



**Councillor James Alexander  
Labour Leader of City of York Council  
Report to Full Council – December 2011**

**Community Covenant**

I am very proud that after working with Brigadier Bibby, City of York Council is now signing up to a Community Covenant. This shows the importance this city places on our military personnel and supporting staff.

The Conservative Liberal-Democrat Government will be bringing serving personnel based in Germany back to the UK. There will be reductions in military personnel and supporting staff. There is an expected increase in those serving in the reserves. All of which will be challenging for the council and for the country at large.

**Tourism Collaboration**

We have committed City of York Council to a collaborative agreement with Blackpool Council. We are the two most popular visitor destinations in the north of England. Blackpool attracts 11m visitors per annum and York attracts 7.1m. The collaboration will see us sharing expertise and contacts in the organising of continental markets. In return, City of York Council will receive lighting expertise, labour and infrastructure at cost. This includes access to bespoke lighting equipment, and LED lighting with low electricity costs. This will help make the small budget of Illuminating York go further and we believe there are opportunities surrounding York's Christmas lights, lighting that was allowed to deteriorate under the previous Liberal Democrat administration.

This supports Labour's manifesto pledge to make York a gateway to Yorkshire.

**Organisational Review**

I asked the Chief Executive for a further Organisational Review following an early assessment of how the revised staffing structure is working. Clearly more savings are required as a result of the next tranche of Government cuts due to be passed down to local councils, and we have no choice but to become a leaner council.

The changes being proposed at Cabinet in December provide the opportunity to liberate middle management to get on with their jobs and to be more creative in the challenges we face, a principle I fully support. It will save in the region of £200k - £250k.

## **Homelessness**

It is extremely alarming that York has seen a 41% increase in homelessness in the past year. Behind every number is a person and a family. Only Hambleton and Scarborough had a larger increase in the region. This is because York has the highest rents in Yorkshire and as people lose their jobs they can no longer afford their rent. Changes brought in since the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed the Government have seen 800 residents in York losing on average £40 a month Housing Benefit. This will have contributed to the increase in homelessness.

As York has the highest rents in Yorkshire, and indeed the highest rents in almost all areas north of London, Labour is calling on the Government to make York a special case when it comes to Government proposals to regionally cap Housing Benefit. We will see increasing homelessness in York under this Government. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Government want to see 1,950 of York's poorest families receiving a further £50 a month less in Housing Benefit whilst wanting those in council and housing association properties to increase their rent payments to an average of £520 a month. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Government are taking decisions that will result in more people living on the streets of York, and only Labour locally is fighting against this. The Labour Council is doing all it can to mitigate the worst of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat proposals.

## **Free City Centre Wi-Fi**

The pilot scheme for St Helen's Square and Coney Street was officially launched on the Monday of Business Week by Chi Onwurah, a Shadow Business, Innovation and Skills Minister. The pilot cost has been found from within existing budgets.

It is a boost to the national and international reputation of York as a forward thinking and dynamic city. The scheme has been popular with visitors, shoppers and businesses. We are currently consulting on whether this scheme should be extended to most of the city centre.

If this consultation is successful we will be looking towards possible capital and revenue streams to extend the service.

Figures show one week after the launch on 14<sup>th</sup> November we had 66,928 hits on the home page and 338 individual users.

This contributes towards our manifesto pledge to support business.

## **Broadband Connectivity**

City of York Council will be working in collaboration with Open Reach to ensure York is one of a few national centres for super-fast broadband. Open Reach share in our

vision of an historic city with a modern future. Our aim is to ensure 95% connectivity by 2014.

We are also in talks with other possible infrastructure providers, including BDUK for rural broadband.

This will also contribute towards our manifesto pledge to support business.

## **Unemployment**

During Business Week I accompanied Jon Trickett, shadow Cabinet Office Minister to Future Prospects to discuss issues surrounding unemployment in York and the valuable work Future Prospects does in helping people get into work and training. The people I spoke to were all aged around 50 and I gained the impression that they felt their age made it difficult for them to find new employment. This affects morale, confidence and the financial stability of the person and their immediate family.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government needs to stimulate demand to improve consumer confidence and get the economy moving again. The Government needs to reduce VAT, and have a plan B on the economy.

## **Annual Business Conference and Business Week**

Labour has a manifesto pledge to hold an annual business conference. The first of which was held during Business Week on 18<sup>th</sup> November at FERA at Sand Hutton. The event was sponsored by Langleys. At the event I launched City of York Council's internationalisation strategy for consultation. Labour believes York is one of the best cities in the world, but this message needs to spread more widely internationally to boost our reputation and economic growth.

The feedback from the session has been very positive and I am pleased it opened up our business community to more than the usual faces. I am keen that this openness continues and there is reform of the Business Forum to ensure this happens.

This event was another manifesto pledge delivered by Labour.

Business Week was very successful and Nick Eggleton and his team should be commended for their work. Council officers also performed extremely well under considerable pressure. I am informed there were more business week events in York during this week than many other regions of the UK. York was also nominated for 13 entrepreneurial awards.

Business Week ended with a round table discussion on the economy in York with Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls.

## **York's Independent Fairness Commission**

The independent York Fairness Commission has made its recommendations to the Cabinet in respect of the forthcoming council budget. We are currently considering these recommendations that have come out of the Commission's research, and from consultation with the public and representative organisations.

The creation of the Fairness Commission was a manifesto pledge honoured by Labour.

## **Assisted Waste Collection Service**

Labour pledged to advertise this scheme for elderly residents to have assistance when presenting their waste for collection. Labour is ensuring this service is advertised with council tax bills when they are issued in the new year.

This is another manifesto pledge delivered by Labour.

## **Open Council**

For the first time this council will hold a public drop-in session for residents and businesses to discuss the forthcoming budget. This face-to-face session will be in addition to the work of the York Fairness Commission, online consultation and a public meeting with businesses. We are also this year holding a public meeting with the voluntary sector.

Since the local elections in May unsuccessful Liberal Democrat candidates have put forward a number of freedom of information requests for political purposes. These include Nick Love who stood unsuccessfully in Holgate, Jonathan Lancaster who stood unsuccessfully in Haxby and Wiggington and Christopher Twells, currently the Chair of the University of York Liberal Democrats and an agent for the party in May.

Liberal Democrat councillors can contact me directly if they would like information or they can even use council questions as an avenue for a more public response. I believe the public would be alarmed to realise that their political point scoring has cost City of York Council an estimated £900 since May. I don't believe this a good use of public money and I would appeal to them to use the other avenues I have mentioned to acquire the information they seek. I've been surprised that Liberal Democrats still find a way to waste public money even after leaving office.

## **Association of West Yorkshire Authorities (AWYA)**

I was the first council leader to attend a meeting of AWYA on 24<sup>th</sup> November, to discuss passenger transport in particular. The electrification of the transpennine route from Manchester to York was discussed and I'm pleased that this scheme is now out in the public domain. We heard from Sir Richard Leese and Sir Howard Bernstein of Manchester City Council on how public transport has worked for residents in Greater Manchester. I'm confident that any announcement on the electrification of this line will be a boost to economic growth in York.

## **Free Parking Initiative**

I'm delighted to have been able to announce free parking in all council-run car parks for Boxing Day. The £10k bill for this will be funded through money saved from industrial action. The remainder of the money saved will be ploughed into protecting front-line services for vulnerable residents, both young and elderly.

We listened to the call made by the Retail Strategy Group recently for free parking on Boxing Day, and acted.

Conservatives have suggested free parking should apply for the whole of January, though to date have been unable to determine how they would fund such a scheme.

They would need to demonstrate which cuts they would seek to make to convince the public their calls are not merely attempts to grab a quick headline, but based on responsible decision-making and sensible calculations.

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It has been six months of the Labour administration and already we are making a difference. We are honouring our manifesto pledges. We said before the election York deserves better and after winning, we are delivering it.

**Councillor James Alexander**  
**Labour Leader of City of York Council**  
**29<sup>th</sup> November, 2011**