

Frome Neighbourhood Plan Supplemental report on Housing Policy

The Case for Community Housing and Self Build

“Localism will mean an end to a top down approach to house building”

Colin Molton HCA executive Director for the South West

The problem of housing a growing population is not a new one. When I started out as a property professional back in the 1970's most Local Authorities were building and managing their own housing stock and a 'Council Estate' could be found in every corner of England. Local Authorities still have responsibility for housing but few today are building new homes. Housebuilding has principally become the preserve of the large volume housebuilders and the development of private housing estates is their stock in trade.

Despite exciting advances in building systems and technology most houses in the UK continue to be built to a formula based on tried and tested traditional construction methods. These are commodities created for a mass market by corporate housebuilders focused on feeding profits back to external shareholders. Such housing is functional and unimaginative.

Over those 40 years houses have got smaller and, relative to earnings, more expensive. We now build the smallest houses in Europe. The RIBA in their report *The Case for Space 2011* highlighted a general dissatisfaction with homes built by the volume housebuilders and cite the main concerns as rooms being too small; a lack of style and a lack of outside space. Sadly most new housing in the UK is built to this “off the peg” model



The formulaic approach too often has little regard for social infrastructure, environmental impact or future management and often offers only limited engagement with the local community. This was a particular concern of Frome Citizens panel and one that the Town Council seeks to address in drafting the Neighbourhood Plan.

Frome Town Council have asked how the Neighbourhood Plan might be framed to support delivery of the housing allocation target to provide a further 1000 homes within the Plan period but at the same time encourage greater diversity in design, social cohesion and environmental responsibility.

The Council also recognise the need for further affordable housing particularly to enable young families and key workers to be able to afford to live in the area. For the year 2012-13 only 113 new affordable homes are expected to be built within Mendip District where there are currently over 2500 families registered on the housing waiting list.

Last year house prices in Frome ranged from £165,000 for a terraced property to £280,000 for a detached house, an average value of £185,000, showing an increase of 4% on 2011/12¹. Whilst house prices in Frome are considerably cheaper than outlying areas such as Bickington and Rode (average price £350,000) or Bath (£325,000), prices are nevertheless 8.45 times higher than local earnings which for some will put homeownership beyond reach. It is important therefore to be able to offer a range of prices and tenures.

The fall in recent years in home-ownership largely reflects the difficulties prospective new homeowners have found in getting access to the market as a result of tight constraints on the money supply. In contrast those with existing homes and equity have been able to take advantage of relatively cheap finance to invest in the buy-to-let market. This has the effect of increasing the social and financial divide.

The intention is to look at ways in which sustainable and affordable private rented housing can be made available through partnership with local Housing Associations and local investment schemes.

These are some of the issues we have sought to address in considering an appropriate housing policies in the Neighbourhood Plan:-

1. Recognising that the development of sustainable communities is an overarching objective the Town Council intend to adopt the principles of One Planet Living to help guide future development of the Town.
2. Recognising the benefits of prospective homeowners being directly involved in the design, building and management of their homes we are making specific provision for certain exception sites to be set aside for affordable self build and community housing development.
3. Recognising the wish to see greater community involvement in the design of major development sites and provision for their long term management there will be specific provision for such proposals to be subject to sustainable and community management plans. Furthermore there will be a requirement that serviced plots are offered for self build or custom build development.

A Case for Self Build and Community Development

The UK has the lowest proportion of self build homes in Europe accounting for only 10% of our new housing and yet according to a Building Societies Association survey over 50% of the population would like a self build home at some stage in their lives. Self build homes are likely to be more affordable and sustainable than those produced by the volume housebuilders.

As the popularity of TV programmes such as Grand Designs suggests interest in self build is growing and this is no longer seen as just the preserve of the wealthy entrepreneur. Housing groups and community land trusts are seen as a way by which people can collectively become involved building their own home and do so as a community project, developing skills and relationships along the way.



Under the National Planning Framework Local housing authorities are now required to identify local demand from self builders which is a strong indication of the Governments commitment to support the sector. Grant Shapps MP, when housing minister, announced the intention to double the proportion of self build and custom build development in the UK by 2020.

The National Association of Self Builders (NaSBA) is the leading support organisation in the UK and principle advisor to Government on policy in this area. They have published a number of useful reports for the benefit of private housebuilders, local authorities, and developers which can be downloaded from their website <http://www.nasba.org.uk/information>

Jargon Busting

Here is a brief summary of terms commonly used to describe different procurement routes:-

<i>Self build</i>	is a term that covers a wide spectrum of people building bespoke housing individually or in groups. It is a common misconception that self builders physically build their own homes. In the majority of today's self build schemes the role of the self builder is to project manage the development.
<i>Community Housing</i>	is frequently used to describe development by a group who build on land that is held in common ownership or trust for the benefit of the residents
<i>Custom build housing</i>	was introduced in the Government's Housing Strategy for England ² and is a term used describe a collective housing project where a specialist developer co-ordinates the whole process for the people involved
<i>Cohousing</i>	is a form of community development where the residents jointly design build and manage the project rather than individuals building their own homes. The design may include shared facilities such as common house or workspace and land for allotments and recreation space. Such developments would typically range from between 8 to 30 units and may offer a mixture of tenures.

Housing projects such as Lilac in Leeds, Springhill in Stroud and The Yard, Bristol are amongst a number of privately funded community and co-housing projects that have received both awards and media attention.

The Yard, St Werburghs, Bristol

Such schemes provide the opportunity to see at first hand the many benefits that residents enjoy that may include lower cost housing, allotments, a healthy lifestyle, and a strong sense of wellbeing.

Self build can also provide a platform for skills training. Over the last 30 years there have been about 20 multi-unit self build projects delivered by Housing Associations or councils, working in partnership with the Community Self Build Agency (CSBA) and often with the long term unemployed.

Frome has an active local Cohousing group and a recent survey by the Town Council strong interest in self build communities from within and outside the area. The difficulties such groups encounter in securing suitable sites, resourcing finance and professional skills and building capacity is recognised.

It is therefore the intention to make specific provision for the development of community housing on exception sites on the edge of the Town where there will be a presumption in favour of community development. It is envisaged a price discount on the land will help offer long term housing affordability.

Community development as a regeneration tool

No matter how much you are committed to and think you have a clear view of a course of action there is nothing quite like seeing it in operation to take your breath away.

Gabriel Scally then SW director of Public health on his first visit to Freiburg in 2008

Examples from Europe such as the self build community at Almere in Holland or the sustainable Vauban district of Freiburg in Germany have inspired some new thinking in the UK into how self build and community led development can function at scale.



Such developments have been made possible through the leadership and ambition of Local Councils working with local residents and strategic partners to lay out a masterplan and provide the essential infrastructure framework within which individuals, groups and developers have been able to create a range of housing, shops, workspace and social and community facilities.

The defining feature of such a development is the partnership approach. The flexibility of a framework design enables a more organic approach to development parts of which are designed procured and funded through different organisations.

The development of Vauban has not only produced a range of housing models and styles (most of them designed and built by their residents) but it has also created a strong platform for sustainable living. The houses are all highly energy efficient and there is little car traffic in this district as the residents can access local shops and facilities easily on foot or bike and for longer journeys rely on car pools and public transport. 70% of households live car free.

Frome can learn from such examples and has the ambition to also lead by example. There is a collective appetite in Frome, as a Neighbourhood Plan frontrunner, to learn from the mistakes of the past and not repeat them in the future; to tackle head-on big issues such as climate change, housing affordability and social welfare from a local perspective; and to ensure that regeneration opportunities such as Saxonvale become exemplar projects that will put Frome at the forefront of good design and practice.

Notes for 8th April Housing WG meeting

The Neighbourhood Plan sets out a framework within which new development solutions will be encouraged and enabled. The policies are intended to promote collaboration, creativity and innovation in designing and planning our homes and to ensure that Frome continues to welcome people from all walks of life to participate in the future of it's community.

David Parkes, the author of this report, has been a chartered surveyor and private development consultant for 30 years practicing in the Bristol and North Somerset Area. He has a special interest in self build and community development.