

Somerset's Rural Housing Shortage Drives Families Away

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Somerset's countryside, with its postcard-worthy hills and quaint villages, is facing a grim reality: a housing crisis that's pricing out families and threatening the fabric of rural life. Soaring property costs, scant rental options, and wages that lag behind the national average are pushing younger families and lower-income residents out of the county's villages and

small towns. The result is a creeping exodus that risks hollowing out these communities for good.

Somerset Council has been sounding the alarm, pointing to a dire shortage of affordable homes as the root of the problem. In 2024, the council managed to deliver 111 affordable homes in rural areas, a step forward but nowhere near enough to stem the tide. Their Affordable Housing team is scrambling to work with developers and housing partners to roll out schemes aimed at low-income families, young professionals, and older residents who want to stay in the countryside they call home.

Councillor Sarah Wakefield, who oversees housing and homelessness at Somerset Council, didn't mince words in a recent interview: "We're fighting to get more affordable homes built in our rural communities because we know how critical this is for our residents. Young working people, in particular, are being squeezed out by sky-high costs and the broader cost-of-living crisis. But let's be clear: the council can't foot the bill alone. We need serious financial backing from the central government, and we're not seeing it."

Wakefield also took a swipe at the current Labour government's spending plans, noting that their recent budget promises seem to prioritise urban areas while leaving rural counties like Somerset in the lurch. This lack of support, she argues, could derail the council's efforts to keep rural communities intact.

Among the projects in the pipeline is a development in Wheddon Cross, nestled in Exmoor National Park, which could deliver nine affordable homes, including options for social rent and discounted ownership. Another scheme in West Bagborough, in collaboration with Falcon Rural Housing, aims to add five social rent homes, potentially meeting most of the village's housing needs.

In Bishops Lydeard, there has been some progress. Earlier this year, housing association LiveWest, backed by Somerset Council, completed 12 wheelchair-adapted homes, eight of which were tailored for residents with learning difficulties. This project, a joint effort between the council's Affordable Housing and Adult Services teams, shows what's possible when resources align. Yet, with demand far outstripping supply, these wins feel like drops in the bucket.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Without bold action and proper funding, Somerset's rural communities face a future where only the wealthy can afford to stay, leaving villages as

hollowed-out shells of their former selves. For now, the council's pushing forward, but they're clear: Westminster needs to step up, or the countryside's way of life could be lost for good.