

THE GUIDE

How to build your isolated dream home

Do you have your eye on a plot of land for a project? Make sure you understand rural planning rules

Jayne Dowle

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Periscope House by Studio Bark in Norfolk cost the owners £249,000 to build and featured on *Grand Designs*

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Before you get carried away watching the new series of *Grand Designs* there are a few things you need to know about building a dream home in the middle of nowhere.

There are stumbling blocks, the main one being a piece of planning legislation known as Paragraph 79 (e). It dictates that you can build in the middle of nowhere, but only if the house is of truly outstanding or innovative merit, and ticks a lot of boxes, including winning over local residents, who may not share your vision.

“The first hurdle is to convince the local planning authority that your plot meets the ‘isolation’ criteria,” says Wilf Meynell, the founder of Studio Bark, an architectural practice with expertise in the field.

“This may be measured by geographical distance from the nearest settlement, or lack of services such as transport links and electricity supply.”



An artist's impression of what will be the first hydrogen-powered home in Europe, built by Studio Exe near Exeter, Devon

The second is to prove that the house will meet a demanding list of conditions. Para 79 legislation states that the house must reflect the highest standards in architecture, help to raise the standard of design in rural areas and significantly enhance its immediate setting while being sensitive to the characteristics of the local area. It has its roots in “Gummer’s law”, named after John Selwyn Gummer, the environment secretary under John Major. He pushed his measure through in 1997 with the promise that “each generation would have the opportunity to add to the tradition of the country house, which has done so much to enhance the English countryside”. Back then this often meant a nouveau-riche mansion with plenty of faux period features, which arguably offered very little in the way of architectural merit.

“Times have changed,” says Garry Thomas of Thomas Studio, an architectural practice in Hereford, who is working on Green the Hill, a Paragraph 79 project. “Councillors still assume that they are all grand Palladian-style mansions built as follies for the very rich. In reality they can be quite modest homes built on strong principles of design and innovation. Although some push the boundaries architecturally, others strongly reflect the local vernacular.” Green the Hill proposes to use stone from a quarry less than 2km from the site, layered with rock, gravel and earth to reflect local geology.

It also offers the chance to build pioneering projects. Rural Solutions and Studio Exe, an architectural firm, have gained approval to build, near Exeter in Devon, the first off-grid, hydrogen-powered home in Europe.

Paragraph 79 exists to support the building of country homes on land such as green belt and areas of outstanding natural beauty, which previously might not have gained permission. Yet Paragraph 79 also argues that local planning authorities should avoid sanctioning isolated homes in the countryside unless there are “special circumstances”. This is where the challenge lies. The guidelines are open to interpretation. Richard Hawkes of Hawkes Architecture, which specialises in Paragraph 79, says: “This year marks the 22nd anniversary of this policy, yet its application is so variable from one authority to another.”

Edward Brassey of Strutt & Parker in Market Harborough, Leicestershire, is marketing the £800,000 Pick’s Pastures, an 11-acre site in nearby Lubenham that has permission for a 7,400 sq ft house to include stables and an indoor pool.

The most common Paragraph 79 sales he deals with tend to be owners who secure permissions then sell the plot. “It is a good way for vendors to make money, but remember that when a Paragraph 79 home has been built, there is very little that can be changed, so be sure the plans show the finished product you want.”

In Scotland, rules around rural homes are set out in paragraphs 92 to 97 of Scottish Planning Policy. Development on prime agricultural land is frowned upon, but new buildings that have an economic purpose are encouraged. In Northern Ireland, Planning Policy Statement 21 sets out the requirements for development in the countryside, while in Wales there is no equivalent provision for Paragraph 79.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Is a plot suitable?

Buying a piece of land in blind hope is not the best route, according to Rob Hughes, a Paragraph 79 specialist at Hughes Planning. “The golden rule is that not every piece of land in the countryside is suitable for a Paragraph 79 house. Seek advice from a qualified planning consultant and ask them to undertake a development appraisal.”

Key considerations include: are there opportunities to enhance the character and quality of the site? Are there buildings that can be replaced? Even a demolished previous dwelling can help to justify a new home. What are the environmental constraints, including rare wildlife species on the site? Is there suitable access for vehicles?

How much does it cost?

“Design fees, consultant fees and everything up to planning will inevitably be more expensive than a standard project,” Wilf Meynell of Studio Bark says. Expect to spend between 20 and 25 per cent of your total project budget on preparation work. Meynell estimates that this can range from £30,000 to £100,000. Most Paragraph 79 projects are ultra-high spec, so build costs are likely to be high – between £2,000 and £5,000 a square metre.

Who’s involved?

Choose an architect with a strong track record in this type of project. Responsible ones will tell you if your proposal has any chance of success before taking a fee. You will have to assemble a team of landscape architects, planning consultants and sustainability experts. Getting the right people together will take time and trial and error. You may also have to inform your neighbours and the wider community.

What’s the process?

A pre-application submission is recommended so risks and problems can be identified early on. “A good team will ensure that the scheme is not simply rejected flat-out by a case officer: it should go forward to the local planning committee for discussion in the public interest,” says Garry Thomas of Thomas Studio. Taking the proposal to an independent design review is also recommended and may be a requirement. This impartial feedback process comprises experienced designers and should carry weight and provide the planning authority with an expert voice to sign off, reject or otherwise decide on a project. Not all local councils have one, but there are independent design panels whose expertise can be called upon.