



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

**Since the Local Election**

It was a great honour to lead the then Labour Opposition Group to victory at the 2011 local elections. Labour won the centre ground at the local elections and that is where we will be to stay.

It is a privilege to lead City of York Council and this city into a new era of social democracy and fairness.

The period from the local election result to taking formal control of the council was a strange period of limbo that many found difficult. This was not a period that Labour wanted to permit to go ahead. We wanted the will of the people to be respected from the outset. Instead the dying Liberal Democrat administration clung on with full responsibility, pay and power despite the democratic will of residents.

For the first time in four years the city now has an administration with a mandate to deliver those promises made from its time in opposition. There will be no compromise on our manifesto and we will deliver. We have the political will and the will of the majority of residents behind us. Our manifesto is beginning to underpin the corporate priorities of the council.

It is thrilling to lead a movement to make York the city it deserves to be rather than the city it has been allowed to become. This report outlines some of the major areas I have been involved in since annual council on 26<sup>th</sup> May.

**Increasing Jobs and Economic Growth**

This is the overarching policy of this administration. We need to play a role in fostering an economic environment where there can be an increase in the number of jobs, facilitated by economic growth.

Residents are struggling due to the global economic crash and this is exacerbated by the Government pursuing an economic policy of faster and deeper than necessary deficit reduction by reducing public sector spending. This in turn is met by making people redundant and increasing the burden on the welfare system, which ironically is a budget wanting to be cut.

York has been given conflicting information as to how susceptible we are to these reductions. As a city, we have an overreliance on public sector employment and an unbalanced economy. This makes us particularly at risk but we also have a number of different public sector organisations that may spread the reductions amongst particular services.

Since taking control we have seen negotiations with Mark and Spencer come to fruition to bring new jobs to York and we have also taken the decision to support expansion of York St John to also create a number of jobs. These two areas have the potential to create up to 400 jobs. I do however suspect the number will be nearer 300. This is just the start.

## **Local Enterprise Partnerships**

I am the only person to sit on both the Leeds City Region and York North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnerships that were created following the demise of Yorkshire Forward. There is no money attached to the LEPs and the advice received from Government is both inconsistent and contradictory. The advice does not give the private sector the certainty it requires.

I would have preferred to see Yorkshire Forward reformed, not abolished.

I am using my unique position to broker the best deals for York as they emerge. So far there has been very little for York to gain. I am not convinced an Enterprise Zone is in the best interest of York in light of possible changes to business rates in the localism bill.

## **Tourism**

I realise how important this is to our local economy and therefore unlike my predecessor I have decided to become a director of Visit York. We believe our 'Reinvigorate York' scheme will support our visitor economy.

## **Reinvigorate York**

My administration has taken the decision to invest at least £2m in restoring our city centre to a state befitting a city such as York. We are currently losing retail market share and we need to be more competitive in the tourism market. This funding will go some way to right the wrong of underinvestment under the previous administration.

## **Financial Black Holes**

We have discovered a number of financial black holes left by the previous administration. This includes £0.8m in the housing and revenue account and £0.5m in property services. My cabinet is asking for full disclosure of the financial problems that were kept from us in opposition and we are asking for options of how to clean up this mess.

## **Housing**

Labour will increase annual new housing targets from 575 to 800 a year. This is still a low number. 800 means the planning document will be robust enough to be approved by the government without delay. It will also mean more access to housing for local residents and the green belt will finally be given a definition and protection. The business community does not take the position of all other parties in this chamber in opposing this move. Not only does this opposing position not support jobs and economic growth, it also does not support the aspirations of local residents or protect the green belt. Officer advice is that without a robust document, the council would lose financially and not be able to define nor protect the greenbelt.

## **Community Stadium**

Plans are progressing at a rapid rate. At the time of writing we have one large retailer on board and another in consideration that I have negotiated with. I really do believe we can deliver a community stadium by giving impetus to the project and though openness of information amongst the partners that was absent under the previous administration.

The new stadium needs to be a genuine partnership between York's two professional sports clubs and we need a scheme to have planning permission by September 2012 or the football club will fold.

I am concerned that the lack of progress under the previous administration will make this deadline difficult to reach.

### **Reversing £1m of Conservative Liberal Democrat Cuts**

I have worked to deliver our alternative budget we promised in opposition into delivery in office.

Our budget scraps the Lib Dem planned £1.4m second new council office in Acomb, replaces damaged bins with high quality replacements in the city centre, increases our contribution to Access York to £0.5m (following the advice of Lib Dem Transport Minister Norman Baker), increases our recycling rate, commits an additional £356k to flood defences, increases funding for road repairs and demolishes the Parliament Street toilet building, providing space for market equipment storage.

Our budget commits funding to tackling youth unemployment, reversing 50% of Conservative Liberal Democrat backed rises in adult social day care and travel costs, cuts to health and disability assessment, Hull Road Park funding, short breaks for disabled children, teenage pregnancy work, disabled childcare equipment, race day toilets, ward committee budgets, library staff, homelessness prevention, Holocaust Memorial Day, 50% of cuts to neighbourhood management whilst increasing respite care, reversing an increase in ResPark charges, committing funding to our manifesto committed Fairness Commission, funding for a pilot statutory bus partnership, giving a small grant to the Credit Union, York Disabled Worker's Co-operative, to the Older People's Assembly and increasing the council's contribution to the York Youth Café, increasing apprenticeship funding and the jobs fighting fund.

All this and we still reduce the council's debt position by £1.7m. Not only can we deliver everything both the Lib Dems and Conservatives promised in their budgets but also a whole lot more. This budget shows Labour's fiscal competence and prudence and lives up to our major manifesto pledge we were elected on.

### **West Offices**

I toured the new offices to inspect the progress being made. I have asked the Chief Executive to look at increasing the capacity that can be used by partners to create more of an income stream to the council.

I also visited Barnsley to find out how their move to new council offices has operated. I received an agreement from the Leader of Barnsley from some of his staff to come to York and discuss with our staff how their move went and what they learnt.

### **Talking to Staff**

I spoke to a meeting of all managers in the council and took questions from the floor. I believe it is important for the Leader, and all Members for that matter, to have a rapport with officers. I enjoyed this session very much, even the tough questions. I was surprised this had not happened under my predecessor. I wish to be more open and accountable.

### **Shared Services**

I have written to all council leaders in the region requesting discussions on shared services. A number of councils have responded. Shared services could deliver savings to the council taxpayer. The main criteria for shared service negotiations will be the effect on the quality of the service, whether there is a genuine saving to be made and where staff will be based.

## **York's Fairness Commission**

York's Fairness Commission will begin its work in the next couple of months. It fulfils a manifesto commitment to have a genuine non-partisan engagement with residents over service priorities of the council. It is clear the fairness commission may have the opportunity of a longer-term role in working towards policy formulation to close the gap between rich and poor.

Labour is enjoying making a positive difference to this city and delivering on our manifesto pledges. I am happy to answer any questions on this report.

**Councillor James Alexander**  
**Labour Leader of City of York Council**  
**21<sup>st</sup> June 2011**