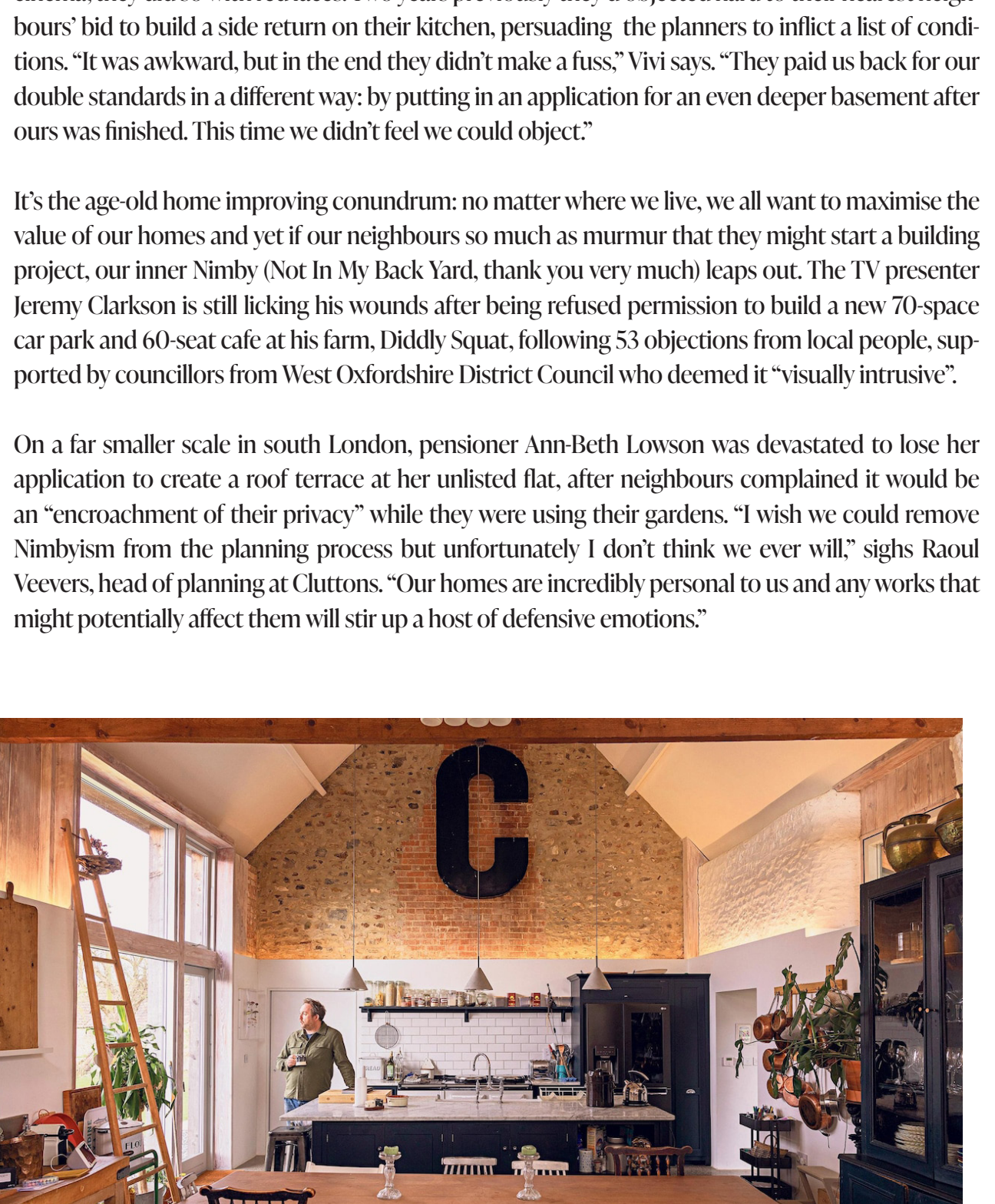


How I beat the planners (and the nimbys) to transform my home

It's important to remember that around 90 per cent of planning applications are still accepted

By Anna Tyzack
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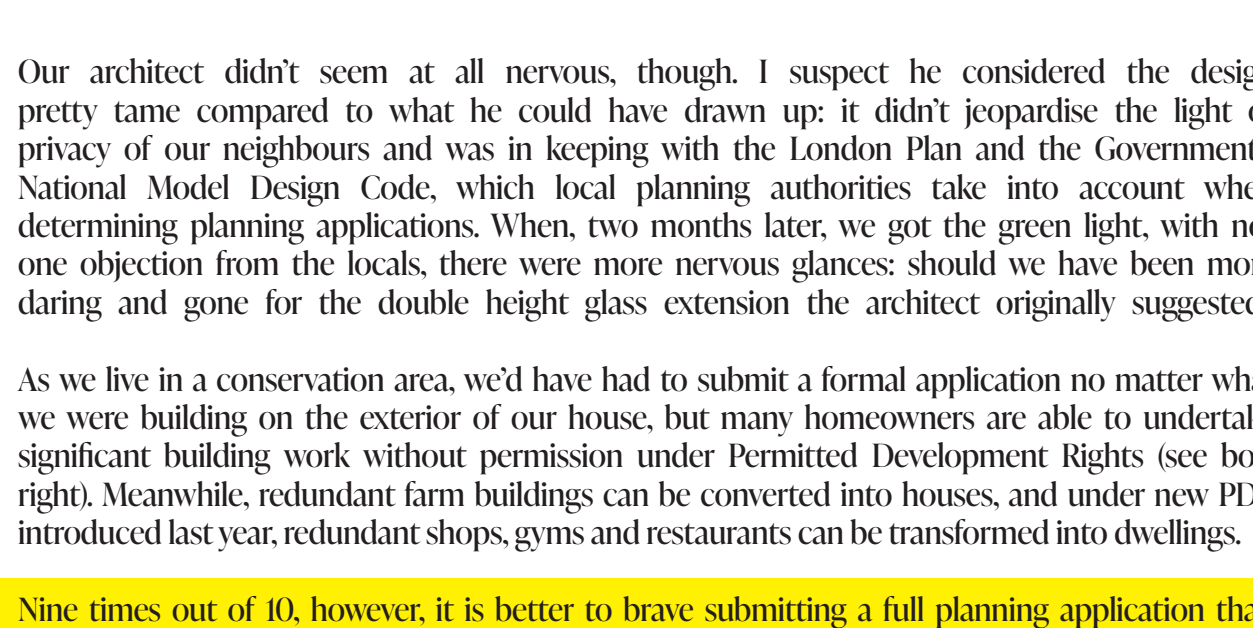


'I love the openness': this 1930s build has been transformed

When Mike and Vivi Plover submitted their planning application for a basement gym and cinema, they did so with red faces. Two years previously they'd objected hard to their nearest neighbours' bid to build a side return on their kitchen, persuading the planners to inflict a list of conditions. "It was awkward, but in the end they didn't make a fuss," Vivi says. "They paid us back for our double standards in a different way: by putting in an application for an even deeper basement after ours was finished. This time we didn't feel we could object."

It's the age-old home improving conundrum: no matter where we live, we all want to maximise the value of our homes and yet if our neighbours so much as murmur that they might start a building project, our inner Nimby (Not In My Back Yard, thank you very much) leaps out. The TV presenter Jeremy Clarkson is still licking his wounds after being refused permission to build a new 70-space car park and 60-seat cafe at his farm, Diddly Squat, following 53 objections from local people, supported by councillors from West Oxfordshire District Council who deemed it "visually intrusive".

On a far smaller scale in south London, pensioner Ann-Beth Lawson was devastated to lose her application to create a roof terrace at her unlisted flat, after neighbours complained it would be an "encroachment of their privacy" while they were using their gardens. "I wish we could remove Nimbyism from the planning process but unfortunately I don't think we ever will," sighs Raoul Veevers, head of planning at Cluttons. "Our homes are incredibly personal to us and any works that might potentially affect them will stir up a host of defensive emotions."

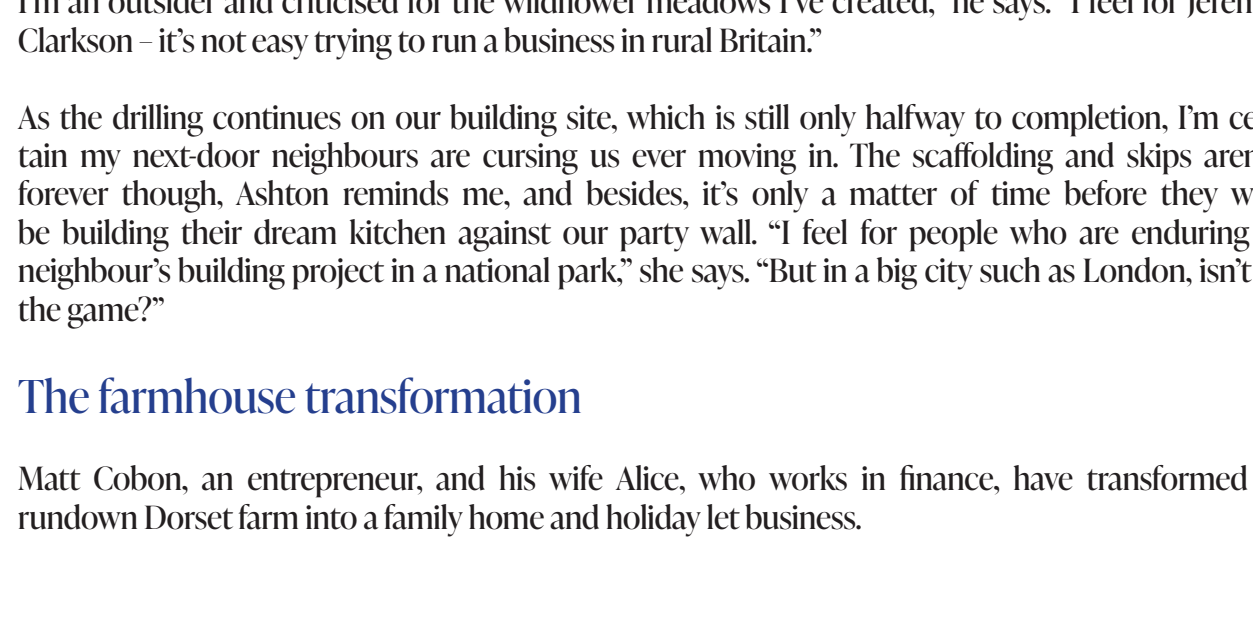


Matt Cobon has converted a barn at the back of his Dorset farmhouse into an airy kitchen and dining room

What's important to remember, though, Veevers continues, is that around 90 per cent of planning applications are accepted. While most of us consider planning policy to be a dry, protracted and repressive topic, a good architect or planning consultant relishes pushing it to its limits – and giving Nimbys no grounds on which to object.

"There's so much scope, even if you live in a designated area – Britain's planning rules support creativity and favour cutting-edge design over pastiche," agrees Chris Menear, a planning consultant from Cornwall Planning Group, who has helped numerous clients in the West Country to extend or remodel their homes. "I try to encourage people to see it as an adventure; you're building your dream. My clients give me a budget and their aspirations, and I work out what can be achieved. They're often surprised by how creative they can be."

This has certainly been my experience. When my architect revealed his drawings for a kitchen extension at our home in south-west London, my husband and I exchanged nervous glances. Three enormous bronze doors between vertical pillars and a coffered ceiling beneath a sedum roof: this was nothing like the classical orangery we'd been envisaging – we were certain the planners would throw it out.



Lisa and Toby Conway-Hughes; a design by Polly Ashman

Our architect didn't seem at all nervous, though. I suspect he considered the design pretty tame compared to what he could have drawn up; it didn't jeopardise the light or privacy of our neighbours and was in keeping with the London Plan and the Government's National Model Design Code, which local planning authorities take into account when determining planning applications. When, two months later, we got the green light, with not one objection from the locals, there were more nervous glances: should we have been more daring and gone for the double height glass extension the architect originally suggested?

As we live in a conservation area, we'd have had to submit a formal application no matter what we were building on the exterior of our house, but many homeowners are able to undertake significant building work without permission under Permitted Development Rights (see box, right). Meanwhile, redundant farm buildings can be converted into houses, and under new PDR introduced last year, redundant shops, gyms and restaurants can be transformed into dwellings.

Nine times out of 10, however, it is better to brave submitting a full planning application than following the Permitted Development Right route, maintains Polly Ashman, a project manager and interior designer at west London-based house builder loftvibrations.co.uk, as there are so many caveats with PDR. With a full application you can apply for extra windows and taller ceiling heights; it's always worth pushing the boundaries of planning policy rather than settling for something second rate, she says. Richard Rogerson of RFR Property, a property consultancy in London, encourages his clients to be bullish with their aspirations, even when the property in question is situated in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or an Area of Designated Flood Risk; the stipulations are more stringent, and for a listed building you'll also need to apply for listed building consent, but this doesn't mean you can't create something fabulous, he says. "We've managed to get air conditioning into every room of a Grade II-listed building, and amalgamate houses in conservation areas in London's Kensington and Chelsea," he says.

By using a local architect to submit our application, I never had to swoot up on planning policy – an enormous relief, as according to Ashman, who has helped several of her own houses, it is hugely complicated and varies between boroughs. A planning consultant or architect will invariably save you time and money, she says; they ensure the designs meet local policy, they prepare the application using the correct terminology and they can also help you challenge the status quo and obtain permission for something new and unique.

"Local council policies change and update all the time," agrees Menear. "And permissions can also be granted in extenuating circumstances, with the support of your local council. A Section 106 Agreement, for example, enables you to build an affordable dwelling to get a family member onto the housing ladder."

A planning officer will ensure a project ticks all the boxes with regards to sustainability, heritage and accessibility, making it almost impossible for the council to refuse, Ashman adds, and they will also, crucially, warn you early on if a project is a non-starter, saving you the cost and heartbreak of a big fat rejection.

Before your neighbours have a chance to make a fuss about your application, Veevers advises presenting it to them in a positive way, warning them about the impact it will have on them during construction, and encouraging them to keep lines of communication open – preferably on the phone or in person.

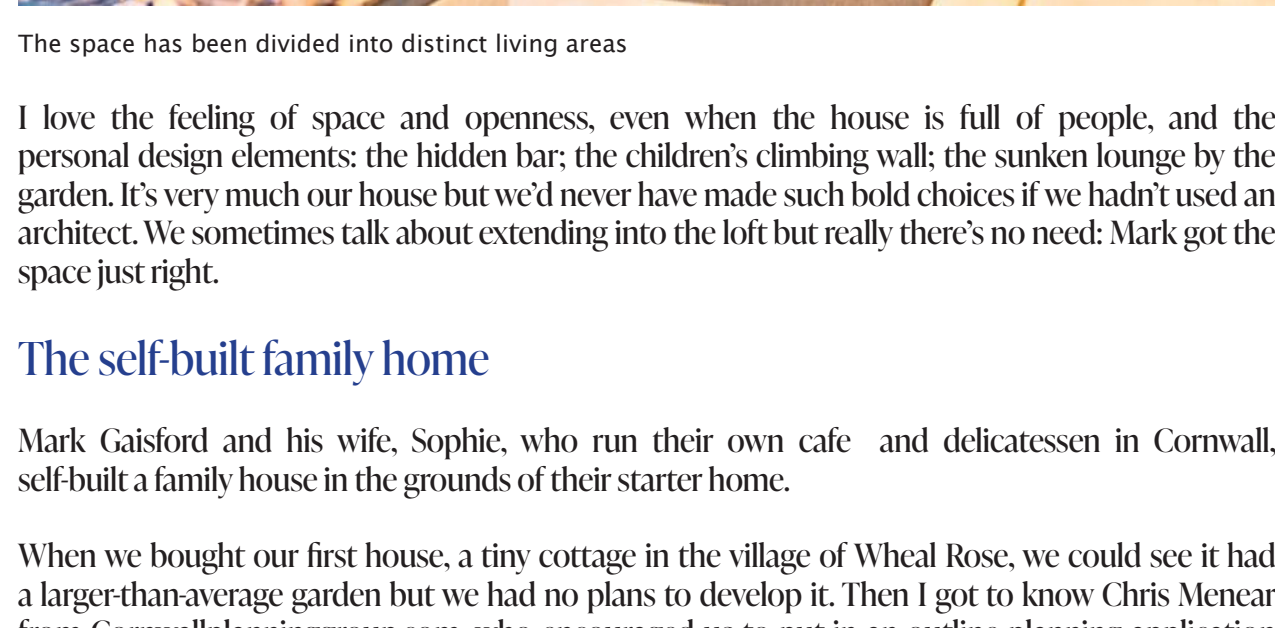
"People become much more aggressive via text messages," he says. If a neighbour loses their rag completely, as his former neighbours did, depositing such toxic manure in his garden that it poisoned his builders, don't retaliate; the most important relationship is the one with your case officer at the local planning department. "The council doesn't get drawn in to petty squabbles and you shouldn't either," he says.

"Focus on befriending your other neighbours. Often it's the same person complaining about every local project." And don't expect the animosity to die down after you've won permission, adds Rollo Embee, a smallholder in Dorset, whose neighbours sent letters to a people living in surrounding villages urging them to object to his application to develop a small barn into an Airbnb. Their campaign continues, even though work on the barn has finished. "I've been told that I'm an outsider and criticised for the wildflower meadows I've created," he says. "I feel for Jeremy Clarkson – it's not easy trying to run a business in rural Britain."

As the drilling continues on our building site, which is still only halfway to completion, I'm certain my next-door neighbours are cursing us ever moving in. The scaffolding and skips aren't forever though, Ashton reminds me, and besides, it's only a matter of time before they will be building their dream kitchen against our party wall. "I feel for people who are enduring a neighbour's building project in a national park," she says. "But in a big city such as London, isn't it the game?"

The farmhouse transformation

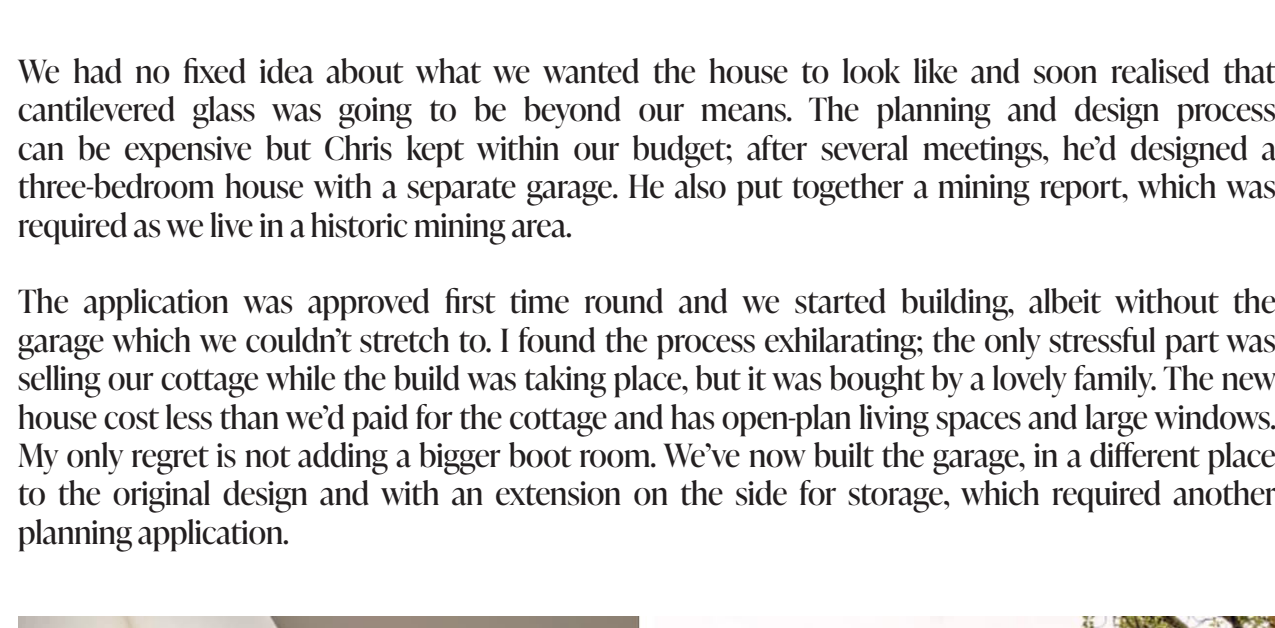
Matt Cobon, an entrepreneur, and his wife Alice, who works in finance, have transformed a rundown Dorset farm into a family home and holiday let business.



Matt handled the planning application and listed building consents himself

We fell in love with our farmhouse in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty near the Dorset coast in 2013 and immediately started planning its restoration. As the house is unlisted, we assumed it would be relatively easy to create an open-plan kitchen in an adjacent barn, but as the house is in the curtilage of another listed barn, we had to treat it as if it was listed.

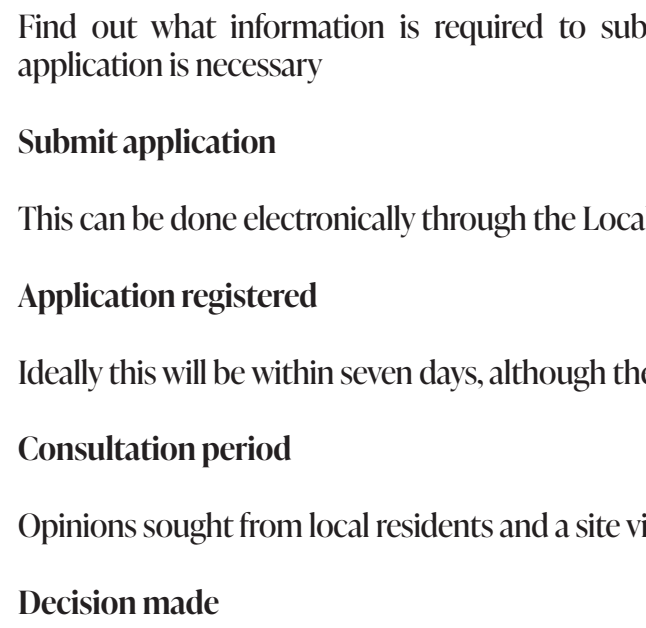
I handled the planning application and listed building consents myself, which was painstaking, as the conservation officer was keen to apply a rigorous listing process to the house and wanted us to replace the double glazing in the windows with single glazing. Thankfully, this was overruled by the council and we were awarded consent.



Matt and Alice have created a play area, vegetable garden and backyard kitchen

We combined traditional and modern elements in the house, restoring the Victorian flagstones and fireplaces and building a modern extension. Outside we created an outdoor kitchen, a vegetable garden and a play area for our two daughters, aged five and seven. During the build we began to dream of transforming the farm into a miniature Soho Farmhouse, with upmarket accommodation in the barns and a gym and pool. It's a slow process: moving a footpath is akin to asking to reroute the M4 and we even needed planning permission to put in a hot tub.

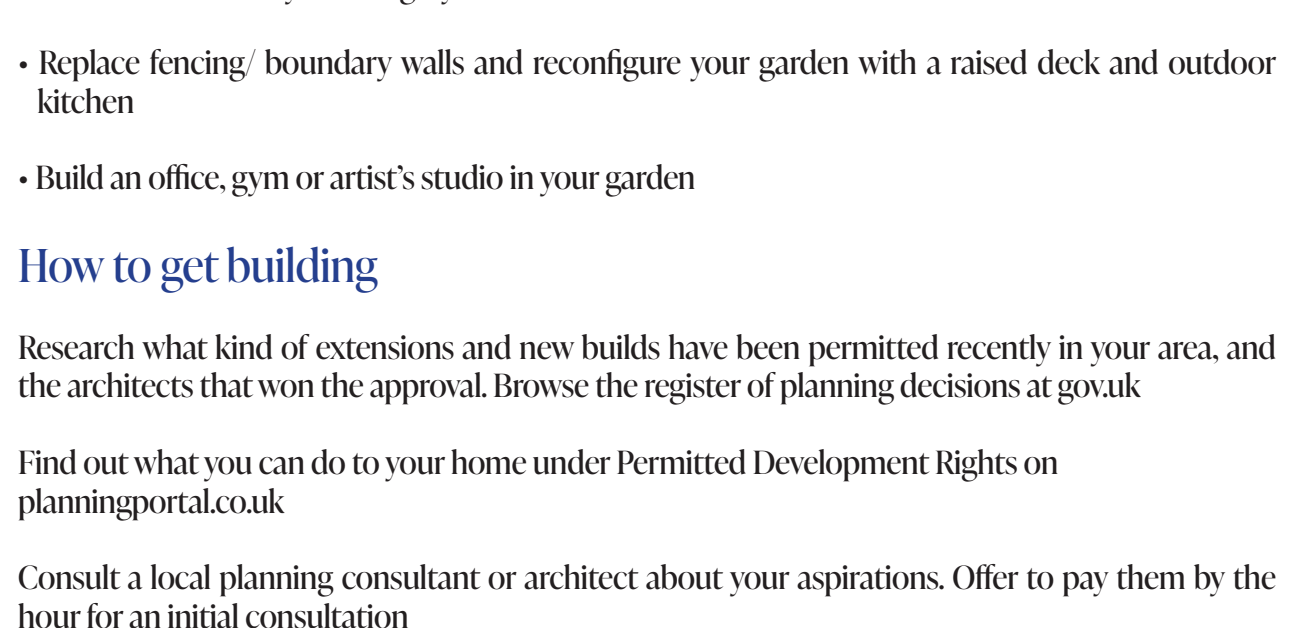
Last year we got permission to pull down an old wooden stable block and built a luxury shed on the footprint, which we let as an Airbnb. Our next project, currently with the planners, is to turn the listed barn into guest accommodation. I've toyed with using a planning consultant but I've now educated myself on local policy and the national framework. I can see why people give up on projects like this – the planning process is time consuming and it's difficult to line up builders – but we love the peace and solitude and can't wait for other people to enjoy it.



'I love the openness': the 1930s build has been transformed

The final design, which included our favourite elements from each, featured zones for relaxing, cooking and eating that could be opened up to form a party house. I was nervous about the planning process but we achieved permission to extend sideways on two storeys and out at the back, which enabled us to have an office, too, and for my mother to have a space to run her childminding business.

When the time came to build, we slightly reduced the second storey extension at the request of our neighbours – we were keen to keep them happy given that we were subjecting them to our building works. I worried I'd never use the office, but when we moved in, 16 months after buying the house, Britain went into lockdown and I had no choice but to work from home, while also homeschooling our two children who are eight and six.



The space has been divided into distinct living areas

I love the feeling of space and openness, even when the house is full of people, and the personal design elements: the hidden bar, the children's climbing wall, the sunken lounge by the garden. It's very much our house but we'd never have made such bold choices if we hadn't used an architect. We sometimes talk about extending into the loft but really there's no need; Mark got the space just right.

The self-built family home

Mark Gaisford and his wife, Sophie, who run their own cafe and delicatessen in Cornwall, self-built a family house in the grounds of their starter home.

When we bought our first house, a tiny cottage in the village of Wheal Rose, we could see it had a larger-than-average garden but we had no plans to develop it. Then I got to know Chris Menear from Cornwallplanninggroup.com, who encouraged us to put in an outline planning application to see if the council might let us build a house on it – the response was positive. We didn't have the funds to build immediately but when our daughter, Zephie, was on the way, we decided to sell the cottage and build a larger house, and Menear helped us to submit a full planning application.

Mark and Sophie's self-built Cornwall home is modern and light-filled

We had no fixed idea about what we wanted the house to look like and soon realised that cantilevered glass was going to be beyond our means. The planning and design process can be expensive but Chris kept within our budget; after several meetings, he'd designed a three-bedroom house with a separate garage. He also put together a mining report, which was required as we live in a historic mining area.

The application was approved first time round and we started building, albeit without the garage which we couldn't stretch to. I found the process exhilarating; the only stressful part was selling our cottage while the build was taking place, but it was bought by a lovely family. The new house cost less than we'd paid for the cottage and has open-plan living spaces and large windows. My only regret is not adding a bigger boot room. We've now built the garage, in a different place to the original design and with an extension on the side for storage, which required another planning application.

Mark and Sophie Gaisford's new-build in Cornwall

I'd love to build another house, taking on more of the project management and building work myself, but the one we've got is perfect. It's modern and filled with light.

Planning timeline

Pre-application discussions

Find out what information is required to submit an application and if an outline planning application is necessary

Submit application

This can be done electronically through the Local Planning Authority's website

Application registered

Ideally this will be within seven days, although there are delays in many areas

Consultation period

Opinions sought from local residents and a site visit from a planning inspector scheduled

Decision made

This should be within eight weeks but can be up to 16 weeks for a more complex project. If the planning department can't meet the timeline, they must obtain your consent for extension

Right to appeal

If your application is refused or subject to conditions you find unacceptable you have a right of appeal to a planning inspector. The Government's planning guarantee deems that no application should spend more than a year with decision-makers, including any appeal

What can you do to your house without planning permission?

(Certain caveats apply – see planningportal.co.uk or consult your local planning department)

- Build a small rear extension, either single storey or double storey
- Build a larger extension up to 8m for a detached house or 6m on any other house (subject to prior approval and neighbour consultation)
- Build a new porch of less than 3m² and 3m height, provided it's also less than 2m from a 'highway'
- Convert your loft into 40m³ of living space in a terrace house; detached and semidetached houses can go 10m³ larger
- Transform your garage or basement into further living accommodation
- Knock down and put up internal walls
- Switch up your doors and windows
- Install microgeneration technology such as solar panels (but not wind turbines) and put up satellite dishes and antenna
- Add roof lights and dormer windows
- Build a conservatory or orangery
- Replace fencing/ boundary walls and reconfigure your garden with a raised deck and outdoor kitchen
- Build an office, gym or artist's studio in your garden

How to get building

Research what kind of extensions and new builds have been permitted recently in your area, and the architects that won the approval. Browse the register of planning decisions at gov.uk

Find out what you can do to your home under Permitted Development Rights on planningportal.co.uk

Consult a local planning consultant or architect about your aspirations. Offer to pay them by the hour for an initial consultation

Consider submitting an outline planning proposal to test the water with the planners. For more information see planningportal.co.uk

Don't rush an application. Get a professional to glance over it before you submit it. Planners are supposed to get back to you with an answer in eight weeks (or 13 if it is a large or complicated development) but many councils are currently asking for extensions

How to object

- Discuss the application with the applicant; encourage them to make your desired alterations or compromise with you
- Write to the planning department by post or email, quoting the application number and listing your grievances (in your own words). In most cases you have 21 days to object from the date the application notice is displayed
- Arrange to discuss the application with an independent local planning consultant who can advise if your grievances will sway the planners and how to present them