

Exmoor Young Voices Open meeting

25th April 2022

Sponsored by The Rest and Be Thankful, Wheddon Cross

First face to face meeting since 28.11.19, due to Covid pandemic

Meeting started at 8pm.

Present: Samuel and Alice Parker-Gill, Josh Smith, Megan Hunt – *EYV Media Co-ordinator*, Sam Camp, Nick Hosegood, Kerrie Wilson, Jol Marshal, Joseph Mallinson, Sue May - *Exmoor Trust*, Cllr Marcus Kravis, Cllr Steven Pugsley, Roger Foxwell, Hester Watson – *WSCLT*, Justin Tyers – *Self Build Advisor*, Will Lock – *Chair, EYV*, Leslie Silverlock – *EYV founder/advisor*, Marion Silverlock – *Secretary EYV Trustees*

Apologies: Vicki Norman, Ian Aldridge, Hermione Warmington, Magdalena Harding
It was noted that lack of childcare and long working days prevent attendance in many cases.

Will opened the meeting by asking for **members' key reasons for attending:**

Josh – house prices, own self-building ongoing

Megan – EYV Media Co-ordinator, as for Josh

Joe – lives with parents, interested in self-build

Samuel PG – lives with wife's parents, working in architects' office, interested

Alice – interested in self build options

Jol – has a plot in Parracombe for possible self-build

Nick – needs EYV to preserve a younger population

Kerrie – looking for other housing options with business storage and wants to help other local young people to stay

Justin – EYV self build champion, mentor

Sue - Exmoor Trust, supports EYV, updating

Hester – CLT and West Somerset Advice Bureau

Roger – updating, parish council, sites

Marcus – Old Cleeve PC and ENPA

Sam C – sites(?)

Les – to update on low interest loans and approaching Summit

Will – Chair EYV

Marion – noting members' issues and information

Will reported the unexpected death of Napoleon Wilcox.

A minute's silence, followed by a spontaneous round of applause, marked our gratitude for his support to EYV, providing many facts and figures not available elsewhere, which gave us invaluable evidence for our issues and suggestions.

Will thanked Megan and Kerrie for the work they carried out during the pandemic.

Self-build project

Progress: presentation from Justin

Lots of interest; people find self build daunting and time consuming; not many applicants becoming self builders. Perhaps there's a need for larger plots of land, and better access to available funds.

It would be useful to know exactly why so few applicants move ahead with their self build plans. It needs a lot of confidence to get started, however.

Josh and Megan are on track: after 12 months, having taken all advice given, their design has been accepted. They have had to overcome the issues of banding – but having a young child helps greatly, as does owning an agreed site. Finding funding for ecology surveys and road closures was essential *before* the design work – so those were unforeseen expenses.

They ask - how could less fortunate people cope with all this?

Overcoming self - doubt is the key – it CAN all be done.

A new project proposal - EYV becomes a developer?

EYV to buy a plot of land large enough for 5 decent sites. Employ local younger people, possibly unskilled, to build houses to our visionary design. EYV to sell the houses for a target price of £115K, including private energy using solar panels and batteries. The builders themselves might or might not be the ultimate owners of the finished houses. Builders develop many skills, and gain confidence in the process. Such a scheme could be replicated all round the country.

Using locally sourced timber and other materials such as clay for flooring, material costs can be slashed. Straw bales are inexpensive and accepted by Building Control. The Forestry Commission could be approached to allow timber extraction for this and similar schemes - demonstrating 'public benefit'. Timber species such as Sitka Spruce can be glue laminated to make strong beams. Overall house design will be further improved by the inclusion of striking features: Cruck Frames, beautiful wood block flooring in the entrance, etc. Preservative Wood treatments will provide even longer life.

Proposal discussion: key points

- Finance and time are great obstacles; impossible to get a mortgage for a Section 106 self-build. Dean Kinsella was going to approach brokers.
- Planning restrictions not always easy to understand as there are often common sense solutions that could be used.
- Impact on landscape could be reduced by stone cladding rather than blinding white walls.
- Nonsense of trying to cram 2 small houses onto one very small site – leaving nowhere for builders to store materials for the second house, upsetting neighbours, damage caused by delivery lorry access.
- A design guide is needed indicating what might be appropriate in different areas and settings.

- House size – still inadequate for rural needs. It is possible to add a bedroom or office space if clearly needed. Unenclosed areas such as open porches and verandas can also be added.
- Members re-iterated – downstairs shower requirements, along with coats and wellies storage; storage for tools; equipment and whatever vehicles are needed, enough parking and turning area for three cars and enough land to grow both vegetables and for children's play area.
- Classification Q allows a farmer/landowner to convert redundant buildings into residences. However, there are no 'affordable' restrictions in place so most will go as second or holiday homes. Could this be changed to help local young people in the future? A question for MPs?
- How can we make this project more attractive to providers? A question for EYV.

Steven Pugsley, Chair of Planning, sees the Summit as encouraging all the relevant authorities, including Highways, to work together to reduce time and expenditure for self builders. Fragmented services need to be integrated and cost effective. Wales is considering requiring planning permission for any change of use from full-time to second home. This would require a change in the law. Some Exmoor villages are now almost entirely second homes. Could the Summit spearhead a request to do the same in England? A question for MPs.

- Local wages will never catch up with existing house prices, so self build really is the only option.
- Sites: Summit discussion: the free pre-planning advice should give an immediate yes/no. The existing maps of suitable sites held by ENPA need to be updated and made widely available, land owners having been approached to agree to affordable self builds. There are other people offering sites who may not be on those maps. They need a visit.

The Summit – Thursday 9th June, White Horse, Exford, by invitation

Background – It has taken EYV 10 years to reach this point. There are 1,960 18-30 year old young adults on Exmoor, mostly living with parents. Self-build is now the only option for home owning. The waiting list for social housing is overlong and there are not enough social housing units for anything like the number needing homes.

All relevant authorities will meet for the second time to share the promises they are devising to make it possible for local young people to remain living and working in the Park. Sitting round the table creates the opportunity to develop co-operative practices and move towards an integrated service. This is a rare event in the housing and local government arena.

The Summit will provide an opportunity for ENPA to show an influencing style of leadership and draw the others into positive action.

Members added child care and the problems for self-employed people needing Universal Credit. The 'month by month' system of assessing income cannot work

for them. It was agreed to invite all the relevant regional MP's to the Summit to carry messages on where small changes are needed. This would also help to develop our Devon links.

Housing generally

- There has been some progress – more helpful planners, some sources of funding found and the first Summit in October 2019
- Hermione Warmington is the new Rural Housing Enabler, on a 3 year contract
- Points raised by EYV are now regularly turning up at meetings and in documents
- Homefinder continues to be a major block, ironically, to helping local young people find rented accommodation. Most young adults do not bother to register – if they do, they might not get housed anyway, whilst others from away do. Affordable is not always affordable and the houses are rarely suitable for rural occupations. There is also a sense of stigma and outrage at the nature and depth of questions asked on the form and the fact that outside problem families can be housed without the same personal scrutiny as locals. This has been observed to disrupt otherwise successful communities and adds to the stigma. (Summit discussion point).
- Outsider families may be non-plussed by the transport difficulties and lack of services and want to leave quickly. Do HA's have the power to refuse to house unsuitable gold-banded families in remote Exmoor villages? (Summit)
- Even if the house you are in is damp and unhealthy, you can still be told you are 'adequately housed' (Another Summit discussion point)
- Caractacus provides starter homes but with an income cap so you will have to move on eventually. With rents at the current level, where is that going to be?
- Magna was going to give local people more say in decisions. Summit question.
- Why are some housing associations paying for builders from far away to do their conversions, ie when Exmoor has many reliable builders with much lower travel costs? (Summit)
- Why do some people refuse the properties they are offered? Perhaps what is offered is not substantially better than where they are living now, even if it is with parents.
- When a Right to Buy affordable property is sold, if it is not taken by a local person, it can be sold on the open market, and is then lost to the social housing pool forever. Could any subsequent sale be brought back into the affordability category? (Summit – MPs)
- Do HAs have a duty to take account of population balance? (Summit)
- Planners could adopt more common sense solutions in order to help people stay in their own villages and actively encouraging them
- Budgets – important to remember they are only ever a best guess

- Part of the problem seems to be that people live in the wrong place when it comes to rehousing ie location issues. (Summit)
- Exmoor has many very large gardens where an affordable house or two could be hidden away.

Action

- Invite MPs to the Summit to deal with items needing government attention and in view of upcoming boundary changes.
- Kerrie will help people with the paperwork as part of her Rural Enterprise role and include people who are currently working out of sight.
- Invite the regional manager of Lloyds agricultural programme to the Summit.
- Get EYV to appear at the National Parks September conference on Exmoor.
- Ask ENPA to create an award for great self-build design. An RIBA award could bring great prestige to a developer who created small settlements at cost or loss. Approach RIBA?
- Find a way to reach philanthropists with Exmoor links who might donate property to house young local people.
- Approach the Prince's Trust and others to raise money to buy the 5 house plot for the self-build project
- £10K is being sought for the production of Justin and Megan's self build Guide.
- Ask ENPA to put out a call for buildings suitable for conversion to affordable house, units

Other issues

- All wi-fi is currently dreadful. Airband promises fast speeds, then appears to dial back speeds in order to charge for upgrade. There was wide agreement about this.
- It was noted that Allerford has full fibre coverage but only about 3 computers in the largely geriatric community!
- Employment and training – Kerrie and Nick are considering offering informal apprenticeships in forestry work and also engaging the interest of younger children with competitions etc

Final word from Steven Pugsley: the Summit belongs to EYV members; do not let it fall into the hands of advisors only and do not become supplicants. The problems are real and the invitees have the solutions to many of them.

The meeting ended at 11 pm, but many stayed on to talk further.