

Housing in Somerset

Increasing number of households

The number of households in Somerset is projected to increase from 235,000 in 2013 to 249,000 by 2021 with the largest *percentage* increase in lone parent households, and greatest *number* increase in single-person households, especially amongst the elderly. Single-person households currently make up 30% of households. Strategic planning for appropriate housing plays an important role in the future sustainability of communities and the local economy for example in addressing the shortage of one-bedroom properties in the county. Local planning authorities are able to influence developers through planning policy to build a proportion of homes to Lifetime Homes standards to help people remain independent in their homes.

Rentals

The 2011 Census shows an increasing trend toward private rentals, now more than 15% of all households in the county. A lack of affordability for private purchase increases demand for rental properties however, this raises rents



and leads to private landlords becoming less likely to accept 'riskier', often more vulnerable households, consequently placing more demand on local authority housing providers. The influx of migrant workers to the vicinity of the Hinkley Point site will increase these pressures. At the construction peak in 2016, there will be 3,700 workers requiring accommodation in the local area.

Housebuilding

Between 2006/7 and 2012/13, 9,610 new homes were completed in Somerset. There are a number of plans for further developments in the coming years and thousands of homes have been granted planning permission and/or are already under way. How many will be built will depend upon various factors including economic climate and approval of applications.

The previous process of agreeing Section 106 payments from developers is, to a large extent, being replaced by the Community Infrastructure Levy. All services need to consider the impact of new developments, and ensure that operational and commissioning plans identify additional resource needs.

House Prices and Affordability

In 2012/13, there were nearly 8,500 house sales, of which 1,160 were new properties. The average house price paid in Somerset was £206,853, but this

varied considerably from £292,000 in Axbridge to £174,000 in Crewkerne and Watchet. The average cost of a semi-detached 'starter home' was £159,000 which is unaffordable to many young people in Somerset. The affordability ratio for entry-level homes (lower quartile house prices relative to lower quartile earnings) is relatively high in Somerset (8.04, compared with 6.59 in England). In West Somerset and Mendip, the ratios are above nine. This, together with a shortfall in appropriate accommodation and the lack of a university in the county, is an important factor in the net outward migration of 18-24 year-olds from Somerset.

Rurality

The county's rural communities not only suffer from a lack of affordable homes, but also require more diversity in the types of homes available. The sustainability of existing communities is also at risk due to increasing pressure on transport, schools, shops, healthcare and other services.

Gypsy Travellers

The refreshed Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (2013) identifies the need for a further 341 residential pitches by 2032. This could prove challenging, and the transit provision in the county is currently uncertain. There are currently around 500 traveller caravans in Somerset.

Social Housing Demand

At the end of September 2013, there were 16,298 households on the social housing register, Homefinder Somerset. Of these, 1,733 were in the gold (high need) band and a further 14 in the most critical, emergency band. On average local authorities are able to house between 12.5% and 16.8% of applicants on the housing register in any given year. Currently, demand far outstrips supply for all properties, particularly one-bedroom.

Empty Homes

In 2012-13 there were 7,762 empty homes in Somerset with around 90% of these in the private sector and almost a third of them being empty for more than six months.

Homelessness

In 2012/13, 605 households were accepted as being homeless and in priority need, slightly down on 2011/12 (652) and 2010/11 (622). The numbers placed in temporary accommodation have fallen from 192 two years ago to 131 at 31st March 2013. Termination of an assured shorthold tenancy and eviction from the family home are the major causes of homelessness. Effects of welfare reforms on homelessness applications will need to be monitored.

Welfare Reform

In August 2013, DWP figures show that a total of 2,842 households in Somerset social housing received reduced Housing Benefit as a result of the 'spare room subsidy', representing 8% of all Housing Benefit claimants. A lack of smaller properties in Somerset has made downsizing problematic. Note that the DWP forecast changes to Local Housing Allowances (LHA) will have a much greater impact on Somerset residents, affecting an estimated 10,800 households in private sector housing who will lose an average of £953 a year.

Housing Quality

Housing Stock Projections by the Building Research Establishment (BRE, 2007) estimated that more than 40% of all private sector stock in Somerset (excluding Mendip) would fail to meet the national Decent Homes Standard. Half of households categorised as 'vulnerable' lived in non-decent homes, although since then thousands of homes have been improved.

The District Councils have a responsibility to identify health and safety hazards in both private rented and owned properties, particularly where these impact vulnerable people. The emphasis is on acting to remedy these 'Category One hazards' before they result in a life changing event for the occupants. In other parts of the country, studies have shown that for every £1 spent remedying these hazards, it saves the NHS £3.36.

Repairs

There is evidence that in tough economic times, people spend less on housing repairs which could cause more accidents and injuries in the home. The London School of Economics has estimated nationally the public and private value of interventions (from grab rails to stair lifts and shower rooms) as £579 per recipient per annum in reduced demand for health and social care services. The NHS estimates in each year one in three adults aged 65 or more (and a half of those aged 80 or more) will have a fall. Research shows that adults lacking necessary adaptations were between 1.5 and 2.8 times more likely to suffer a fall than those where interventions were in place.



The ageing population is likely to increase demand for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG). In 2012/13, across Somerset, excluding South Somerset (which has its own Home Improvement Agency service), the Aster Home Improvement Agency had 531 DFG enquiries and they completed 181 DFGs delivered and signed off in people's homes. Countywide, they also completed 4,305 handyperson jobs.

Mental health

People often find it difficult to obtain and/or maintain suitable accommodation if they have enduring mental health problems. Somerset County Council

commissions a range of supported housing and floating support for adults with such problems and associated needs, but more multi-agency work is required to develop services that meet the accommodation needs of people who require a 'high tolerance' setting whilst they continue to recover from acute mental illness.

Lifeline Alarm Service

The provision of a Lifeline Alarm Service across the County through different providers provides an invaluable service to vulnerable people, providing assurance and confidence to live independently and often preventing injuries becoming more serious. As an example, the Deane Helpline service handled 225,000 Lifeline calls in 2012/13, increasing the opportunity to effect early admission to hospital. The Deane Helpline Emergency Response Team (available in Taunton Deane) was called out 1780 times in 2012/13, saving an estimated 600 unnecessary call outs to the emergency services.

Fuel Poverty and Energy Inefficiency

The South West has the highest proportion of energy-inefficient dwellings. In Somerset, one in six properties have a Category 1 Excess Cold Hazard, below the regional average but above the national average of 12%. The issue is particularly prevalent in West Somerset.

There is a clear link between poor energy efficiency, fuel poverty and poor health. A positive relationship between low thermal efficiency of housing and excess winter deaths exists. A considerable number of excess winter deaths are attributable to cardio-vascular disease and respiratory diseases.

Cold housing impacts on health in various ways. For example, children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely to suffer from a variety of respiratory problems, including asthma, than those living in warm homes. Mental health is also negatively affected by fuel poverty and cold housing for all age groups and existing conditions such as arthritis can be exacerbated.