



Lynn Jeffries

This is the first meeting of Full Council since Councillor Lynn Jeffries passed away. I would like to place on record my thoughts and those of other Labour councillors being with her family and loved ones following this very sad news.

Unemployment

The number of people claiming Jobseekers Allowance in August fell by 75 to 1,441. This represents 1.1% of the working age population. This time last year it was 2,451 people or 1.8% of the working age population.

York is outperforming the region which stands at 3.0% and the country which stands at 2.3%. It is good to see the correct environment being fostered in York to help people into employment.

I reiterate my concern though at the growth in part time and zero hour contract work – especially with regards to the income of women. Although the local economy is back to pre-recession levels of Gross Value Added (GVA) and Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants the real incomes of families are not. The city therefore needs a greater focus on higher wage jobs. This is where we must capitalise on our infrastructure and skills whilst making land sites available through the Local Plan.

Whilst I am pleased to see significant reductions in the number of people claiming JSA in Hull Road, Clifton and Heworth wards, I am concerned to see no reduction in the numbers of people claiming JSA in Osbaldwick, Heslington and Fulford. The total number of claimants in the more central wards is higher but these wards are seeing a reduction in the number of claimants. In the outer wards listed the number of claimants is lower but we are not seeing the same reduction.

Local Economy

There are many indicators to show how well York's economy is doing from low unemployment to low empty retail units to high GVA. However, productivity is low and falling compared to the UK average so is something the city needs to tackle. This is something York's Economic Partnership is addressing.

York has been performing above the national average with regards to business survival rates.

Anaplan

I was honoured to be invited to the opening of Anaplan's new office at the Bonding Warehouse. This is a company which deals in cloud-based business planning and operations.

The company was set up by a York resident and has a head office based in San Francisco. Anaplan has decided to take space in this iconic property that had been left derelict for far too long. The business wanted to access the high skills set York has thanks to our universities. The expanded operation in York includes programming jobs which are well-paid.

The company now turns over \$100m (US) per year.

York-Harrogate Rail Line

During the council meeting Members will hopefully get the opportunity to debate the motion we have submitted on electrification of the rail line between York, Harrogate and Leeds.

I'm pleased that we are working closely with Harrogate and North Yorkshire councils on how we make this a reality. It will require strong representations cross-party from councils, MPs and also from business representatives such as Chambers of Commerce.

There are identifiable economic benefits from such an improvement to rail infrastructure so I hope with the right collaboration, it can become a reality.

Tour de Yorkshire

Welcome to Yorkshire and Amaury Sports Organisation (ASO) have announced they are to collaborate again on an annual three day cycle race in May 2015 in Yorkshire.

This is fantastic news for the county and reflects the huge appetite the county has for cycling as well as the incredible reception the Tour De France received for this year's Grand Depart.

It is clearly testament to the good work of staff, volunteers and the participation of the public that ASO wants to continue their involvement in cycle races in Yorkshire.

The route for 2015 is yet to be confirmed, but I'm confident York will feature along with many areas which missed out back in July. This would be great news for them and help spread the message that the whole of Yorkshire is a great destination for cycling.

Electric Buses

York was the place where we launched the world's first electric tour bus, which involved the conversion of an existing vehicle. I am pleased to see electric buses currently running on our new A59 Park and Ride route and look forward to further electric buses operating soon on other existing Park and Rides in the city.

This shows our commitment to sustainable transport in this city. It is good to see York leading the way nationally and internationally on this issue.

Community Stadium

The community stadium project has been discussed for around 10 years. Since leading the council Labour has secured planning permission, funding and has appointed a preferred bidder. Construction work is due to begin early next year. The stadium will be underpinned financially by different community and commercial facilities at the site. It will create a great resident destination of national quality. The council will be providing £8m to the £37m project. £4m of this was already allocated in 2003 and includes £2m for the relocation of the Athletics Club.

The project includes a replacement pool at Waterworld which would have closed in the not too distant future due to the level of investment required to bring it up to standard and its long term viability as a business. The council could not be in a position where it needed to pump significant subsidy into the facility annually on an ongoing basis. Despite pools and libraries closing around the country due to Government funding cuts, I am pleased in York Labour is replacing a decaying facility with a brand new pool and opening an additional library.

I have been disappointed by Conservative opposition to this plan for some time, but I was surprised by new Liberal Democrat hostility to the project. This was called into scrutiny and Liberal Democrats abstained on their own call-in. I, and I'm sure many others, believe this was a waste of people's time and money.

The project has been talked about long enough and action is needed. Due diligence has been done, extensive work with partners has been undertaken and we should now proceed to delivery.

There are no plans to close Yearsley Pool. We do need to work with the community to help reduce the public subsidy of £250k a year if it is to be sustainable in the long term. Through the installation of a new boiler, we have already reduced this by £100k per year.

Any delays to this project will now put York City Football Club at risk. This is unacceptable.

Minimum Wage

Ed Miliband announced at the Labour conference a commitment to increase the minimum wage to £8 by 2020.

After consulting with my Labour colleagues I can announce a second term Labour council would plan for uprating our current Living Wage of £7.65 an hour to £8 per hour well before 2020 should this level exceed our Living Wage commitment at that time.

Local Plan

Labour has announced the final draft of the Local Plan for the last phase of city-wide public engagement. Within minutes the Conservatives called-in this decision. This will delay the public having their say on this latest draft by around three weeks.

The Plan has taken into account public feedback, recent progress on brownfield developments and the Government's latest density guidance. This means that we have reduced the overall housing numbers from 22,000 to just under 17,000. This brings the annual housing figure down to 996 homes a year.

Liberal Democrats still support 575 homes a year, while Conservatives now back 800 homes a year. Both figures in officers' professional judgment would render the Local Plan unsound at inspection. An annual target of 800 new homes is what Labour proposed in June 2011 and this was voted down by Conservatives. At the time the Conservative Group leader said this was too high.

If the figure was 800 a year, this would still require new land sites – which so far the Conservatives have been unwilling or unable to identify. Though it would appear that they are moving towards a position of tacit acceptance of the need for Whinthorpe which is a step in the right direction.

Furthermore, the Government says York has only four years land supply for homes and requires at least five. Further land allocation is therefore required regardless.

Labour understands the homes crisis York has and that we need more homes for current York residents and their families. Labour also understands this need, which is independently assessed, cannot be addressed through brownfield developments alone. We have limited the requirement for village extensions by planning two new settlements on the periphery of the city.

David Cameron has announced a Conservative policy to have new homes built and sold at a discount to first time buyers. I am writing to him to request this starts in York earlier than his plans set out.

But the Plan is not just about homes, it is also about employment sites. Labour has listened to businesses and ensured land is allocated to cater for up to 13,500 jobs. This land allocation also delivers choice for businesses in the correct locations.

I would encourage everyone to get involved with this last, critical phase of engagement before the final Local Plan is prepared for submission to the Planning Inspector.

Food Bank

I spent a day with the York Food Bank at their base operating from Tang Hall Community Centre. It was very interesting speaking to volunteers, staff and the users of the service. People cannot just access the food bank without being referred by one of 96 different agencies. They can also only use the service up to twice in a year.

Tesco at Askham Bar is the third most generous depositing point for food from the public in the country. Tesco also donates in cash 30% of the value of the weight of this food. This is the main collection point for the York food bank which operates from four separate locations. There are irregular collection points elsewhere in York, including at Asda.

Labour announced we were willing to give up to £10k from the savings made through the recent strike towards supporting the work of food banks. It is clear from my time at the food bank that the best way we can help is through the purchase of a vehicle to support its activities. At the moment staff must hire a vehicle and this limits in operational terms the number of collections that can be made at irregular depositing points.

As much as I admire the work food banks do, it is wrong that we live in a society and a relatively wealthy city where food banks have to operate.

Councillor James Alexander
Labour Leader of City of York Council
29th September 2014