# Somerset council rejects Tory motion blaming asylum seekers for housing crisis



In a recent council meeting in Somerset, a contentious debate unfolded over the housing crisis, revealing deep divisions among local councillors regarding the role of asylum seekers. A motion proposed by Conservative councillors sought to prioritise housing for local residents, arguing that government schemes to resettle asylum seekers were exacerbating the already dire housing situation in the county. However, this motion was soundly defeated, as Liberal Democrat and Labour councillors accused its proponents of scapegoating vulnerable refugees for broader systemic issues.

The Conservative motion, introduced by Councillor Lucy Trimnell, emphasised the immense pressure on Somerset’s housing market, exacerbated by ongoing infrastructure projects and a national commitment to resettle asylum seekers. Trimnell pointed out that Somerset has been allocated 826 bed-spaces for asylum accommodation—the third highest in the southwest—further straining local resources. The motion aimed to rally support for local residents' housing needs, calling for assurances from the government that these resettlement schemes would not disadvantage Somerset's families.

Critics of the motion, including members of the Liberal Democrat and Labour parties, contended that it unintentionally perpetuated negative stereotypes about refugees and asylum seekers. Councillor Sarah Wakefield rebuffed the claim that the pressure on housing was primarily due to these groups, indicating other pressing factors such as the ongoing phosphates crisis, rising tourism, and increased demand for second homes. According to Wakefield, the focus should remain on the “chronic underinvestment in social housing” rather than targeting the vulnerable.

Sajjad Jabarkhel, a refugee from Afghanistan, articulated powerful opposition to the motion during the public question segment, arguing that such rhetoric misrepresents the challenges faced by refugees and may fuel societal divisions. He stressed the contribution that refugees can make to society and suggested that a more constructive approach would involve development programs that empower asylum seekers rather than framing them as a burden.

Further complicating the discussion, the Somerset Council’s allocation of £3.5 million from the government's Local Authority Housing Fund was underscored as an important initiative aimed at purchasing properties for refugees. These homes are intended to revert to local council availability once the refugees no longer occupy them, promoting a dual focus on addressing immediate humanitarian needs while also considering local housing demands.

The motion's defeat reflected widespread concern among councillors that blaming asylum seekers for the county’s housing woes was fundamentally incorrect. Multiple councillors pointed to evidence suggesting that asylum seekers constitute a minuscule percentage of the overall housing demand, with one report noting that they made up just 0.038 per cent of Somerset’s population.

And while voices in favour of the motion, such as Councillor Marcus Barr from Reform UK, claimed a need for controlled immigration, the overall consensus among the governing parties leaned towards a collaborative approach to tackle Somerset's housing crisis holistically. Echoing this sentiment, Labour group leader Leigh Redman highlighted that the ongoing housing needs in Somerset predate the recent influx of asylum seekers, calling for unity rather than division among various groups in the community.

With the council focusing on structural issues such as planning delays, rising costs of building materials, and economic instability, the debate in Somerset epitomises a larger national dialogue about housing, immigration, and social responsibility. As local councils grapple with these complexities, the hope remains that constructive discussions can pave the way for inclusive solutions that support both locals and those seeking refuge.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[4]](https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2023-04-21/the-west-country-debate-april-local-elections-immigration-and-housing)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-68133448), [[5]](https://opencouncil.network/meetings/21513)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-67212103), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgm1e78gevo)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-67212103)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[4]](https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2023-04-21/the-west-country-debate-april-local-elections-immigration-and-housing)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[5]](https://opencouncil.network/meetings/21513)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgm1e78gevo), [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-67212103)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://wells.nub.news/news/local-news/wrong-racist-and-ill-conceived-tory-asylum-motion-crushed-in-somerset-housing-row-261898> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-68133448> - Somerset Council has been allocated £3.5 million from the government's Local Authority Housing Fund to purchase 31 properties for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. These homes will be re-let to local residents once the refugees have moved on. The initiative aims to provide stable accommodation for displaced individuals while addressing local housing needs. The council has already acquired 10 homes, with additional properties in the process of being purchased. The funding is part of a broader effort to support resettlement schemes and alleviate housing pressures in Somerset.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-67212103> - Councillors have raised concerns that the government's plan to end contracts with 50 hotels housing asylum seekers by the end of the year could shift the financial burden onto local councils. The Local Government Association warns that councils may be required to find alternative accommodation for refugees, potentially straining local resources. The government intends to house asylum seekers in more cost-effective accommodations, such as disused military sites and barges, but the transition could impact local communities and budgets.
4. <https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2023-04-21/the-west-country-debate-april-local-elections-immigration-and-housing> - In the April edition of The West Country Debate, panelists discussed the challenges of housing and immigration in the region. Conservative Councillor Rebecca Smith highlighted the need for swift action due to escalating costs of housing asylum seekers in hotels. Labour MP Karin Smyth criticised the government's approach as a temporary solution, advocating for a comprehensive, long-term strategy to address the underlying issues. The debate underscored the complexities of balancing housing needs with immigration policies in the West Country.
5. <https://opencouncil.network/meetings/21513> - During a Somerset County Council meeting on 22 May 2024, Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts addressed the housing crisis in the county. She highlighted a significant decrease in the number of affordable homes available for let, from approximately 2,898 units per year between 2010 and 2016 to about 2,146 units annually from 2017 to 2023. Despite this decline, demand for affordable housing has increased, with around 10,000 households currently seeking homes. The council acknowledged the housing crisis and committed to exploring solutions in future meetings.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgm1e78gevo> - Somerset Council is considering selling non-operational buildings and small parcels of land to address a financial gap of £80 million. Proposed sites include the Market House in Taunton and the Cornhill in Bridgwater, with a combined value estimated between £17 million and £21 million. The council declared a financial emergency in November 2023, citing rising service delivery costs and national factors like inflation and higher interest rates. The sale of these assets is part of the council's strategy to bridge the budget shortfall.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-65984747> - In North Petherton, Somerset, a hotel housing approximately 250 asylum seekers has been integrated into the community. Mayor Philip Spencer reported initial concerns from residents, but noted that the asylum seekers have been welcomed and are participating in local activities, such as litter-picking and playing cricket. The Home Office has stated its commitment to reducing the use of hotels for housing asylum seekers, but the situation in North Petherton highlights the complexities of community integration and public perception.