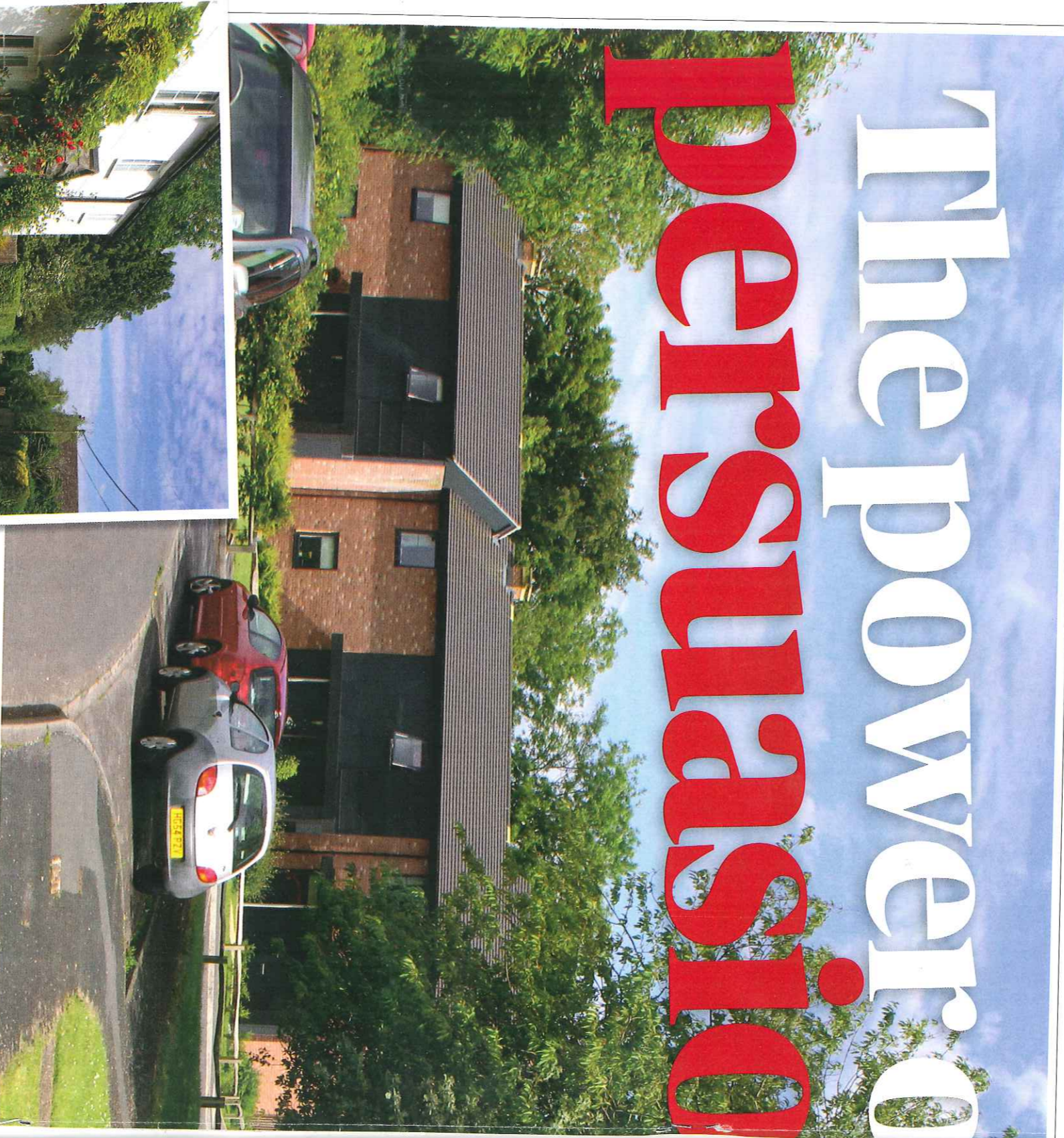


The power is in their hands



A project in south west England is attempting the near-impossible task of combating nimbysism to get affordable homes built. Nick Duxbury returns to his rural roots in Hampshire to investigate

I have a terrible confession to make: I might be a 'nimby'. The realisation hit me a few weekends ago strolling down the leafy country lane that leads into my sleepy home village of Martin. This picturesque settlement on the westerly edge of Hampshire between Salisbury and Blandford has been my family's home for 30 years - and in that time there have been few notable changes.

The last time I raised an eyebrow at a local development was when ferret racing returned to the Martin Club. Many families have lived here for generations and the community is extremely tight-knit, with a village cooperative farm and farm shop. The homes are nearly all attractive period houses dating back to the 15th century dotted along grassy verges - and even though I could never hope to afford any of them, I feel no resentment; simply grateful for the village's enduring beauty and resilience to change.

How would I feel about homes being built in Martin? The truth is, despite being pro-development in principle, on my own hallowed turf, my first reaction would be a defensive one - protectionist. This stance can, fairly, be characterised as that of a nimby - one whose response to proposed development, regardless of how nuanced or reasonable, can be

PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK DUXBURY



reduced to 'not in my back yard'. But if not here, then where?

The response to this challenge can only really go one of three ways. First, a nimby can take up the position of a 'sobby' and suggest building in 'some other b**ger's back yard'. Second, a nimby could become a 'banana', and respond with a variation of 'build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything'. Finally, a nimby can become a 'yimby' - someone who says 'yes in my back yard', either agreeing to plans, or suggesting a viable alternative. It will come as no surprise that this third response is the rarest.

Fighting acronyms with acronyms, an initiative called Harrah, or Hamp-

The housing development in Martin, Hampshire, and older homes in the sleepy rural village (inset)

“Where there is nimbyism it is damn near impossible to overcome altogether. You will never get rid of it entirely.”

shire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing, has been working to make this third response the default one in villages across Hampshire and surrounding counties. Pronounced 'harrah', this scheme is seeking to tackle mounting rural housing need by converting prospective nimbys such as myself into yimbys.

Promoting development

The venture, set up by Hampshire Council in 2005, works with Hyde Housing Group and rural enablers from a community action group to develop communities of the case of development. It does this by visiting parish councils, helping them quan-

tifying housing need, and then by addressing local concerns about proposed affordable housing development. So far, it is the only scheme of its kind in England.

So, what is the process for converting nimbys into yimbys - and most importantly, as Harrah nears its 10th anniversary, is its approach working?

Before addressing these questions, it is time to admit a vested interest: my home village of Martin and the surrounding villages are in prime Harrah heartland and are being targeted for development - specifically for affordable housing. In small communities, even the smallest change has a seismic impact. Beauty and ►

Construction and development special



are showcased to other local councils on a Harrah parish bus tour. This is a crucial part of Harrah's engagement strategy: establish need and then encourage local participation in the design and development process. The scheme is funded by a growing network of district councils: New Forest, Test Valley, South Downs National Park, East Hampshire, Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Winchester and New Forest National Park Authority put in £6,000 a year each, while Hampshire Council and Hyde put in £40,000 a year and the Homes and Communities Agency provides development grant. The money is used to build websites, host events and bus tours, and to pay the salaries and bus tours'.

These are viewed as important as they are viewed as neutral parties by parish councils. 'Community action groups help pull together neighbourhood plans,' explains Mr Buchan-Hepburn. These plans are used by councils to inform their local plans which dictate council-wide housing need. 'They employ the rural enablers whose job it is to help communities deliver development. They can tell parishes that we have helped other parishes.

'[Communities] can be a bit parochial at times, but they do care about what other parishes are doing,' he adds. Joseph Reilly, a parish councillor in the New Forest village of Copythorn, near Southampton, is one of the councillors who has been on Harrah's famous bus rides, because the village is being targeted for development by Harrah. He has been a lone voice in calling for more affordable housing in the village because he is concerned that young people are being priced out. 'What Harrah does is a great idea,' he says. 'The problem is that people in the parish are not all that amenable to the idea of building homes because there is some stigma [towards affordable housing]. [Hyde] tried before and there was total uproar. The chair of

the council was very anti at the start, but now he is coming round to the idea. We have 30 people on the housing waiting list so there is need. But you have to convince everyone else in the village, too.'

Small victories

Every win - however small - plays a crucial role in teeing up the next one. For instance, on the back of the homes built in Martin, the nearby village of Breamore agreed to the development of five homes in an old railway yard. Having been shown these homes and the resulting local benefits, the neighbouring village of Whisbury is also now planning to build the first affordable homes in a generation.

'Where we have delivered homes, it is only ever with the parish council's support,' adds Mr Ditta. 'Sometimes we have lost a parish council along the way. The pressure in small communities is significant. You are always accountable. You need to create a mandate for change. Normally when we commission surveys we only get a 30 to 40 per cent response rate.'

Not every Harrah development has been received entirely willingly, even with all this effort to change perceptions. Maïne Lawton, chair of Twyford Parish Council, recalls that one Harrah

development was a 'hot potato' when it was first tabled and there were considerable objections.

He adds that despite wanting more new homes to get 'new blood' into the village, the 15 social homes weren't as integrated into village life as hoped. 'Being affordable housing, the homes were close together and high density.'

'Harrah doesn't purport to be a perfect partnership, but it is effective. I haven't seen anything that works better.'

It was almost like a closed area a long way from the centre of the village. Having said that, they were built and are serving a purpose.'

Despite the early opposition, Mr Lawton recalls the parish council having 'a good professional conversation' with Harrah. In fact, he says: '[Harrah] was perceived as a consultancy that showed us other previous

A tour of new Harrah developments (above) and recently built homes in West Meon, near Petersfield



developments in other villages that looked good.'

This impression of neutrality - or at least representing the best interest of communities - is interesting given Harrah's clear agenda.

Hyde, which won the tender for Harrah's development partner twice with the current extension running until 2018, appears to be seen as the big bad developer in the first instance, while, based on the responses from parish councillors in the Hampshire area contracted at random by *Inside Housing*, Harrah has managed to develop trust among communities. Asked if the rural enablers it pays to visit parish councils are seen as Harrah puppets, Mr Buchan-Hepburn seems surprised. 'I don't think it is a huge issue,' he replies. 'They are seen as quite independent.'

So what does success look like for Harrah? The answer, for all that work, many sound a bit limited. The scheme aims for 50 homes a year, while Hyde has an overall rural target of 75 homes a year. It has been hitting this target, but progress has been hard fought. 'I think it has been successful,' states Mr Buchan-Hepburn. 'We have created 1,000 bed spaces. The odds are that those people would have been lost to communities otherwise.'

'The start was slow,' admits Mr Ditta. 'But in recent years there have been tangible results. But it's not just about housing. Harrah doesn't purport to be a perfect partnership, but it is effective. I haven't seen anything that works better.'

So, as a potential nimby, how do I feel about more of the same development in my backyard? Well...

After my time with the Harrah team learning about local housing need, I think it best to get on board with my fellow villagers and brand myself a nimby: 'not enough in my backyard'.

Comment on this story at www.insidehousing.co.uk