

*The Archbishop today delivered his first speech after returning to the House of Lords as Archbishop of York. The debate was on the report 'Coming Home' by the Archbishop's Commission on Housing, Church and Community, and the case for setting out a long-term housing strategy. The speech follows in full...*

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My Lords, it is an honour to speak in this debate and support my dear brother, the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose visionary leadership in this and other issues of social policy draws people of faith and good will together in developing a narrative of hope.

As we emerge from the horrors and sorrows of Covid we have all become much more aware of our inter-dependence. Just as Covid cannot be dealt with anywhere until it is dealt with everywhere, so it is for other challenges facing our common life. When we cheered the NHS last summer we were also cheering a set of ideas that are precious to our national life; that is that we belong to each other, and that some things, like health are so basic that we cherish the fact that they are available to everyone at the point of need and regardless of one's ability to pay. Should not this principle apply to other things as well? Such as food on everyone's table? And a roof over everyone's head?

When we do consider the housing challenge facing our nation and unfortunately, part of the challenge is that we have not done this in a sufficiently joined up way - we tend to think first of homeless people on our streets and the human tragedy and other political, policy and social failures this represents.

But this is just the visible misery on the surface of a larger and far more extensive set of challenges. Behind those who literally have nowhere to live, are the hidden homeless who move from place to place and sofa to sofa in temporary and insecure accommodation. Then there are those who are forced into inadequate and unsatisfactory housing because nothing else is available. And then there are those who cannot afford to live in the communities where they grow up and with it the concomitant damage to morale and social cohesion. This is a big and complicated challenge, affecting many millions of people, and not just the homeless, though they are our most immediate concern. Could we then take this opportunity of thanking those many amazing charities up and down the land who minister to the needs of those who currently live on our streets. The churches and other faith communities being very involved in this work.

But the other visible sign of the problems we face is less obviously a problem at first: it is the vast new estates we are building, where the housing may be very nice if you can afford it, but the chief motivation appears to be profit and the infrastructure needed to make houses into homes and homes into communities, is often lacking. There are of course marvellous exceptions to this. And we must build on them. Literally.

And this is what this Coming Home report is all about: establishing the values and finding the political will to tackle the housing challenge together with long term, joined up, solutions. This requires a reset in our attitude to housing, and in the way we approach seemingly intractable problems. The keyword is "together". We are unlikely to make significant progress unless all parts of our society and all parts of government cohere around a common vision and, as this report identifies, a common set of values that can then drive policy over a longer period of time, transcending the short term fixes that are so often dictated by even shorter election cycles.

This is a challenge. A challenge to all of us. To national, local and regional government; to landlords and landowners. But there can also be exciting ways forward when we move together. And practical steps that can be taken. And, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, the Church itself must lead by example and face these challenges ourselves.

But working together will be helped by some sort of cross party recognition of the values and approaches outlined here. At the very least we should start by adopting a definition of affordable housing that is linked to income, as others have already said in this debate.

However, in the few minutes left to me of the five values identified here as being fundamental to our vision for homes and community, I want to focus on the last one: satisfying.

It would be possible to build sustainable, safe, stable and sociable houses. But they wouldn't necessarily be things of beauty. They wouldn't be a source of joy.

I am delighted that this fifth element, that could so easily be seen as an optional extra, is kept in the mix, because it will encourage architects and builders and interior designers and those who are at the cutting edge of developing the new technology we need in order for our homes to be sustainable, to think and imagine how this can be achieved with beauty as well as with simplicity and economy, and we need to draw on some of the great architectural visions of our history and of European history in order to raise our expectations.

When being interviewed a few years ago on the radio, I think - about my likes and dislikes, foibles and peccadillos, I was asked what is my favourite journey. I replied that I really liked driving round the M25 and up the A12. The interviewer looked askance. This was not the expected answer. But, of course, that was my favourite journey then, because that was my journey home. Now I would say how much I love the A64.

But my experience of joy and expectation when I turn the corner to arrive home, is not the experience of so many of our citizens. Either because they have no home. Or because their home is not what it should be.

During this past year the inequalities of housing have, we know, callously accelerated the spread of COVID, where cramped conditions and lack of access to outside space have meant that those without good homes are also those without good health.

This must change. But to ask for such a change is not naive optimism. It is a vision of hope that can lift our spirits and stiffen our resolve. To do it is within our grasp. It is a matter of policy and political will. It is the right thing to do. But it will also save us money in improved health, social cohesion and well-being.

This report is called Coming Home. It aims for nothing less than ensuring that everyone can come home, and find joy and stability in that home.

My Lords, to build homes is to build community. To build community is to build stability. To build stability is to build peace. And isn't this the first responsibility of government?

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