NPPF could hit initiative to turn offices into homes

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Plans to boost housing supply by converting empty offices into homes suffered a setback when the policy was watered down in last week's planning reforms, architects have warned.

Ministers consulted last year on plans to allow the conversion of office buildings without planning permission — a move supported by a number of ex RIBA presidents, spearheaded by Marco Goldschmied, but opposed by the City of London.

The National Planning Policy Framework says only that councils should "normally approve" applications to change from commercial to residential — from classes B1, B2 and B8 (business, general industrial and storage) to class C3 (residential).

Goldschmied said: "The rigidity of use classes is a very serious hidden brake on the economy. This is better than nothing but by deferring the decision to different councils, we know that they bring in extraneous factors."

"All we can do is hope local authorities who have historically been opposed will recognise the winds have changed," he added.

Speaking at a Planning in London conference last week, Design Council Cabe chair Paul Finch added: "The framework of use classes has introduced a notion of permanence that is quite at odds with reality. You design mono-use buildings which, if you're not using them for that purpose, you might as well demolish and start again."

Other speakers calling for a further relaxation of change-of-use rules included chair of the National Planning Forum, Brian Waters, and Philip Turner, associate-director at AHMM.

Those opposed to loosening the use class system have warned that lack of restrictions could be exploited by developers to avoid planning obligations such as providing affordable housing.

But architect and developer Roger Zagorowsky said other benefits had been overlooked. "There's a lot of discussion in our industry about retrofitting," he said. "What's not been understood about the proposal to change use class orders is that any work would trigger the requirement to upgrade the property under building regulations."