

Meet the Dimbys

Getting permission to develop in your back yard could help you sell your home — and make a tidy profit. Here's how, says *Alexandra Goss*

Karen Magrath and her husband, John, had spent 16 happy years in their 1960s bungalow on the top of Yarnells Hill, drinking in the views of rolling countryside and the dreaming spires of Oxford. Yet as Karen, a teacher, approached retirement, the couple decided to sell their home so they could pay off their mortgage, downsize and become more financially secure. Then the inevitable happened: it didn't shift.

Despite being in a desirable area three miles from the city centre, surrounded by lovely gardens, the four-bedroom property spent six months on the market at £650,000, with no offers. Even a £50,000 price cut didn't help.

"We had lots of viewings, and everyone really liked the setting, but it was on a sloping site, and this was causing the problem," recalls Karen, 62. "Young families loved the garden, but wanted to extend the house. They would have to dig back or fill in front, which would make it too expensive. And older people looking for a bungalow in a peaceful setting found that the steps down to the front door and the sloping garden were likely to be too much for them."

She and John, 63, an international development



Karen and John Magrath got planning permission to demolish their Oxford bungalow and develop the site — netting a six-figure profit
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researcher, almost gave up — until they came across Albright Dene (albrightdene.co.uk). The planning consultancy, which operates across southern England, uses in-depth knowledge of our labyrinthine planning laws, both national and local, to help people maximise the value of their properties by exploiting their development potential. Essentially, the Magraths would become Dimbys — Develop in My Back Yarders — to try to sell their home, and alleviate the housing crisis along the way.

Joe McDermott, Albright

Dene's managing director, proposed demolishing the bungalow and excavating the site, which is on one of the steepest hills in Oxford, to create eight luxury flats. If planning permission were granted, this would make the property worth significantly more than its £600,000 asking price — and the city would acquire much-needed new housing.

In most cases, the firm operates on a joint venture, "no win, no fee" basis: it will only take on problems it believes it can solve, and it shares the profits with the homeowners. The Magraths



Simone Illger, pictured with her husband, Andrew, got consent for her mother to build on her land

took their home off the market and, after 18 months and considerable initial opposition to the scheme, the planning committee granted consent. The couple sold their site for £850,000 — with the £250,000 profit, after costs, split 50/50 with Albright Dene.

“At first we were wary, but this has made a big difference,” Karen says. “We sold a difficult house, I was able to retire and we are now relatively financially secure, able to go on holidays. We

miss the lovely garden, but we have only moved 200 yards away.”

Of course, becoming a Dimby won't work for everyone struggling to sell — you'll usually need land on which to develop, and it helps if you have a single-storey property among taller buildings, or a detached home in a built-up area. Precedent is a consideration, too — it may be easier if others in your neighbourhood have developed or extended. And it's not for the faint-hearted:

you should be prepared for opposition from Nimby neighbours, parish councils and planning authorities.

You also need the luxury of time. “In the best-case scenario, if there are no objections and everyone responds promptly, the process will take four months,” McDermott says. “But usually it takes six or seven — longer if it's more complicated.”

In some cases, homeowners don't even need to move to turn Dimby. After her



husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and admitted to a care home in 2015, Andrée Botitko decided that she wanted to leave Poltava, the three-bedroom home that her husband had built on a three-acre site in the Berkshire village of Bradfield Southend in the 1970s.

Yet Albright Dene advised Botitko, now 83, and her three daughters that they could increase the value of the site by acquiring planning consent for the building of another house on the land. Even though Poltava is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and planning rules generally restrict residential development in the countryside, a change to local planning policy allowed Albright Dene to expose a loophole — which increased the value of the estate by more than £250,000.

In May 2017, West Berkshire council adopted a new "housing site allocations development plan" that provides for tightly controlled and limited infill development in the countryside where there are existing clusters of

dwelling outside defined settlement boundaries. "We could demonstrate that the site met all the requirements and that our development scheme would not harm the intrinsic character and beauty of the AONB landscape," McDermott says.

Botitko's husband died a year ago and, sadly, she has also been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so she has decided to stay in Poltava. "We have all been heartened to see how much improved our mum is, remaining in her own home," says Simone Illger, 55, her eldest daughter, who lives near Reading with her husband, Andrew. "All thoughts of moving house have disappeared for the time being, but gaining this planning consent has given us many more options and allowed us to make suitable care plans for her."

You don't even have to go through the time and expense of gaining planning consent to maximise the development potential of your home. Faced with a challenging market, vendors with smaller sites are increasingly seeking to tempt

buyers by showing how improvements could be added.

In Ealing, west London, the owners of a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house were struggling to sell when they approached [Resi.co.uk](https://www.resi.co.uk), an online architecture platform that can design building projects from £250 and help homeowners visualise them with 3D models that start at £100.

The company created plans showing how a buyer could use permitted development rights to add a side-return extension to the ground floor and create an open-plan kitchen-diner, as well as extend into the loft space to add two double bedrooms and an ensuite.

"By showcasing these designs with the property, the owners were able to find a buyer and to sell for £100,000 more than they expected," says Resi's co-founder Nick Stockley. "It proves no one can resist great design."

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