

**Lord Bishop of Exeter to ask His Majesty's Government what their plans are to address the housing crisis in rural and coastal communities.**

**Monday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

My Lords, as Bishop with pastoral care of one of the largest rural dioceses in England that boasts not one but two coastlines, I have become concerned about the escalating housing crisis in rural and coastal communities. If this is the situation in Devon, I suspect it is equally the case elsewhere, which is why I am encouraged by the number of colleagues from across the House who are speaking today. My hope is that we can distil wisdom that will reshape the housing policies of His Majesty's Government.

We are all familiar with the problems of affordability caused by the chronic housing shortage that is having a disproportionate impact on people with low incomes. The Government, as it has admitted today, is falling woefully short of its own homebuilding target and, as a result, people are suffering because they have nowhere to call home, their health is diminished, and community spirit is being eroded.

In coastal and rural areas, particularly in tourist hotspots, the situation is compounded by second home ownership, holiday rentals and AirBnb lettings. In Devon and Cornwall, there is a huge gap between properties listed for short-term holiday lets and long-term rentals.<sup>1</sup> Last year ITV

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2022-08-30/the-number-of-airbnbs-in-cornwall-compared-to-long-term-rentals>

highlighted the fact that in the whole of Devon there were only 936 properties to rent compared with more than 15,700 holiday lets, sixteen times as many. Re-visiting the same data ITV used last year, the ratio has risen to twenty-two times the number, with available rental properties having slumped to under 700.<sup>2</sup> The situation in Cornwall, as no doubt Lord Teverson will confirm, is even worse with a staggering ratio of over ninety times as many holiday lets. Only 208 rental properties are listed compared to more than 19,000 holiday lets.<sup>3</sup>

Too often local people are forced out of areas where their families have lived for generations, fracturing their support networks to the detriment of individuals, families and whole communities. Tourism is an important industry. No one begrudges those who have the privilege of choice enjoying the countryside and fabulous coastline. But without systemic change, including regulating the AirBnb industry, our rural and coastal communities will be hollowed out. In my diocese, the impact of second home ownership in Salcombe, for example, has meant that there are now so few locals resident in the community that they are struggling to recruit volunteers for their lifeboat crew.<sup>4</sup>

The report published jointly this month by the South-West Social Mobility Commission and the University of Exeter, highlights how the housing crisis, in combination with poor public transport, is contributing to low

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<sup>2</sup> From AirDNA on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 2023 Devon AirBnb plus Vrbo properties 15,236 Rightmove properties to rent (excluding retirement and student lets) 678  
<https://www.airdna.co/vacation-rental-data/app/gb/south-west-england/devon/overview>  
<https://www.rightmove.co.uk/property-to-rent/find.html?locationIdentifier=REGION%5E61297&propertyTypes=&mustHave=&dontShow=retirement%2Cstudent&furnishTypes=&keywords=>

<sup>3</sup> As above: 19,247 AirBnb and Vrbo; 208 properties to let via Rightmove

<sup>4</sup> Information from the Helm of a south Devon lifeboat crew.

educational attainment across the region. Transport investment in the region stands at £308 per head of the population, compared to the national average of £474. Inadequate public transport disadvantages poorer residents and young people who wish to engage in educational and apprenticeship opportunities. In combination, this exacerbates the cycle of deprivation and stifles aspiration. The human and societal cost of the housing crisis is accelerating. Employers struggle to recruit for the hospitality and retail industries. Healthcare providers and community services suffer shortages because keyworkers cannot afford to live in rural and coastal areas.

In his 2021 report, the Chief Medical Officer for England noted the high proportion of the worst health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals that are concentrated in coastal communities,<sup>5</sup> and access to quality affordable housing is a contributing factor. The demand for social housing in rural areas is growing at ten times the rate of that in towns and cities. In Devon, with the current rate of net additions to affordable housing stock, even if housing waiting lists closed tomorrow, it would still take over 32 years to clear the backlog.<sup>6</sup>

A report from the Universities of Kent and Southampton notes the dramatic rise of homelessness in rural areas with a 24% increase in rough sleeping in the last year alone.<sup>7</sup> Rural and coastal areas often fall through the cracks in our national data gathering, but research by the Rural Services Network shows that if our rural communities were

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-2021-health-in-coastal-communities>

<sup>6</sup> Data from Keri Denton Head of Economy,, Enterprise and Skills, Devon County Council

<sup>7</sup> <https://englishrural.org.uk/rural-homelessness-counts/>

aggregated into one region, then its need for 'levelling up' would be greater than any other region in the UK. It is why the current housing crisis merits action, not just sympathy.

The recent report of the Archbishops' Commission on Housing entitled 'Coming Home', points out that housing is not just about putting a roof over a person's head. It is about creating homes in communities where people can live with dignity and security. It is about enabling the diverse communities that make up our United Kingdom to thrive and have a real community spirit, and this is where I believe the Church can have a significant part to play. Sadly, my noble friend and colleague, the Lord Bishop of Chelmsford, who chaired the Archbishops' Commission on Housing and who intended to speak today, is unable to be present due to a family bereavement.

I know she would join me in welcoming the various practical responses that are being developed to address the current crisis, whether by landowners, Local Authorities or charities, including by the Church of England in the use of its land assets to promote truly affordable homes. In Braceridge Heath in Lincolnshire, to give one example, the Church Commissioners have just obtained planning permission for 1,000 new homes of which 20% will be affordable. The plans include infrastructure that will enable people to live in community with dignity and facilities to promote their wellbeing. All this will be integrated into a town of some 5,800 people. Things happen when Government, landowners and communities come together in partnership to promote the common good.

Rural Exception sites open up new opportunities for affordable housing, often with Community Land Trusts being instrumental in enabling tight-knit rural communities to be integrated into decision-making about housing developments.<sup>8</sup> But research shows that policies are not always applied consistently across local authorities. There are challenges with the current planning system to make agreements fruitful for all parties. The complexity of the situation means that we cannot afford to tackle this crisis piecemeal.

It is why the Rural Coalition has called on the Government to create (and I quote) ‘a cross-departmental strategy for rural England, setting out a vision and policy framework to deliver sustainable growth for its communities and businesses, and encompassing farming and environmental concerns.’ Will the noble Baroness the Minister commit to going back to her department and press for such a comprehensive funded rural strategy?

I note with approval the renewed commitment of the Prime Minister to achieve the Government’s housing target by the end of 2024. But I regret that in the statement by the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities, the focus seems to be solely on cities and once again there is no recognition of the scale of the housing crisis in rural and coastal areas.

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<sup>8</sup> Middlemarch Team Devon Research (not published)

My Lords, it is a privilege it is to live in one of the most beautiful counties of England. Heaven is Devon, but the picture postcard view of rural life is only half the story. This housing crisis is not restricted to a few beauty spots, and I believe it is not something the market can solve, as some seem to think. The absence of housing supply, the diversity of people's needs and the immense pressure in the system mean that neither the market, nor any single organisation or individual can make the difference that we all long to see.

Without partnership and systemic change, the spiral of deprivation will become more acute. The Government needs to recognise the scale of this problem. We need cross-departmental working and cross-party agreement to forge a coherent long-term strategy that will secure good housing and the flourishing of our rural and coastal communities. I hope that such a coalition of goodwill will begin here and now today.

+ Robert Exon

The Right Reverend Robert Atwell

*Lord Bishop of Exeter*

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