

Friday it was good to attend the launch of the Devon Housing Commission's Report. I was the only Devon MP to be a Commissioner, excellently chaired by crossbench peer Lord Best. And whilst lovely to be at the University and see so many graduating students, the report was not such joyous reading.

The positives are that having data led research from the University of Exeter there are clear recommendations as to steps to tackle the housing crisis, from local councils right through to government. However, given the magnitude of the problem, it is not going to be a short term fix. A combination of a lack of building of affordable houses, lack of rental properties, exodus of young people and mass migration in of retirees, on top of an already aging population, overlaid with poor connectivity, deprived coastal towns and our multi tiered local government, making planning far too often disjointed with under staffed planning departments.

The report highlights the issues around short term holiday lets and second homes, and I remain proud to have had my name on the amendment to the Levelling Up Bill which would see this begin to be tackled. However, I remain hugely frustrated that not all the measures needed have been passed into law, and quite clearly a Labour government with no interest in rurality or understanding of the complexity of our housing crisis will be able to drive these initiatives through. Instead we seem condemned to have yet more houses built on our green fields, which still do nothing to tackle the housing crisis as our migration issues are so different to other parts of the country. In North Devon we built significantly more new homes than required from our local plan between 2021 and 2023, yet we still have a shortage of homes for local people and in particular local people with affordable needs.

This report follows on the tail of the South West Social Mobility Commission's Report: Turning the Tide which came out in June and shows that poorer children in the south west have the worst educational outcomes in the country. Again the Commission has an excellent Chair in Sir Michael Barber and there is much planned across the region, although progress is slow and obstacles abound particularly in the north of Devon where we are the constituency furthest from a city, and region with the school furthest from a University.

My whole family teaches, I briefly taught before being elected as MP, and have been asked by many if I will now return to the classroom, as I am all too well aware that there is a national shortage of maths teachers. However, my time in politics has shown me a different side of North Devon. I've had the privilege of meeting business leaders from all industries, and heard some business owners explain they cannot see the point in students retaking their failed maths and English GCSEs or remaining in education until they are 18. And with some of the lowest wage rates in the country one can see that perspective, but there are some highly skilled vacancies and very well paid jobs here in Devon, but they are out of the reach of far too many of the people that currently live here. Inward migration is not only from those looking to retire, there is an inescapable link between skills, social mobility and housing.

I also had the privilege of taking Lord Cameron to a school in North Devon during the campaign. I recall from my time training to teach hearing from modern language teachers how hard it was to encourage youngsters to learn a language here in North Devon as so few of them travel. The visit with Lord Cameron had no press present, and he is quite clearly a natural teacher, taking over a history and science lesson, before explaining to students how many countries he had visited as Foreign Secretary – to a cohort where 27% of students do not even have a passport.

I spoke with him after the visit and it transpires he volunteers at the Grenfell School when in London. And whilst deprivation is a similar issue there as it is to too many of the families in North Devon, there is no lack of aspiration, which unfortunately there is here. I've heard wonderful tales from some of the students and staff present on this day, but the local Lib Dems reported the visit because they thought it was party political. There was no party politics at this visit, it was an opportunity to bring a major international figure and at the time Cabinet Member to talk to children and hopefully inspire. We should all encourage these kind of visits from national figures from any political or non political background.

We as a community have to begin to tackle some of the issues that face us with regards to aspiration, educational outcomes and housing. I have learnt in my time as MP that one MP alone could not fix these things – and it has taken a data led, cross party, multi council approach to even identify the magnitude of the issues facing the south west peninsula in these two reports.

Government alone cannot resolve these issues, and one MP alone certainly wasn't going to, however many times she stood up in the House of Commons, or lobbied ministers privately for more support to tackle the rural and coastal inequalities of North Devon. But I fear locally that in a drive to change politics nationally, we may have lost some of the strategic direction we so desperately need and the focus on aspiration, rural poverty and coastal communities. The fact that hundreds of local families are living in temporary accommodation paid for by our councils – unseen because they are not on the streets, whilst communities oppose housing developments because we continue to build homes ahead of target means we have not yet broken the back on these challenges. In my time at Westminster, I opposed national housing targets for this reason – North Devon had built ahead of target – yet still did not have the homes our local community desperately needs. North Devon alone cannot solve any of these problems which is why we need national and Devon wide solutions.

I hope the reports will begin to tackle this big issues with a cross party focus, as I know much of my best work at Westminster was on a cross party basis. Opening youngsters' eyes to opportunity and meeting inspirational national figures is something we should all welcome. We need to keep bringing the major political figures to ensure North Devon is heard and in decision makers' minds moving forward. We need all businesses to recognise and embrace education and skills at all levels. And with so many layers of government, often working at cross purposes with each other, I remain convinced that some level of unitary local government is vital, even if it is just to address specific issues. I am concerned that despite these reports that the action that needs to happen will not be forthcoming but having spoken to some senior figures locally there is a real desire for change. I am keen to help and hope I have another opportunity to work on some of these big issues over the coming years.

Selaine

<https://news.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024EI047-Devon-Housing-Commission-Final-Report-v8.pdf>

<https://news.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Turning-the-Tide-SWSMC-Annual-Report-2024-1.pdf>