

Exmoor LCN Housing Notes

Meeting Exmoor House – Thursday 14 May 2026

In attendance:

Cllr Steven Pugsley (Chair)	Somerset Council
Cllr Frances Nicholson	Somerset Council
Annie Cole	Magna Housing Association
Colin McDonald	Somerset Council (Advisory) (Virtual)
Ruth McArthur	Exmoor National Park Authority
Sam Murrell (LCN Link Officer)	Somerset Council

1. Apologies

Duncan Smith, Wendy Lewis (Somerset Council), Katy Attwater (Timberscombe PC), Stephen Kimsey (Huishchampflower PC), Eric Norman (Cutcombe PC), Mike Ellicot

2. Update on actions from previous meeting (The notes from the meeting held on Tuesday 22 October 2025 are attached).

- No significant issues raised.
- Timberscombe housing scheme reported as progressing positively, with improved communication and onsite presence from contractors.

3. Update on Housing Needs Survey – Colin McDonald

- Survey ran **1 February – 31 March 2026** across Exmoor area.
- Approximately **380 responses received**.
- Analysis ongoing and considered complex due to cross-parish data.
- Headline findings expected later in 2026.
- Early indication: results likely to **support existing understanding of rural housing pressures**, rather than change it.

Other comments:

Early Data Extraction for Timberscombe: Colin noted that some data specific to Timberscombe was extracted early to support ongoing projects but emphasised that affordability assessments are incomplete without current market value comparisons.

Anticipated Outcomes: Colin and Ruth discussed that while the survey is unlikely to reveal unexpected trends, it will provide current validation for existing assumptions about rural housing needs and may highlight the proportion of respondents in genuine housing need.

4. Progress on Housing Report – Cllr Steven Pugsley / Colin McDonald

- Updated Homefinder data presented (covering c. 2021–2026).
- Key trends remain consistent:
 - Majority of lettings are **bungalows**, with fewer houses and very few flats.
 - Most applicants rehoused are in **silver or gold band**.
- Identified issues:
 - Limited availability of larger family homes.
 - Majority of lettings **not subject to local connection criteria**.

- Discussion highlighted tension between:
 - Meeting homelessness duties
 - Supporting sustainable rural communities

Local Lettings and Section 106: Colin and Ruth discussed the distinction between open market lettings and those subject to local criteria, noting that nearly 90% of lettings were open, though this does not preclude local people from being housed. The group also highlighted the role of Section 106 agreements and local lettings policies in influencing allocations.

Gaps and Limitations in Data: The discussion acknowledged that some landlords, such as Caractacus and other small charitable providers, do not use Homefinder, meaning their lettings are not captured in the data. Frances and Colin noted that additional data is collected through other channels, such as the authorities monitoring report.

5. Somerset Council Housing Development Strategy

- Clarification that document is a **housing development strategy**, not a full housing strategy.
- Discussion on potential role of the Council in:
 - Investing in small-scale rural housing schemes
 - Addressing unmet need where housing associations are less active
- Concerns noted:
 - Right to Buy implications for Council-built homes
 - Competing priorities with urban housing demand.

6. Challenges in Rural Housing Allocation and Community Fit:

Annie, Frances, and Colin discussed the difficulties of housing allocation in deeply rural areas, focusing on the mismatch between available properties, local need, and the suitability of placements, with input from Ruth and other participants on the impact of current policies.

- **Community Integration Issues:** Annie and Frances described cases where people housed in rural areas like Dulverton, often due to homelessness or gold band status, struggled with isolation and lack of support services, leading to high turnover and challenges in community building.
- **Policy Tensions:** The group discussed the tension between the need to quickly fill vacancies and the long-term sustainability of rural communities, noting that commercial pressures on landlords can conflict with the goal of housing those best suited to rural living.
- **Support Services and Collaboration:** Annie outlined the support provided by Magna, including tenant support advisors and partnerships with community agents, but acknowledged the limitations of these services in addressing deeper systemic issues.
- **Local Lettings Policy Considerations:** Colin and Ruth emphasised the importance of local lettings policies and the statutory obligations of housing authorities, suggesting that more targeted local criteria could help address the unique challenges of rural housing allocation without breaching legal requirements.

7. No More Excuses, Affordable Housing Works – English Rural Housing Report.

- Noted key national context:
 - Only ~7% of affordable homes built in small rural settlements
 - Rural population proportion significantly higher
- **Debate on Investment and Development in Rural Housing:**

Attendees debated the strategic direction for rural housing investment, weighing the roles of Somerset Council, housing associations, and the impact of right to buy legislation, with contributions from Ruth and others on the long-term implications for rural communities.

 - **Council vs. Housing Association Development:** Sam and Colin discussed whether Somerset Council or housing associations are better positioned to invest in rural housing, considering factors such as speed of delivery, resource allocation, and the risk of losing stock to right to buy.
 - **Right to Buy and Section 106:** The group examined the limitations of Section 106 agreements in preventing right to buy for council properties, the evolving legislative landscape, and the potential for lobbying to further restrict right to buy in rural areas.
 - **Voluntary Disposals and Stock Retention:** Colin raised concerns about voluntary disposals by housing associations and councils, suggesting that offering first refusal to local providers like Caractacus could help retain rural housing stock.
 - **Statistical Evidence and Advocacy:** Steven and Ruth highlighted the importance of using data and reports, such as the English Rural Housing Reform report, to advocate for rural investment and to counter arguments favouring urban concentration of resources.

Action:

- **Sam Murrell to obtain and circulate a PDF copy of the report**

8. Discussion on Cutcombe Magna Housing vacancy

Detailed discussion held on:

- Ongoing vacancy at a **2-bed property with Section 106 local connection requirement**
- Difficulty letting despite identified local interest

Key issues raised:

- Conflict between:
 - **Section 106 local priority**
 - **Financial eligibility thresholds (income multipliers)**
- Case highlighted where local applicants may be excluded due to income thresholds despite clear housing need.
- Concern this could:
 - Undermine confidence of landowners
 - Discourage future affordable housing schemes

Discussion points included:

- Differences between Magna and Homefinder eligibility thresholds
- Limits of planning authority involvement (focus on local connection rather than affordability assessment)
- Wider systemic issue of rising wages vs static affordability thresholds.

Actions:

- **Draft letter to Magna Housing raising concerns about thresholds and policy implications** (Cllr Pugsley)

9. Dates and times of next meetings (Venue to be confirmed)

Not discussed.

10. Meeting closed at 4:00pm

Follow-up tasks:

- **Timberscombe Housing Project Update:** Obtain and circulate the latest update on the progress and issues at the Timberscombe housing site, including asbestos roofing concerns. (Katy)
- **Housing Needs Survey Analysis:** Complete the analysis of the Exmoor housing needs survey responses and provide headline figures on tenure aspirations and actual need. (Colin)
- **Home Finder Data Integration:** Incorporate the refreshed Home Finder lettings data and analysis into the ongoing housing report for Exmoor. (Steven)
- **English Rural Housing Report Access:** Download the English Rural Housing Reform report in PDF format and circulate it to the group for reference in the housing report. (Sam)
- **Wheddon Cross Lettings Policy Issue:** Draft and send a formal email to Magna raising concerns about the income threshold for charitable status and its impact on local applicants for the Wheddon property, seeking review or adjustment of the policy. (Steven, with input from Colin, Ruth)
- **Wheddon Cross Lettings Policy Issue:** Assist in drafting the technical basis for the email to Magna regarding the income threshold and Section 106 implications for the Wheddon Cross property. (Colin, Ruth)