



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

Community Covenant

I have been working with Brigadier Bibby and colleagues regarding the role of the military in York and the wider region. The Brigadier explained to me Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government cuts to the size of the armed forces has led to redundancies here in York. He also explained the Government's desire to increase the numbers that serve in the Territorial Army. This creates significant pressure on employers and those either leaving or entering the military. This is because more military personnel will be leaving the armed forces and endeavouring to pursue civilian jobs. This means a significant transition. The second is that employers will come increasingly into contact with a workforce that may serve time abroad. It is concerning that those serving in the Territorial Army are often scared of explaining this responsibility on job applications in case it is seen as a negative by the employer. In response to this situation as well as issues of a level playing field for military personnel in accessing public services, the Brigadier is endeavouring to ensure the armed forces play more of a role in the community. After several meetings, I have been keen to pursue a Community Covenant which recognises the contribution the armed forces make to York. This is largely symbolic and gives no preference in access to public services. I am also investigating the council taking on an individual who will be leaving the armed forces under the Defence Career Partnership programme. This will give the individual experience in a civilian setting as a part of their transition and allow the council to gain access to invaluable experience from another sector of employment.

I was informed on Wednesday last week by officers that the Covenant should come to this Full Council as there are deadlines relating to access to government funding for a covenant. This can include funding for youth services in areas where there are high numbers of military personnel. I also think that the issue of the Covenant is at a level of importance that this report should outline the work being carried out in this area accurately. I therefore decided that this report should be submitted after my scheduled meeting on Friday with Group Leaders, in order to first discuss this important civic issue. On Friday Group Leaders agreed to take the issue back to their Groups and pursue an agreement to pass the Covenant through Staffing and Urgency Committee, to meet the deadlines for a Government funding bid. In December the Covenant can then be passed at Full Council to give the Covenant the formal approval it requires.

Freezing of Council Tax

I have seen and welcome the announcement at the Conservative Party conference that the Government is looking at reimbursing councils who look to a 2.5% council tax increase or less. This is what happened last year. Labour was the first party in York to

call for such a freeze and this policy was pursued by the now two main opposition parties.

The announcement is welcome in that it gives the council choice and serious consideration will be given to this announcement during the budget process. The Labour Group will be discussing this at our next Group meeting.

I am, however, concerned over where this money is coming from and what happens when the funding no longer appears in the base budget due to the Government withdrawing it. I would have personally preferred this funding of £850m to go towards employment schemes targeting young people.

Beyond the next year where the Government funds a council tax increase, the decision actually represents further cuts to the council in future years beyond the 28% already agreed by Government to 2015, by not adding to the council's base budget. This represents a another real terms cut that we can ill afford, so this must be considered very carefully.

Apprenticeships

The number of apprenticeships in the council has risen dramatically with almost 50 positions taken up in the first few months of the Labour administration. Almost 200 have been achieved through the successful Press campaign.

The increase in number coupled with the additional funding we committed shows a very clear commitment of this Labour administration to apprenticeships. This also satisfies a key manifesto pledge.

Increasing Jobs and Economic Growth

This still remains the top priority of this administration and I welcome an economic climate being fostered by this council that has led to interest in new hotel applications, new leisure opportunities, new retail opportunities and new research and development.

York is in the top ten cities in the UK for retail performance and our unemployment is less than both the regional and national averages.

However, unemployment has increased in York in the last two successive months just as it has in most other areas of the country.

I do not believe Government economic policy is working to address the economic situation we find ourselves in. I am also concerned that a third of the long-term unemployed are 18-24 and that unemployment for women has increased at a faster rate than for men. Both these characteristics are again in line with national findings.

This underlines the importance in getting developments started across York.

This administration is focussed on making the city centre more attractive to local residents and visitors to the city. This is why Reinvigorate York and Digital York have come to prominence and why funds have been committed this financial year towards the demolition of the Parliament Street toilet and office building. We are also investigating payment-on-exit car parking solutions that have been called for by retailers for a number of years. Furthermore with a greater focus on the city centre, areas like Piccadilly become all the more important in moving forward and playing a part in the city centre offer.

Community Stadium

A planning application has been submitted for a community stadium at Monks Cross as a new home to York Knights and York City. The application includes genuine community facilities and is part paid for by the associated retail development.

This application is the outcome of work since circa 2003 regarding this project. For the last twelve months or so I, the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture and Social Inclusion, her predecessor, the leader of the main opposition and former Executive Member for City Strategy have been informed of the progress on this project and taken part in discussions over the direction of the project. The application is the culmination of these discussions and reflects the policy of both the Liberal Democrat and Labour administrations. There has been no change in policy over this project in the transition but more of an emphasis in pursuit from the Labour administration.

The scheme will see a number of new jobs created should planning permission be granted.

There is clearly some fear from city centre retailers regarding the impact of this development. Any concerns should be evidence-based, as should the case for retail expansion at Monks Cross.

York Central

The council is now part-landowner of the site and as such has a much bigger influence over any proposed development. I am still pursuing Tax Increment Financing (TIF) as a method of paying for the infrastructure-related financial gap that exists due to poor geographical access.

I have pushed for the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Carol Runciman to be a member of the board and kept up to date as I feel that such an important development needs buy-in from all parties.

I am pleased to say that there is no change in policy regarding York Central from the previous Liberal Democrat administration and I believe the three main parties are all, at least at the moment, aligned in pursuit of getting this development off the ground.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

Since my last report I have become the Labour Vice-Chair of the Leeds City Region (LCR) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Leader's Board. I am also now the Vice-Chair of the Employment and Skills Board.

I have also pursued York having a bigger voice in the LEPs through the Cabinet Member membership. Therefore my Deputy, Councillor Tracey Simpson-Laing is now on the Housing Board and Councillor Dave Merrett on the Transport Board. Each of these memberships helps us to stand up for York and makes its case both regionally and nationally.

I attended the Leeds city Region LEP summit in Leeds and contributed to a panel discussion on employment and skills.

I attended a meeting with Minister for Cities, Greg Clarke MP where he outlined the Government's economic policies for LEPs. It is clear that the Government is willing to take a back seat with regard to LEPs but expects results. It is also clear that Government economic policy for growth is based on the eight largest cities in the UK growing and others surrounding those cities benefiting from this growth. I am concerned that this is the same trickle-down economics that was so disastrous when last employed in the 1980s. I am also concerned that places like York will not receive the necessary Government attention. I have been contacting Ministers to get this redressed.

There is also confusion from Government over which cities are target areas for growth. For example, the top ten largest cities will get directly elected Mayors. Eight is where the Government believes economic growth will come from and eight will get localised transport funding. So what happens to the other two cities, and more importantly to York?

In the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding LEP I have been kept up to date on the work of task and finish groups. The Chair will soon be facilitating a meeting between myself, Welcome to Yorkshire and Visit York regarding the future of both organisations.

Reinvigorate York

I have asked Sir Ron Cooke to work in an advisory capacity to the Cabinet on what improvements need to occur in the public realm of the city centre. Sir Ron believes that a lot can be achieved within existing budgets by the council using our finances more wisely. However, the Labour administration is also keen to see future investment in the city centre.

Sir Ron is consulting with many retailers, organisations, individuals, Members and officers to pursue vigorously the aim of this administration to reinvigorate the city centre.

Digital York (City Centre Free W-Fi)

During business week in November, a pilot scheme will be switched on that will see free open access to our dark fibre network for shoppers, visitors and businesses along Coney Street and St Helen's Square. We are consulting with businesses on whether this would be worth pursuing throughout the city centre. The feedback from the Retail Strategy Group was positive.

Such an innovative project will put us on the map nationally and internationally. It will also show how forward thinking the new administration is and how ambitious we are for York.

If the scheme is successful we would like a company to run the front homepage, to pay for maintenance costs and for the council to receive a cut of advertising revenue.

Council Plan

The Council Plan will underpin the workplan of officers over the coming four years as the council implements Labour's election manifesto. Already around a quarter of our manifesto has been delivered, with many more pledges likely to be delivered on in the coming months.

We take seriously the mandate Labour has been given and will deliver on the pledges we made to the electorate.

York's Fairness Commission

The Fairness Commission is having both public meetings and staff meetings and is beginning to formulate its interim report. This will give the Cabinet some focus as to where the public's priorities are that should be considered by the council with respect to expenditure in a tight economic climate due to Government cuts. I am ensuring the Fairness Commission is given all budget options that we considered for 2011/12 budget. This will be the first time these options will have been made public and not just to councillors.

Open Council

I have requested that the council's full asset register be published online for public scrutiny. I am also looking at other pieces of information that can be published that until now have only been available to councillors.

Councillor James Alexander
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