



Exmoor Young Voices

Summit Recall Report

The White Horse, Exford

9.6.22

The purpose of this Summit was to reconvene after the 2-year interruption caused by the pandemic and to consider the pledges outlining helpful changes to practice that attending organisations might make to support the agreed ambition to halt the flow of young adults away from Exmoor, particularly around housing.

Representatives

Andrea Davis, ENPA & DCC; Christine Lawrence, SCC; Marcus Kravis, SWaT; Martyn Gimber & Stuart Talbot, NDHomes; Fiona Cousins, Caractacus; Sue Southwell, SWaT; Fiona Stevens, Amanda Shirani & Sue Rogers, Magna; Dean Kinsella, ENPA; Ken Miles, NDC; Sarah Bryan, ENPA; Eric Ley, ENPA & NDC; Sue May, Exmoor Trust; Mike Ellicott, Parishes Forum; Steven Pugsley, Chair; Will Lock, EYV Chair.

EYV member Speakers: Josh Smith and Megan Hunt, Nick Hosegood, Sam Camp

Observers: Jane Lillis, Village Agent; Ginny Saunders, Webbers Estate Agents; Rupert Warren, Homefinder; Hester Watson, WSCommunity Land Trust; Bill Gash, Exmoor Society; Magdalena Harding, EYV Treasurer; Justin Sargent, S. Community Foundation; Brian Westcott; Selaine Saxby MP, ND; Leslie Silverlock, EYV; Marion Silverlock, EYV Trustee.

Apologies (requesting follow up Report): Lee Baker, Lloyds; John Patrinos, ENPA&NDC; Frances Nicholson, SCC; Pres Sloley, Caractacus; Sam Southam, Falcon; Adam Preece, LiveWest; Hermione Warmington, RHE; Frederica Smith-Roberts, SWaT; Ruth McArthur & Dan James, ENPA; Robyn Gummer, Kerrie Wilson & Becky Nelder, EYV; Francesca Smith, WSaT; Julia Ridge, SCC/WSOA; Sam Relph, CPRE; Naomi Philp, Federation Head; Zoe Vaughan-France, WSFP.

2pm. Steven Pugsley thanked the EYV members for taking time off work to attend, and to Will and Megan for keeping EYV going throughout the pandemic. Since the pandemic, the situation for younger people has worsened, so the task today is to consider what to do, but not how to do it.

The four **EYV members** spoke movingly about the problems of finding suitable rented accommodation, or self-building. **Please see Appendix A.**

Rents have outstripped local wages by a big margin and the present policy, which allows outsiders to be housed when locals have been waiting, was universally condemned. One couple, with their own business, are still living, with their son, in the parental rented home.

Another couple have a rented house with sufficient land available for heavy equipment, needed by their business, but which entails miles of commuting to their workplace. Housing for people with a business is neither available nor suitable.

The practice of being unable to be housed until you are evicted and living in a caravan needs revising, to avoid great hardship and pressure on children. “Without EYV’s support we would not be struggling on. We need help, not barriers and costs.”

It is impossible to be rehoused into decent, dry accommodation because you are told you are adequately housed already. It becomes necessary to engage the health and safety agencies before anyone takes account of black mould. One couple had a choice between a private rental at £700 pm, which had access to buses and nursery places, but as self-employed people with an uncertain life with Universal Credit, this was impossible. A HA house is £400, which is do-able, but has no suitable storage for tools and equipment, poor wifi and no mobile phone signal – all hopeless for business.

The speakers presented a picture of hopeless barriers to finding a home suited to their purposes and the businesses needed to sustain Exmoor National Park.

Will Lock: “And these are the resilient ones....”

“Youth proofing is an EYV request, i.e. that decisions should be reviewed for their impact on younger people, who will always need extra help to survive here. We risk the total loss of local knowledge and skills. There is a great need for more common sense to be used when making decisions. Today should be used to share and improve your own and others’ policies.”

General discussion

There was a wide –ranging discussion of problems, restraints and ideas.

1. The context

- The emerging issues are **housing, transport, childcare, communications and household incomes.**
- SWaT could do more but there is pressure to focus on larger populations.
- There are bi-lateral conversations between Somerset and Devon re digital connectivity.
- Central government is not appropriate/fit to judge Local Plans.
- Developers buy up land and then do not build, but if you cannot prove a need, you cannot build anyway.
- **Second homes** are outside ENPA control; ENPA is not a housing authority. Its main concerns, defined by government, are landscape protection, tourism etc.
- In **North Devon**, private rentals have lost out to **second and holiday homes/Airbnb**, now 23% of housing stock. **Homelessness** has increased and **key staff** are proving very **difficult to recruit**. Central government has the power.
- In **Exmoor National Park** the issues are more acute because of wages, house prices and government levels of support.
- How to finance self-building? Cross subsidies from larger development funds could be used to finance smaller projects in rural areas.
- **Exmoor houses need to be allocated to Exmoor families/young adults.** The last 10 houses in Exford have all gone to outsiders. The points system allows

problem families from elsewhere to be dumped on villages, even where there are local families with children in need! One consequence is the additional pressure on local schools to provide more, and expensive, 1:1 teaching.

- One Exford house had 18 local applicants, none of whom succeeded, and all of whom are still stuck.
- Land for affordable housing needs to be affordable, so owners are reluctant to sell below open market value.
- This is the 2nd least affordable area in the UK. Trying to build communities with not enough land or finance needs us to think outside the box. At the moment it takes 8.5 years from identifying a housing need to placing a key in the door.
- The mismatch between supply and demand is the main problem – for every house available through Homefinder, there is an average of 73 bids and for 2 bed properties it is 120.
- Homefinder is not designed to secure ‘local houses for local people.’
- Most of the houses bought as second homes would be beyond the reach of locals. (Webbers). Ex-S106 properties are selling at high prices.
- Rural needs are so different from urban ones. A local housing development moved its required affordable units to a town off Exmoor, 30 miles away!
- Local people get stuck in unsuitable houses, unable to move for lack of suitable affordable housing.
- To be financially viable, HAs cannot build less than 10 properties on a site.

2. Delegates suggested:

- Could ENPA, HA’s and housing charities buy up plots of land dotted around the park, for self-builders?
- Local flexibility, as EYV has demonstrated in 15 cases, is all that’s needed.
- Convince land owners of the needs of local young residents.
- We could all encourage offers of land, a collaborative approach based on ENPA’s information about what might be available/suitable.
- The points system needs reversing, to avoid the inappropriate dumping of outside families.
- ENPA will work on its pledges.
- There will be Young Voices at the National Parks Conference in September.
- Self building can be financed by a mix of Lendology support, private donations and eg Landfill Tax money.
- Allocate Exmoor homes to Exmoor families.
- Affordable housing could be tackled collaboratively with HAs, planners, use of building apprenticeships etc, and cross-subsidising from big areas to small ones.
- Much more hand holding needed before Homefinder can work for everyone.
- The new, unitary, Somerset Council could invest directly into housing, perhaps including some smaller and less economic developments.
- Homefinder needs a local connection requirement
- Could ex 106 properties revert to S106 on re-sale? Does S.106 need revising?
- If affordable development quotas can move from rural to urban, why not the other way round?
- Could self-builders make use of the new Somerset Council account to buy materials at a much cheaper rate?

- Another offer of possible financial help for self builders was made after the meeting.

Next steps

1. Organisations study their pledges in tandem with others to adopt, adapt, dismiss and/or add to.
2. A tangible list of deliverable actions to be developed by September this year.
3. Youth proof major decisions to assess the impact on younger people.
(Required under an Equalities legislation exemption which allows prioritisation in order to right a current lack of equality)
4. Side meetings to hammer out issues, build relationships and develop new ways of working to solve some of the inequalities

The meeting disbanded at 4pm for further networking conversations.

Appendix A - EYV Speakers

Josh Smith

“I work at an agricultural / garden machinery dealership serving, and selling to, the local community. Currently, I commute over an hour to South Molton and back, Monday to Friday.

My family have lived on the moor for decades. 2 generations have lived in Winsford, with close family now residing in Timberscombe for over 50 years. I have no interest in living in a terrace town house with limited or no garden area. I have always been a country boy and want my children and family to have the same quality of life.

Some of the personal issues we are facing are rising fuel and living costs, which will always be our largest obstacle. But I have always lived rural and don't want this to change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been problematic, with outsiders moving to the area and house prices rising, but not at the rate of wages. The majority of sales in Timberscombe during the last year were semi-detached properties, selling for an average price of £264000.

I've found a property in School Lane, Winsford. (1997) £59,000 - £292,000 to £357,000 house in Winsford (semi detached) 395% increase. Lower figure. Difference of £233k.

I don't begrudge people moving to the area - they boost the economy. But, the sought after house market means those from large towns and cities can sell up, move down and still have a comfortable lifestyle. It also pushes the typical working family from their rightful homes.”

Megan Hunt, *“Mum to 6 year old Arthur, self employed copywriter and the Media Coordinator for EYV. We’re currently living with my parents in a privately rented house, while we build our family home in Winsford. Our plot of land has been owned by Josh’s family for decades and was where his great grandfather used to grow veg, and his father would rear calves.*

Difficulties

Despite being lucky to have a plot, and obtain planning permission, it has been a long, arduous process. It is difficult to navigate ‘the required steps’ such as proving local affordability with the Homefinder application, which we found quite intrusive. We had to disclose our earnings, savings, and background.

Taking on a self build requires a lot of confidence, and it’ll be hammered at with all the setbacks and obstructions on the way. Luckily for us we have Justin. Justin Tyers is the EYV Self Build Advisor and local self build legend. Without him and EYV, we wouldn’t be in the position we are in now.

Costs

In doing our self build, we’ve uncovered lots of costs and required steps that we weren’t initially aware of. For example, surveys, road closures, licences and rising material costs. We’ve found it seems very difficult to keep costs down, especially when you seem to need an expert for everything.

Suggestion

It would be great to have discounts for those building S106 affordable houses from the likes of planning and highways. Remembering we’re not building a house to sell - we are doing a self build because we can’t afford an Exmoor home on the open market.

We are also helping with the social housing need, as for every young family that can build their own affordable home, it’s one less family that will need social housing, putting less strain on the housing associations and councils. Let’s be honest, would you prefer to see 10 concrete jungle houses being built on one plot or 10 individual environmentally friendly dwellings, which suit those of rural families?

Finance Issue

There is also the big issue of financing a self build with S106. Even for someone that has the plot, and can prove they require a home and can’t afford anything on the open market, it’s a catch 22 because they need to have enough money to fund the project without outside sources.

Why we’re here

We’re here to ask the people in this room to make it easier for young people to continue living on Exmoor, not with their parents, but in their own homes. The youth of the moor is the future.”

We've also been sent a message to read out on behalf of one of our EYV members Jol, who lives on the North Devon side of Exmoor. He can't be here today as he is working, and also in the midst of moving his family, which includes three school-age children, to a caravan as they are being evicted, through no fault of their own, from their privately rented home.

Jol Marshall

"We are both working 2 jobs on Exmoor. Although my business is based in Barnstaple, I also work on the Moor for customers, my wife works in the village, Parracombe and also in Lynton, our kids school locally.

We have lived here for 5yrs and yet we can't stay unless we move into a caravan, how is this right or acceptable?

We want to build our own affordable local home so we can have a home of our own without the threat of eviction. We want our children to grow up in the place they call home, and when we are all done and dusted we want that home to go back to the community for another generation to do the same. So why is it so hard?

We have made tentative enquiries on a potential plot and so far have received a lot of reading documents in response that would just put people off. However, due to guidance from Justin at Exmoor Young Voices we are going to persevere. It would seem the road ahead is going to be long and convoluted and potentially expensive, but why should it be if everyone agrees there is a need?

Surely there can be a blueprint for success if a family meets the local affordable criteria? Instead of appearing to make this process even more difficult? We need help. We need our own home. We need it to happen now - not just talk but action . We are ready to build with a spoon if needed, just help.

*Thank you,
Jol and family."*

Nick Hosegood

"Forgive me for being so scruffy. I've been cutting down trees all day. We run a business, tree planting and forestry at Simonsbath sawmills. This is a National Park property. Our industry is a young person's game. Not something you can carry on forever. We employ two people, one 53 and one 29, pay them fairly well, but neither of them can afford to live where we work, on Exmoor; one coming from Minehead and the other from Watchet every day.

We don't have a next generation of people for this work. That's my big issue. There are no houses, no jobs, so the only way is to learn what you can and get out. The schools can't survive because of this and we are all losing out on a younger generation. I'm struggling to see what the future is for my two and a half year old son.

One of the things that we are doing is coaching young people to imagine their future here and help them to create that. There are so many rural skills, things that people can do, of benefit to Exmoor, if only we could sort out the housing issue. This is a huge issue, not least because the affordable housing on Exmoor is not suitable for the many types of work which are needed to maintain Exmoor's environment or welcome visitors.

We are very fortunate because the property which we rent has enough outdoor space and a landlord who is happy to tolerate our two tractors and trailer. It is not an ideally suitable home to live in but there is not a cat's chance in hell that I'll be able to afford a plot of land and build a place of my own with sufficient space to deliver our environmental business. The equipment we need inside the house, the space, for washing facilities for ourselves and our work clothes. There needs to be a more common sense approach to work on Exmoor."

Sam Camp

"I live on Exmoor and run my own carpentry business. Since the last Summit, my family has fortunately been rehoused by Falcon. Before that we were in private rented accommodation which had rising damp and was too expensive. The walls needed treating and the roof replacing. Because we took the issue up (when the landlord would do nothing) with environmental health, he took exception and threatened us with eviction. We had a one year old child and if you don't know what you're doing, what your rights are, we would've been in serious trouble. Becky Brown from SWaT, who we met through EYV, helped us to identify the problems. Otherwise we would have been evicted.

Fortunately, Falcon Housing agreed that our situation was unacceptable. But, we still had to go through the procedure with Homefinder, apply for a house and prove that we have the right connections. The house is in Luccombe. There are no buses, bad Wi-Fi and no mobile phone reception for running a business. If I am away working, there is no chance of my partner getting out of the house or going shopping.

It's a nice house for our family and it is better than the £700 a month we were paying before. But for me to run a business from there, it is not suitable - tools upstairs in the loft, no shed in the garden, trying to send emails and messages proves quite difficult with one megabyte per second. Sometimes I have to wait three days! At times, I have to take over the kitchen.

Connectivity is poor. You can only use the mobile phone through Wi-Fi calling so when Wi-Fi goes down there's no chance of continuing business. And BT wants to take the village phone box away so no possibility of summoning help in an emergency. We moved onto Airband, which is better than BT - well, until the storm and the power cuts that came with it. Since then that has not been working properly either.

If you start a family on Exmoor and you are self-employed, universal credit doesn't support your working family lifestyle. We employ other people. I need to pay them. Because our tax is paid half yearly the income we receive is viewed by universal credit to be too much to qualify and, therefore there is no money for childcare to release my partner to work. This means your nursery place, which has to be booked in advance and paid for, cannot be covered.

Essential local workers, young families and businesses just move away to survive."