

## Report of the Leader of the Council

As this will be the last Full Council before the elections I would like to start my report by thanking all those members of the council who are standing down in May for their service to the Council and to the people of York.

Whatever the outcome of the elections on May 7<sup>th</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to say that it has been both a pleasure and an honour to serve in the administration that has led the Council these past four years and I fundamentally believe we have made a positive impact on our city.

### Governance and Transparency

Much has been made by some commentators of the notion that this Council lacks openness and transparency in its decision making.

I was pleased with the findings of the Local Government Association (LGA) review of our political culture and I entirely accept their findings and the challenges that they laid down for the Council. However, it is worth reminding both councillors and members of the public that the LGA commented several times during the report of their findings that decision making processes in York are normal and that clearly there are many people who have not yet fully adapted to the Strong Leader and Cabinet model of governance that has been adopted in York and most other local authorities.

However, I am keen to make it clear that whilst I do not entirely share the views of those who think the Council lacks transparency I am listening and keen to act to demonstrate that decision making in York is open and accountable. Since becoming Leader I have:

- **Invited the leaders of the two largest opposition groups to join the Cabinet.** Councillor Steward accepted this offer and has so far made a very positive contribution to Cabinet proceedings – sometimes agreeing with decisions sometimes disagreeing but always being given the opportunity to make his case and help to influence the debate. Sadly Councillor Aspden declined the invitation and whilst I will take this opportunity to reiterate the invitation for him to join the Cabinet, I would also reflect that I feel he took the wrong decision. This leaves it open to those who would seek to say that when the big decisions on York's future are taken

the Liberal Democrats would prefer to heckle from the sidelines rather than be at the table to give constructive views, even if those views are to disagree with the administration.

- **Instructed Cabinet that all decisions are now taken in public.** Formal Cabinet meetings were already open to the public however now delegated decisions taken by individual Cabinet Members are all taken in a public decision sessions that are webcast and open to the public to attend, with agendas published in advance.
- **Included an additional £50,000 in the budget for transparency matters including improved technology for webcasting meetings.**
- **Reduced delegated authority of officers to sign off on budgetary matters.** In order to promote greater transparency I have agreed to the spending powers that senior officers of the Council can make being reduced from £500,000 to £250,000. In practice I am not aware that an officer has ever taken a decision to spend anything like £250,000 without a political process being involved first, however, to boost confidence in transparent decision making I have agreed to this change.
- **Ensured that reports to Cabinet now appear in the name of the lead officer responsible for the report being compiled.** This was agreed to show transparency in the origins of a policy report.

I know there are those who would favour a return to an old style committee system ahead of the current Leader and Cabinet model. I would simply observe that far from improving openness and transparency what is more likely to conclude from such a move would be reduced accountability. In virtually every place that system has operated, what tends to happen is more officer control of the system and far fewer councillors prepared to stand up and be accountable for a decision because a committee of several people took it rather than one person who can be held to account later. The other likely consequence is that there is no individual in place to drive forward decision making and so inertia can easily be a result.

### **West Yorkshire Combined Authority**

York's membership of the Combined Authority has continued to pay dividends. Significant investment has been made in the last two months in helping to progress plans for the York Central development. After years of talking about this development our membership of the WYCA

has allowed us to draw down the funding to actually get some action on this strategically important site. This will be a major boost to jobs in York and provide desperately needed housing on a brownfield site.

The Combined Authority has also invested significantly in the York BioVale project. BioVale is an innovation cluster involving business and academics based on the outskirts of York that will support development of the region's bio-based economy. A successful BioVale will catalyse environmentally and socially sustainable growth and attract inward investment to the area. As the world shifts away from its dependence on fossil fuels, new multi-billion pound markets are emerging for bio-based products. A successful bioeconomy benefits **business** by providing access to multi-billion markets in high growth sectors. By reducing reliance on fossil fuels, the bioeconomy protects industry from oil price hikes. BioVale will support business with specialist advice, facilities and training as well as cutting edge research.

The much cherished improvement of York's outer ring-road is also being supported by the Combined Authority with investment of around £35 million. Without our membership of this body it is difficult to see how we would ever get that vital project moving.

## Crime

In the last four years crime in York has fallen sharply, with a 20.6% fall in total recorded crime since 2011. This was far from inevitable given that there was a rise in crime in the last year that the Liberal Democrats formed the administration in York.

The residents of York have consistently told the Council that issues relating to crime and anti-social behaviour are their top priority. For this reason, the Labour administration has chosen to make tackling crime and anti-social behaviour a major policy priority and has committed the resources to making that happen. We have created an Anti-Social Behaviour Hub which seeks to improve the quality of life of residents all around the city by increasing enforcement on issues around street drinking, graffiti, dog mess, litter, noise nuisance and fly-tipping.

In last month's budget we successfully awarded an additional £300,000 to support this work which will pay for an additional eight FTEs to enforce on these matters. It is a great pity that opposition parties did not feel able to vote for the budget proposals for this and in particular that the Conservatives chose to seek specifically to remove this additional money for tackling anti-social behaviour. I would like to reassure the residents of York that so long as there is a Labour-led administration in York we will continue to listen to their top priority and support them in

tackling these matters and crucially to continue to put in the resources to making that happen.

### **Employment in York and the Cost of Living**

York continues to perform better than both the national and regional performance in terms of jobs in our economy. The latest estimate for the number of working age people claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) has now fallen to 0.9% from the 2.7% it was in 2011. In meaningful terms we have full employment in York and that is thanks in part to the focus giving to growing our economy that has been given by City of York Council in the last four years.

However, I am very conscious that whilst unemployment is low in our city we have a very high number of people in work but on low pay. The level of in-work poverty is a concern for me and for this reason I am determined that the Council must focus a great deal of energy on tackling issues around the cost of living and also securing better paid jobs to improve quality of life in the city.

I have been meeting with a number of employers in the city to encourage them to follow the example of City of York Council to pay the Living Wage.

### **Older People's Accommodation**

Much has been made about recent developments regarding the future of elderly people's home in York. Needless to say that we are not in the position that I would hope to be in at this point.

However, I am not going to apologise for being ambitious about the future provision of older people's accommodation in our city. I still want to see first-class facilities for our elderly people and the fact that the Council was ahead of the market in terms of what can be provided simply means that we need to look for alternative ways to deliver that commitment.

I believe the revised proposals that the Council have put forward to make better use of our existing extra-care housing, build new extra-care housing (likely to be in Acomb), provide a new residential care home in the community hub in Burnholme, build more down-sizing homes in Lowfields and other sites, and work more closely with the independent sector to provide extra capacity all add up to a strong vision for the future of older people's accommodation in York.

## **Equalities Peer Review**

I am delighted following an independent peer review City of York Council has been granted 'Excellent' status for matters concerning equalities and diversity. Our community engagement in particular was highlighted by independent reviewers as among the best they have ever seen anywhere in the UK.

In a huge number of diversity issues CYC is leading the way and I am very proud of the strides forward we have made in this direction in the last four years.

I would like to thank the commitment and support of all Council staff and Members who have helped to bring this about.

## **Housing**

York continues to have a housing crisis. Average rents and mortgage repayment levels continue to outstrip average incomes meaning that too many residents in York are having to pay a substantial proportion of their monthly incomes to meet the cost of housing. This is unacceptable and presents a challenge for politicians from all political parties to solve together.

We need a Local Plan that gets more homes built in York to start to address the genuine supply and demand issues we face. This means that we are all going to have to compromise on some long-cherished views, and I firmly hope that once the election is out of the way councillors from all parties will come together to tackle this issue.

However, it must be made clear and we must be honest with the people of York: we cannot fix our housing crisis by building on brownfield sites alone. A considered and evidence-based Local Plan that genuinely meets our housing demand needs but acts to protect the greenbelt where we can is the only solution to this and I would like councillors from across the political divide to join me in making that clear statement to the people of York.

Councillor Dafydd Williams  
Leader of the Council (Finance & Performance)