

Unemployment

Last month saw the number of job seekers allowance claimants decrease by a further 57 to 1318.

York's rate now stands at just 1.0% of the working age population - outperforming the country at 2.1% and the region at 2.8%.

This time last year the number of claimants was 2195. In October 2011 it was 3439. Over the course I have been leader I have ensured the council has played its part in this reduction by around 60%. This is a Labour achievement I am particularly proud of. Work is the only sustainable route out of poverty.

However, York has a growing problem of low wages which has been increasingly the focus of my attention. York needs better paid jobs created to provide opportunities for progression to those living in poverty in the city. This cannot happen in isolation and has to sit alongside up-skilling as a key part of the council's economic strategy going forward.

Youth Unemployment

The number of job seekers allowance claimants aged 18-24 decreased by 25 last month. This time last year the count was 530. It has decreased by 44% over the past year to 295.

The council's work in creating and encouraging others to take on apprentices has helped. We have also worked with partners to set up an apprenticeship brokerage service across the Leeds City Region. This helps businesses by taking on board the red tape functions required to be carried out to recruit an apprentice.

York's current focus now concerning apprenticeships is no longer the availability of these opportunities but ensuring these vacancies are taken up by York residents. Work needs to be carried out to further promote apprenticeships to young people and a look at the wage levels may be required.

UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts

My congratulations to Stuart Goulden and those in the media arts industry in York. I am proud the council successfully supported the sector to bid to become a UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts.

York is now the only UK city to receive this designation. It puts York in the same league as Beijing, Sydney, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Lyon, Sapporo, Bogota, Brazzaville and Shanghai as being part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

The designation will help the sector grow in York and with Gigabit internet connections will help encourage more such businesses to be set up in York or relocated. The designation will have a significant impact on jobs and growth.

Community Conversations

I have now attended a community conversation in every ward in the York. I would like to thank residents for attending, asking questions and engaging. I have provided the feedback from these meetings to the Labour Group and to the new Leader for a response.

Parsons Brinckerhoff

I attended the opening of their new office at Clifton Park Avenue. It was interesting seeing the rail and road projects that are being supported. The company is also working on some of the infrastructure plans associated with both the Local Plan and Leeds City Region ring road investment.

Omnicom

Omnicom has also set up an office in the same location as Parsons Brinckerhoff off Shipton Road. Omnicom has recruited more staff and have developed better links with the University of York for programmers. They now take graduates and employ students during their courses.

I was pleased to see Omnicom is now carrying out work on the Australian railways. It is good to see export success.

York Central

The council has entered a memorandum of understanding with Network Rail securing the first access route into York Central for construction. This comes on the back of the council announcing investment for this route a year ago.

The move is so significant that it is expected work on new homes will begin by the end of 2016.

Ring Road

In my last external meeting as Leader I helped secure an agreement at the West Yorkshire Combined Authority for funds towards initial design work for ring road improvements. This paves the way for £38m of investment. This is the single biggest transport investment the council will have received.

This comes in the wake of national roads spending announcements today which, despite the Prime Minister saying York's outer ring road upgrade should happen and Julian Sturdy making it an election pledge back in 2011, have yielded nothing for the outer ring road.

People are acutely aware of the need for improvements to the ring road and this is why I have backed the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership's campaign calling on the Prime Minister for action.

I hope these calls are heeded soon given York has been overlooked by the Government on this occasion. In the meantime, Labour will work with any partners to secure as much investment in transport as possible.

Local Plan

I have left the most important item to last.

The council and others with the power to influence an outcome on the Local Plan are at a crossroads. We all know the city has waited 60 years to get an adopted Plan which is a reflection on all parties, one I'm sure none of us would care to dwell on. But there is now an opportunity to address this shortcoming and do the right thing for the city.

Yes, we disagree on the housing numbers in particular but I know my Labour colleagues are prepared to get around the table and discuss this. The question is: are other parties? Who will come first, the city and its residents or opposition parties?

Professional advice on housing numbers and their response to this shows the Liberal Democrats want no Local Plan or one that would fail Government requirements, so it is only the Conservatives that can deliver a Plan with Labour to define and protect our Green Belt for the first time.

The irony is that the longer they procrastinate, the longer developers have to get their applications together and submitted before a Local Plan is adopted, leaving the draft Green Belt open to potentially inappropriate development. The opportunity to do what's right for York and its residents must be taken now.

Time is running out.

Leaving Message

It has been an honour to serve York as the Leader of City of York Council for the past four years. I wish the city, its residents and those who serve York all the best for the future. York's best days are ahead, not in the past.

Councillor James Alexander
Labour Leader of City of York Council,
1st December, 2014