

Housebuilding in North Somerset

There has been a lot of confusion relating to housing and green belt policy in North Somerset. I hope that this note will clarify the position.

Housing targets are set by government to try to produce, across the country, the housing that we need to allow social mobility (ensuring the next generation can participate in the benefits of homeownership) and community continuity (with more affordable homes being made available so that young people can continue to live alongside their families in the local community). Local plans are adopted by elected local authorities, setting out their own priorities and putting government targets in a local context. For example, housebuilding in the north part of North Somerset district (North Somerset constituency) is limited because of competing government guidelines on building on floodplains and the very tight restrictions placed on green belt development. In the south part of North Somerset district (Weston-super-Mare constituency) areas of outstanding natural beauty in the Mendips also face restrictions on building.

I have set out the figures for recent years below to show the target that was set each year, the number of houses built and the difference between the two.

Year	Completions	Target	Difference
1996/97	662	993	-331
1997/98	873	993	-120
1998/99	875	993	-118
1999/00	974	993	-19
2000/01	812	993	-181
2001/02	1066	993	73
2002/03	1206	993	213
2003/04	1265	993	272
2004/05	1058	993	65
2005/06	1253	993	260
2006/07	1132	993	139
2007/08	1474	993	481
2008/09	935	993	-58
2009/10	772	993	-221
2010/11	637	993	-356
2011/12	515	700	-185

2012/13	527	700	-173
2013/14	760	1049	-289
2014/15	674	1049	-375
2015/16	569	1049	-480
2016/17	852	1049	-197
2017/18	863	1049	-186
2018/19	729	1049	-320
2019/20	868	1049	-181
2020/21	966	1049	-83

As you can see, for the majority of the years that are set out (and for the last 13 consecutive years), housebuilding numbers have fallen short of the target. There are (at least) two possible explanations for this.

One is that the constant shortfall against the Government set target shows that there is not the level of demand that the Government seem persuaded exists by developers who then don't build them.

The other is that developers sit on their permissions until the demand, and thus the price, rises. They will then argue to the Planning Inspectorate that the local authority has not "built enough homes" and therefore must release more land for development. This leads to unsuitable sites, land banking and leaves communities blighted for years.

Currently there are over 11,000 permissions already granted for dwellings to be built in North Somerset but where this has not happened. This would fulfil current targets for a number of years.

As the former Conservative leader of North Somerset, Nigel Ashton, made clear, "My request has always been that when the developers convince the Inspector that there is a need for x-numbers of new housing, then that permission, with all the accompanying infrastructure, should be phased and built to that schedule. Providing essential infrastructure and having to build to schedule, would have the affect of reducing the huge uplift in land values which allow developers to say they cannot afford to pay for services or enough affordable homes".

Some MPs, including myself, have suggested that we go further and that the forthcoming Planning Bill should be used to tackle this issue of "build -out" where existing permissions are not used. One way would be to make changes to the planning process so that developers are not allowed to apply for any

more land for building inside a local authority area until they had “built out” the full quota that they already have. I accept that this would be controversial, and am willing to consider viable alternatives, but the status quo is not acceptable.

We await the publication of the planning Bill proposals to see what changes are proposed in this area and I, along with several other colleagues, are likely to table amendments to the legislation if they are not.

I have also seen a number of scare stories about North Somerset Council “being forced to build on green belt land”. There are very strict guidelines about housebuilding in the greenbelt which are set out under the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework). Not only does central government not instruct for housing to be built in the greenbelt, but it positively restricts it and will normally refuse planning permission being issued. I enclose the link below to the NPPF but would draw your attention to paragraphs 147, 148 and 149: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/13-protecting-green-belt-land>

Complicating all of these issues are the local politics in North Somerset. The present splintered administration in NS has now put the level of affordable housing that should be built at 40%. The previous Conservative Council were averaging about 12 % after negotiations over the trade-off between affordability and the provision of local amenities. While we would all like to see more affordable housing built, to build more in areas where there are no amenities, no employment, no public transport and no new roads is madness. Some councillors in the “Rainbow Coalition” (who campaigned on being “green”), want vast numbers of affordable houses and want them near to Bristol for transport and employment. That means destruction of green belt, affordable homes allocation to Bristol with all costs falling to North Somerset. This is driven by the desire of some councillors to see North Somerset join Bristol in a larger authority. I am completely and utterly opposed to this. I believe it is fundamentally against the reason why green belt exists and that it would have a destructive impact on Long Ashton, Dundry and other local villages, altering the landscape, visual amenity and local environment forever. I hope this provides you with some objective information to help make sense of the current debate. We will get a better idea of what will be contained in any planning legislation soon and I will post an update on my website.