



Councillor James Alexander
Labour Leader of City of York Council
Report to Full Council – October 2013

Employment

I am pleased to say unemployment fell again last month to the low level of 1.8%. This is one of the lowest of any city in the Yorkshire and Humber region. It is clear this administration's prioritisation of the local economy is beginning to yield results in a way not seen when compared with the national picture.

There was an increase in the last set of figures for the number of women claiming job seeker's allowance. Women have been particularly hard hit in the current economic crisis and our unemployment rate will mask unemployment where people, often women, have had to reduce hours or take part-time work.

I am very proud that since Labour won control of the council the number of children in workless households has decreased by 40%. However, we are also aware that the current economic crisis is leading to an increase in child poverty. This shows the growing problem of in-work poverty. I get quite perplexed when some seek to paint people on benefits as shirkers or scroungers when there are many receiving in-work benefits due to current and previous Governments' use of tax revenue to subsidise low wages.

As our economy continues to grow and we commit more time and resources to this end the growing challenge will become about the cost of living and addressing the wage gap in this city. This is where York Labour policies such as the Living Wage will become more and more important.

Vacant Shops

A further indicator of the relative success of York's economy is the city having the second lowest shop vacancy rate in the country. Of course any vacant units we want to see occupied and will work to that end, but this shows that our city centre is standing up well to the country's current economic challenges.

Cities of Service

I was honoured to be invited to a meeting with the Mayor of New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg last month. He was launching the Cities of Service programme to the UK. Boris Johnson registered London's interest and I signalled York's intent to explore what this model could do for improving services in our city. This makes us the first UK city outside the capital to register our interest.

The scheme is live in 169 cities across the US. It is a scheme that harnesses the talents and contributions of communities in bringing solutions to city-wide challenges. It could afford us the opportunity to build on the already good work we have done with NESTA through our GeniUS initiative where the public is at the forefront of generating ideas to help us improve how we deliver services and improve the city we live and work in.

Castle Piccadilly

After the announcement that Primark was keen to move into the soon-to-be vacated Marks and Spencer's site on Piccadilly, Centros has come forward with new plans for Castle Piccadilly. Martin Burgess also submitted plans for the land within his ownership at the same time. The previous Piccadilly scheme was criticised by city centre retailers for being too large and providing unfair competition. Therefore I hope this reduced scale development is more welcome.

White Swan Hotel

I welcome this site being brought back into use as housing association homes with a Sainsbury's store below. This comes on the back of council investment committed to upgrading the Coppergate junction through the Reinvigorate York initiative.

Reynard Garage Site

Following progress on plans for Castle Piccadilly the council is putting the Reynard Garage site on the market. This is a key site in reinvigorating Piccadilly as one of the key access points to the city centre. For too long it has not been befitting of its position in the city so I'm pleased that things are beginning to move on this front.

Monks Cross

It is good news that Primark wants to open a second store in York. This will provide more choice for shoppers, underpin the retail offer in the city centre and at Monks Cross whilst providing jobs.

British Sugar

I welcome the release of a vision for 1,300 new homes on this site. This is a complicated site but I am encouraged by the progress being made.

Bus Fare Reductions

I want to pay tribute to Councillor Dave Merrett and his tireless efforts to improve bus services in this city over many decades.

As Members will be aware the council does not regulate, own, operate or licence buses since deregulation in the 1980s. However, Councillor Merrett has built a good relationship with bus operators leading to the all York bus ticket and now significant bus fare reductions. I believe that through his representations Coun. Merrett has impressed on First that hiking prices has done little to progress the shared aim of increased bus patronage, and that price reductions should in the longer term benefit both customers and its own business.

Coppergate

Traffic restrictions were put in place along Coppergate in the 1960s. Residents, bus drivers, taxi drivers, the media and Members have complained for a number of years at the lack of enforcement of this restriction. This has now been put in place.

Lendal Bridge Trial

This has been debated in council before. It was first discussed in 1974 by the then County Council and under the previous administration this was placed in the council's future transport plans.

It is early days so far but it is becoming clear that traffic along Leeman Road, Bootham, Gillygate and Lord Mayor's Walk has reduced whilst traffic along Foss Islands Road and Clifton Bridge has increased.

I do not believe the trial has so far created the chaos or justified the hysteria some in the opposition and media expected or hungered for. I remember well the comments of the Deputy Leader of the Conservatives, Councillor George Barton when he said "the thought of this frightens me to death".

I welcome the comments made by the previous Deputy Leader of the Conservatives, Councillor Joe Watt at the recent Economic Scrutiny meeting where he expressed his personal support for the trial and its objectives.

Over the course of the six month trial evidence will be accumulated to see whether the trial is made permanent in its present form, if we revert back to the previous system or we extend the hours of operation.

Apprenticeship Living Wage

I am proud that Labour dramatically increased the number of apprentices in the council. This had been supported by the Conservatives and their contribution should be recognised. However, our apprentices were being paid £2.45 an hour. This reflected the in-work training that the roles include. I do not believe this pay was right and so we have now changed the policies we inherited on this issue. From April we began paying the apprenticeship living wage, which is the same as the minimum wage. We have effectively doubled the pay of some of our apprentices, ensuring they can afford to properly support themselves during this training period.

National Railway Museum

I am pleased with the efforts the community and the council went to in lobbying for a future for the National Railway Museum. I would like to thank all the Labour Members who took part in the rally and Councillor Paul Healey from the Conservatives who also attended.

Together we showed the Government how important the National Railway Museum is to York. The Government reduced the cut planned for the Science Museum Group.

Jobs Fairs

We are continuing to hold job fairs more frequently. They are helping local residents gain access to new jobs that the council is helping to attract to York.

It is an honour to send invitations to those seeking work. Employment gives hope and a sense of self-determination and pride.

Late Night Levy

We are currently consulting on the introduction of a late night levy. The commitment to allow councils to introduce such a levy was in the Conservative manifesto and in the Coalition Programme for Government.

Despite the Federation of Small Businesses being against introduction of the late night levy, their survey of city centre businesses showed most businesses are in favour.

The policy received widespread support at the annual crime summit.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

As some are aware there has been a lack of clarity from Government over future funding streams to councils in the two Local Enterprise Partnerships covering Leeds and North Yorkshire. This raised concern about the ability of York to access large capital funds for transport schemes required both to improve transport and facilitate economic growth.

I am pleased to say that this problem has been recognised by Government and both the Leeds City Region and York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnerships.

The York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Economic Plan that came to the last meeting I chair of Local Government North Yorkshire and York recognised that large capital funds should be facilitated through the Leeds City Region.

The Government has also said that a large proportion of single pot growth funds will be allocated along Department for Transport splits.

We are working with both Local Enterprise Partnerships constructively to ensure we can work with both in the key sectors York has a functioning economic area for.

I look forward to updating council as soon as this clarity and demarcation is confirmed.

New Chief Constable

I took part in the selection process for Chief Constable David Jones and have publicly welcomed him to his new role. I have already begun working with him.

Former Terry's site

Terry's is an iconic building that is important to the heritage of this city. It has been sad to see aborted plans over the past few years. It has also been sad to see the site deteriorating over that same period. I welcome Henry Boot Developments and David Wilson homes buying this site. It is clear they felt the market conditions in York and economic growth facilitated by the council working with the private sector made it possible for them to invest. This turns a new page on the site. The new owners will be keen to make a return as quickly as possible.

Changes in Planning

The Government has announced plans to be able to allow change of use of properties without planning permission. This could mean an increase of conversions from retail to housing. I disagree with the Labour opposition that this would be a good thing. To pursue this course of action is to give up on the high street and our retail centres will suffer if a quantum of retail is not maintained or increased. I have made representation to this effect.

Councillor James Alexander
1st October, 2013