

Agenda Item 4

For decision - Planning and Housing

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Summary

The purpose of this document is to encourage within the Council and wider discussion about the stance we adopt to new development over the next five years. It is not intended as a policy document; the debate may lead us to require more data and a wider discussion with other players and organisations. The relationship with the new unitary will be crucial.

Introduction

The situation regarding housing in Frome is well documented. Numerous support agencies and tiers of government all have statistics to offer which in their own way all paint the same picture. There is a chronic housing shortage in Frome.

We have received anonymised data on households registered with Homefinder Somerset who either:

- Live in the BA11 postcode area and have Frome in their address, and/ or
- Have stated that they have a local connection to Frome, and/ or
- Have given Frome as one of their 3 areas of preference

The headline figures from that data are - 874 households are in need a home in Frome (a total of 1954 people)

As of 27/07/2022, in Frome there are 4 properties available on Homefinder Somerset –

- 2 x 1 bed
- 1 x 2 bed
- 1 x 3 bed

The Homefinder Somerset register only identifies those in need of affordable/social housing it does not capture those who need a home but do not qualify to be on the register.

Fair Housing for Frome have conducted Housing Surveys to look at housing need with mixed success, although what became apparent was the type of house needed is at odds with the majority that developers want to build. There is a need for smaller 1 and 2 bedroom units for young and old with good connections to the town centre, open spaces and public transport. This is also echoed in Mendip's housing register. Overall, the need for housing has never been greater.

The reasons for the lack of affordable/social housing can be traced back to -

- The right to buy initiative in the 80's. Social Housing stock has never recovered from that mass sell-off.

- Restrictive planning policies have not kept up with shifting family patterns of formation.
- The unforeseen rise in popularity of the market town especially in the SW and within striking distance of London
- Fewer privately rented units are available due to tightening regulations and the growth of Airbnb and equivalents.
- The national system is not helpful. Private developers have never managed to keep pace with demand, it is not in their interest to make too many dwellings available and they like a long chain of available future sites. The only period when housing supply kept up with demand was during the inter-war years and when council housing completions exploded, and all governments competed with one another to build more houses.
- Much new housing is outside of the price range of many who are looking for accommodation. The average price of a 2 bed house in Frome is £ 225,000, 2 Bed Rentals are around £1,000 per month and the average salary for the region is £ 28,000

Local initiatives

Over the past few years various support groups have looked into the problem and tried to find solutions. Ideas such as Tiny Homes, The Community Land Trust, Mendip's "Green Spaces" initiative and, advocating local renting policies. Apart from a few new units being built the main issue remains.

The main factor that has prevented the various groups from bringing forward more affordable housing is the lack of available sites. Frome has no brownfield sites available that don't already have planning permission for development or are owned by developers.

Historically when sites have come up for sale, they have been snapped up by developers, who are able to pay a premium. One of the key elements of being able to provide affordable housing is to be able to purchase the land at a largely discounted price.

The Frome Area Community Land Trust have tried various approaches to find land, including a call for sites, asking landowners if they have any land that they would be willing to sell to enable affordable housing. They have also carried out a very comprehensive survey of land adjoining the town boundary to try and identify suitable sites.

Mendip District and Somerset County Council have also assessed land within their ownership and identified any land that may be available for development. The number of local objections that were received in response to Mendip's "Green Spaces" initiative, which resulted in them withdrawing the proposals, with the exception of 24 dwellings proposed for North Parade Car Park.

Somerset County Council are looking to develop the Packsaddle site for both market and affordable housing.

All the above, combined with the fact that some developers are able to convince Mendip that they cannot provide the required 30% of affordable/social houses on development sites due to viability, has resulted in an undersupply of affordable/social houses.

Between March 2007 – 2022, a total of 2317 new houses have been consented, 496 (21%) of those were affordable.

Realistically, market housing schemes with the required 30% of affordable housing are the only way in which enough affordable housing is likely to come forward

Development in Frome

As a council we have been committed to protecting our surroundings, but also conscious of the need for the town to grow. During planning considerations, we have adopted a policy of engagement with developers. They, and we, know that we have no planning powers but by gentle and not so gentle persuasion we have tried to ensure that new development suits the needs of the town. Without the power to enforce this the results have been mixed although good concessions have been achieved on sustainability and active travel strategies.

In addition, past town council strategies have been reactive, we generally only know about proposed schemes when they are submitted. Recently we have been more involved at the very outset as developers realise that by engaging with us they might produce a more acceptable scheme, which smooths the application process.

We have always 'sat on the fence' during these discussions until such time as we felt that we had to make our wishes clear publicly. Mayday Saxonvale is a great example of this. We listened for many meetings before finally endorsing and promoting the development. Until now this has worked.

However, over the past few years we have seen more and more new developments proposed some of which are good others, leave a lot to be desired. These include:

- Saxonvale,
- The Old Nurseries
- The Old Printworks
- Sandy's Hill Lane
- Little Keyford (FR3a)
- Innox Hill
- Marston Lane
- Cherry Grove
- Selwood Garden Community

Some sites were in the Local Development Plan LPP2, others purely speculative. Those that have been agreed are in the process of being built or having final plans go through the system. Some such as Innox Hill and Marston Lane have been rejected, for now.

It is likely that more speculative proposals will be lodged in the next few years. For the following reasons:

1. Mendip cannot demonstrate a 5 year housing supply (the land on which to build the quota of houses set out by the government) therefore the local and neighbourhood plans are deemed to be out of date and the overriding principles on which decisions are based become those set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, which effectively states that any area can be developed if it is deemed suitable and sustainable within the parameters of the NPPF.

2. Frome is a popular place to live, it has received widespread positive press coverage over the years and is seen as a safe, convenient, progressive market town.
3. Developers appear to be able sell houses here quickly and on good terms.
4. DEFRA has banned any development on the Levels at the moment due to phosphate run off into the surrounding rivers. Mendip still have to reach their new homes quota so the areas where they can be built are limited to predominately the East of the County

It is probable therefore that we will be fighting off speculative developments such as Innox Hill and Marston Lane for many years.

Mendip will not be updating their local plan before they cease to exist and as such there is not a great deal of point in us updating our Neighbourhood Plan. Even if the new unitary starts immediately it will take 2-3 years to develop and have agreed a new Local Plan, that takes us to 2025/6. On one hand we have a desperate need for housing on the other there are many who build on a speculative basis and provide very little else for the town.

A New Approach?

Perhaps a new even more proactive strategy is required. Parish and Town Councils have been firmly paced in a restrictive box by upper tier councils, lacking in experience and expertise and primarily interested in “dormer windows”. Maybe we can break out of that straight jacket with the new unitary where it is becoming increasingly obvious that money will be tight and new planning policies will be slow to emerge. Perhaps they would even welcome our approach.

Here are 7 thoughts on which direction we could go.

1. Our engagement in the past has been driven by a fear of piecemeal and ad hoc small/medium development dotted around the town that individually give nothing back and collectively add a huge strain on the infrastructure. Maybe we should welcome progressive, sustainable, well planned, and designed large scale planned developments which could bring with them resources that the town needs.
2. An assurance that a minimum Affordable Housing number is met. It is currently 30% of all units but the reality is that Mendip only achieve 21%. Wells has 40% and the rationale there was that all their developments were on green field sites. This should be our aspirational target as well.
3. Raise awareness humanize the housing issue, including the numbers that are waiting and the type of dwellings required. We may need to accept internally and then externally that there may be a shift to meeting local housing needs in an affordable and managed way.
4. To balance our desire for environmental protection, we would assess existing open spaces with a view to ensuring that there is good connectivity between the sites making them more accessible to all and ensure that any new development provides sufficient accessible open space and improves the biodiversity value by having a positive ecological impact, delivering improvements through habitat creation or enhancement.

5. Set up a balanced panel to look at the housing situation and how it relates to development within the town. They are plenty of 'experts' here although the challenge would be to get a balanced group together. .
6. Engage with Somerset Education, Somerset & National Highways, and the NHS to fully understand the need for schools and health care services within the town and how the traffic should be managed, not just for individual developments but across the town.
7. Lobby the new unitary to give us powers of enforcement or some decision making. There is no point putting hard work in at the planning stage only for developers to fail to adhere to conditions imposed.

Recognising the issues

If we engage even more with developers, there is a likelihood that we will be accused of siding with them or losing our values and principles.

There will always be an anti-development voice in any town, and it is right, that should be the case. But the reality is we never hear from those who are in desperate need of a roof over their head. This can lead to a very one-sided discussion with plenty of objection but very little support, even though we are certain it is out there, and numerous support agencies echo this feeling.

The reality is we will have some development and they will eat into green areas around the town, there no significant brownfield sites left. Do we fight all development on green spaces or accept that it will happen at some and try to shape it the best we can; Maybe sacrificing one fields to save three or four others?

Large developments can bring local wealth. Jobs will be created in construction, service industries and contractors who all need skilled and non-skilled labour. As the country charges towards recession could we in Frome play a part in helping to mitigate this for our residents?

Whatever we do will not be universally popular, but we are at a crossroads and need to debate how we are going to grow our town to provide the necessary housing but also protect those areas we feel strongly about.

Conclusion

This paper is not intended to be a 'game changer,' it is the beginning of a discussion involving many agencies and engaging with the town. This discussion will be difficult and even heated but it would be a dereliction of our duty to all our citizens if we do not start to ask relevant questions.

Recommendation

Delegate to the Planning & Development Manager, to set up a panel including various agencies, who will engage with the town to debate the issues addressed in this paper.