing provision

PD: creating quality housing?

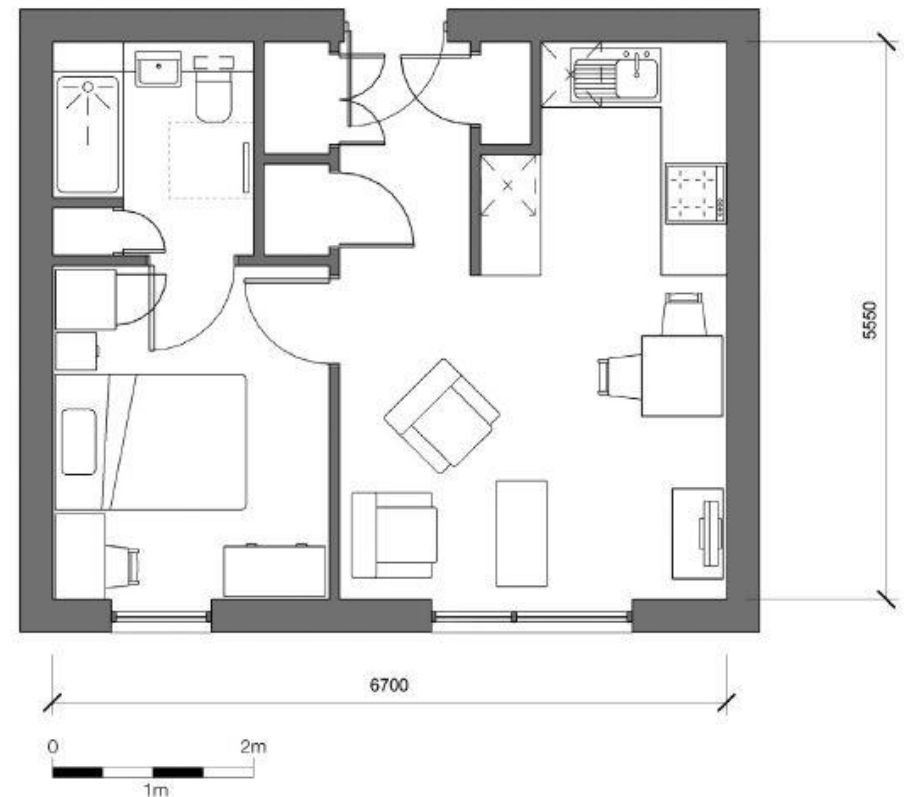
- Housing quality was the most serious issue we found
- Without proper planning control of individual scheme design, residential quality varied enormously and essentially at the whim of the developer. Some high-quality developments but examples of ‘studio’ flats just 15m² compared to recommended (but not mandated) minimum space standard of 37m² for a one person, one bed flat
- 2018: just 30% of PD units meet national space standards compared to 94% with planning permission (2020: 22% met space standards)
- Less likely to have access to private or communal amenity space (balconies, roof terraces) – 2018 study found just 14% of the PD units benefitted from this (2020 – just 3.5%)

PDR: creating quality housing?

- Park (2019) illustrates what space standards mean...



Newbury House single studio 13m²



NDSS compliant one person flat 37m²

PD: creating quality housing?

- 77% PD units are studios, or one beds (compared to 37% with planning permission – 2018 study). Cater to a very narrow segment of the residential market / overcrowding
- One resident we interviewed gave evidence of families with children in one-bedroom units, and no open or play space in the development or nearby for the children
- Some units with no windows at all, or strange layouts with little natural light. 72.0% of the dwelling units created under PD only had single aspect windows, compared to 29.5% created through planning permission (2020 study)
- PD schemes 8 times more likely to be in industrial estates / business parks (albeit only 7.9% of PD)



Health impacts?

- Work by Marsh et al (2020) highlighted, potential ways that PD conversions might have more negative than positive health impacts based on existing knowledge about PD housing quality and housing's relationships to health
- Clifford and Pineo (2023) (funded by Impact on Urban Health) exploratory study conducted a postal survey with residents of PD housing in 4 London boroughs (Lambeth, Southwark, Hounslow, Hillingdon) – 218 responses – and then 41 short interviews on daily experience in their homes
- Survey asked about self-reported mental wellbeing, measured using the survey questions defined by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWBS)

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Health impacts?

- Proportion of survey respondents with a WEMWBS score indicating low wellbeing higher than UK average (23% cf 15%) and proportion with a score indicating high wellbeing lower than the UK average (6.8% cf 15%)
- In terms of housing problems, commonly reported problems of a shortage of space (46% of respondents), street noise (40%), noise from neighbours (26%), pollution (from traffic or industry) (16%), vandalism or crime (16%) and a lack of fresh air in the dwelling (14%). Only 63% were able to keep comfortably cool during hot summer weather, suggesting potential issues with these PD homes overheating. 14% reported not having a single window they could open; only 68% had at least one window they could easily see outside through

Health impacts?

- Regression analysis showed that having sufficient space in the housing was strongly associated with improved wellbeing as self-reported using the WEMWBS scores (after controlling for household income)
- Ability to keep comfortable during hot weather an important determinant of mental wellbeing in PD housing
- Having more types of amenities within a ten-minute walk of accommodation was associated with higher wellbeing
- Respondents' perceptions of safety were also strongly associated with mental wellbeing
- Respondents having a lack of fresh air as a problem in their housing were more likely to have a lower WEMWBS score

Conclusions

- Existing strong evidence on the relationship between housing and health. PD housing associated with poor quality design
- Pilot study suggests importance of sufficient space in accommodation; thermal comfort; fresh air / ventilation / windows allowing in sufficient natural light and through which there was a view of the outside world; not having excess levels of noise from neighbours or street outside; having access to open or greenspace; living in walkable neighbourhoods with access to local amenities; living in a home in which you felt safe. New NIHR study ongoing
- Many of these not being secured in PD (or even non-PD) housing. Need for Healthy Home Principles