

**District Councillors report**  
**Cllr Lindsay MacDougall – September 2021**

This month I have attended Planning Board at Mendip District Council (MDC); also the Scrutiny Board as a non-voting participant (I am not a member) and various trainings and briefings (re a new Somerset Unitary council). Planning approvals continue to be approved in the west of the district where possible, given the as yet unresolved phosphates issue concerning the Levels Ramsar site.

During the relative lull in meetings in August, I have been working with other councillors to look again at the solutions proposed for the housing crisis, a national problem, currently being addressed by the administration at MDC with the potential build of 33 social rent/ shared ownership (50% of each) dwellings at Cemetery Lane in Street and 6 social rent dwellings at Norbins Road (using part of that carpark) in Glastonbury. It is unfortunate that, again, the phosphates problem impacts the building-out of these proposals which are otherwise due to proceed. MDC have also in mind a site in Frome for 18 homes, which is due to be endorsed by Cabinet on 6th September, and a new site is being considered in West Shepton, where they have proposed a scheme for 15 one and two-storey homes suitable for elderly residents with some units adapted for wheelchair use, all at social rent. This will all go some way eventually to address the housing list of 1685 households registered on the housing list (those with a recognised need, in Gold, Silver, Bronze & Emergency categories) for socially rented accommodation in the Mendip district. However, the situation will remain a crisis where much more needs to be done.

Historically, MDC owned a good stock of social housing, which was all sold off to housing associations and also through the Right-to-buy scheme, 20 years ago; MDC as a result does not have the capacity to build their own social housing and is limited to working with Registered Providers (RP), usually housing associations, in order to provide socially-rented housing, where the RP buy the homes to be built for social rent or build their own as is the case above.

Michael Eavis has in recent years donated land to build up to 50 homes in Pilton reserved for local residents and for social rent, of which 37 are built and 13 in the pipeline, thus overcoming the biggest hurdle for the building of social housing, which is the ever increasing price of land. He can now house those who work in the village where Pilton has become out of reach for many house-buyers and rent payers. He hopes that other landowners will follow his example.

Mendip District Council has also contributed by approving housing development on the free market, within the restrictions imposed by central government, where 30% affordable housing is standard on these large housing developments. In the time that I have been a councillor, since May 2019, I have seen the approval of around 180 homes within the affordable housing definition that are specifically for social rent (usually about 50% of the affordable homes are social rent, others being shared-ownership or full ownership sold at 80% of market value, there is also an 'affordable rent' category).

Councillors and officers have looked at other options: Community Land Trusts present one solution. A group of residents may club together to raise a deposit to buy land and build their home that way, or refurbish properties; Frome Area Community Land Trust is an example, and elsewhere in Somerset, West Somerset Community Land Trust.

Rachel Inman at Elim Connect (MDC's homelessness service provider) has managed a project to build a 'Tiny Homes' dwelling which does not require foundations, for which she is currently seeking a suitable site.

MDC are unable to impose any penalties on under-occupied homes (2nd homes and holiday homes), since central government legislation prevents this in England; however empty homes are charged council tax at a higher rate. There has been criticism of Airbnb in the media recently, and a new European provider, fairbnb.coop has emerged which limits each host to one house for short-term rental, soon to come to this country. Likewise, central government does not permit MDC to impose any cap on long-term rental rates; there has been some progress in addressing the worst aspects of the free market in the rental sector in a government white paper on social housing as referred to here:

<https://www.housing.org.uk/our-work/together-with-tenants/social-housing-white-paper/>

Finally, I have been made aware of a report, 'Coming Home', produced by the Church of England, which outlines the housing crisis and their response to it. This is important in that the Church of England is a significant landowner. I am seeking a local response to this report.

To put some of this into perspective, the 2019/20 median income in this country stands at £28,400 per annum per childless couple, as stated by the Institute for Fiscal Studies 2021 report on Income Standards & Poverty) and the median rental is £142 per week for those over 60, This represents a huge challenge for those trying to access the housing market, and another challenge for those who are leaving the employment market; the average house price in England is now around £245,000 and the housing allowance for a single person is around £70, with a state pension at £137.60 per week.

The above represents a brief summary of what is a complex subject; the aim is to highlight some of the solutions to the homelessness that we have been made so aware of in town during the pandemic, and progress made.