

City of Durham CLP Report — April 2012

Constituency & Community News

Kerry Foods Factory Closure

Earlier this month Kerry Foods began consultations on the closure of their factory with the possible loss of 350 jobs.



I visited the factory to meet with the management and staff to discuss the issues facing the company and to see what can be done to assist the workforce through what is a very difficult time for them.

Stuart Watkins from Business Durham, a section of the County Council, and representatives from the Job Centre and USDAW were on hand to implement support mechanisms for the employees.

I intend to visit the factory again next month to follow up on these meetings.



St Cuthbert and Lindisfarne Gospels

I was delighted at the news that the British Library has acquired the St Cuthbert Gospel, the oldest intact European book.

The manuscript was produced in the North East of England and buried with the Early English Christian leader on Lindisfarne in about 698 AD. It was rediscovered at Durham Cathedral in 1194 after St Cuthbert's coffin was moved to escape Viking raids

I look forward to visiting the Gospel to see it for myself when it is displayed in Durham University's Palace Green Library next year along with the Lindisfarne Gospels that are also being loaned to the North East again by the British Library. The exhibition has been made possible by a partnership between the British Library, Durham University and Durham Cathedral.

Response to HM Prison Inspectorate Report on HMP Durham

This month HM Prison Inspectorate published a report on HMP Durham which attracted significant media attention. As MP I go on visits to the prison on a regular basis and I have felt that over the last few years significant progress has been made in turning Durham into a community prison.

The Inspectorate did feel that progress is being made particularly with regard to learning and skills but more needs to be done.

In particular I am obviously worried about the comments made by the Inspectorate about drug availability at the prison. Clearly this is something that will need to be tackled.

I have already spoken with the governor of the prison and have written to the Inspectorate's Chief Inspector to arrange a meeting with him so I can discuss his findings in more detail.



The Inspectorate report which attracted much negative publicity in the national press comes at a bad time for the prison as it is currently one of nine prisons being subject to market testing by the Ministry of Justice.

I really hope the report does not negatively impact on the chance the current management of the prison has in securing the contract to run the prison. I have always been against the privatisation of prisons and am really worried that the current contestability exercise will result in a private sector provider running the prison.

The Venue

The youth project is still going strong but will require much more work and help to truly reach its potential. If anyone is interested in the progress of this project can they please speak to me or Anne Bonner.

World Heritage Day

Baroness Andrews, Chair of English Heritage, visited Durham on World Heritage Day to view Durham's UNESCO World Heritage site.



Baroness Andrews and I held meetings with representatives from Durham County Council, Durham Cathedral, Durham University and residents to discuss issues with the newly refurbished Market Place. And other proposed developments in Durham City Centre.

Hospital Issues Meeting

A number of you will no doubt be aware that there has been some media attention about care of older people in Durham University Hospital. This reflects a growing number of complaints that have been received in my office.

The Foundation Trust appointed a new Chief Executive in February and I met with her and the Chair to discuss my concerns. I have raised many of the issues before which has resulted in changes being made to A&E and the Out of Hours service. I hope now to see some change with care of older people. I will keep you all posted on this.

I have also had a long running campaign to get parking charges at the hospital reduced. The new Chief Executive promised to look into this issue also.



Police Numbers

Crime figures for Durham continue to be low but Durham still has problems maintaining a full complement of PCSOs and Beat Police

Officers mostly because they move on with promotions. I really think that we need more police visibility especially in the villages. I am not holding any breath for immediate action but I will keep pressing the issue.



Domestic Violence and the Legal Aid Bill

Following on from the work I did for 'Everywoman Safe Everywhere', detailed in last month's report, I visited the Derwentside Domestic Abuse Service this month. I met with mem-

bers of their dramatic society, Silent Sisters, to talk through issues surrounding domestic abuse and their plans to raise awareness with dramatic performances in schools.

When the Legal Aid Bill returned to the House of Commons I voted in support of all of the amendments made to the Bill by the House of Lords to protect women and children from domestic and sexual violence. However the Government failed to listen to our concerns on the issue of domestic violence and rejected our the Lords' amendments to the Bill.

Housing Issues Update

Following on from the success in getting supported housing for the elderly built on the sides of Brandon House and Oversteads House I met with housing staff including the new Head of Housing at the County Council to discuss the lack of affordable housing in the city and various issues relating to the private rented sector.

Championing Real-Life Entrepreneurs

I recently met with the Federation of Small Businesses' Regional Chairman Ted Salmon and Development Manager Simon Hanson to discuss their Real-Life Entrepreneurs campaign.



The economy as we all know has fallen back into recession nationally and the North East economy is even more precarious. With the huge cuts in public sector jobs we will have to rely on the private sector to drive growth in the region at least for the foreseeable future. I am particularly concerned about the lack of job opportunities for young people and I hope the

National and Policy Issues



NPPF Debate

As Shadow Minister for Planning I have been working hard to respond to the Government's National Planning Policy Framework since it's release at the end of last month.

Like the process of reform itself the scheduling of the debate on the NPPF was shambolic. After arranging it for the 24th we were left with only 20 minutes at the end of the day and a second debate had to be hastily scheduled for the 26th. This meant many of those who wish to participate were unable to do so.

As you can see further on in this report I have been working on an alternative to these plans with key stakeholders. We need a planning system which supports communities, home building and the economy whilst protecting the environment. But the process of reform has been shambolic. The final draft of the NPPF is simplification for its own sake and will lead to more appeals and chaos in our planning system.

We need to use the planning system to give real power to communities to shape the places they live and offer a positive strategic vision for England. This means balancing economic, social and environmental demands by engaging with communities and developing a clear growth plan for the country as a whole.

Debate On The Impact Of The Budget On The North East

During a debate on the impact of the Budget on the North East I challenged Tory Treasury Minister Chloe Smith to visit the region to witness for herself the dreadful impact the lack of a growth strategy from the Government is having.



I am absolutely astounded at the lack of an overall growth strategy from this Government particularly for regions like the North East. To make matters worse the Government dissolved the RDA which was very successful in growing jobs in the area.

It has replaced the RDA with a fragmented approach based on LEPs, the Regional Growth Fund and Enterprise Zones but none of these is delivering a coherent approach to economic development in the region.

This month much parliamentary time has been spent debating the budget. It really is a dreadful document which protects the better off at the expense of the

Loss of Free School Meals

In my role as Vice-Chair of the All Party Group on School Food I have been campaigning on behalf of the retention of free school meals.

The Children's Society this month warned that the proposed universal credit system, which comes into force in October 2013, could spell the loss of school meals for 350,000 children.



This could result in 120,000 poor families losing free school meals, worth £367 a year, unless they drop their earnings below the household earnings threshold of £7,500.

I will be working hard with my colleagues on the All Party School Food Group to lobby the Government to take the issue of school meals seriously.



Tax Credit Bombshell

I joined shop workers union Usdaw and national charities to campaign against the £3,870 'Tax Credits Bombshell' that the Government dropped on 255 low-income families in Durham on 6th April.

From now on couples with children who currently work between 16 and 24 hours a week will have to increase their hours of work to 24 hours a week or face losing a staggering £3,870 in tax credits.

It is simply astonishing that the Government is punishing families on low incomes who can't find extra hours of work by taking this much money from them. I called on the Government to reverse this change as it's important that people are better off in work and this change could push many people onto benefits.

Regeneration Debate

In my role as Shadow Minister for Planning I responded for the opposition to the debate on regeneration. I called on the Government to develop and publish a strategy to address the problems faced by the most disadvantaged communities. I also called for the Department for Communities and Local Government to issue guidance about how public land can be used to stimulate regeneration. We must have a holistic approach so that the department

Visit to Uganda

At the beginning of the month I visited Uganda with the Intra-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The IPU works with parliaments from around the world and organisations such as the UN to share good practice and strengthen parliamentary democracy. I worked with groups of women parliamentarians to look at strengthening political parties by encouraging more women to enter politics.

I focused on how social media and ICT can be used to increase the candidate pool and mentor female candidates.



Planning Policy Roundtables

In my role as Shadow Minister for planning I organised the first in a series of roundtable meetings with key stakeholders and academics to begin our process of reviewing planning policy.

BPAS

Given the growing protests against providers of abortion services I hosted an event in Parliament for the British Pregnancy Advice Service this month. The challenges women face in accessing sexual health services, including contraception and abortion are under a mounting challenge from the coalition government.

NUT Forced Academies

This month I also chaired a meeting in Parliament of the National Union of Teachers and the National Association of Head Teachers to discuss the issue of forced academies.

Commission Work

My work on the commissions for Higher Education, Adult Social Care and Youth Services has also carried on this month.

Local Elections

Ahead of the Local Elections on the 3rd May I have been busy campaigning in Carlisle, Cambridge, Reading, Oxford, London and Newcastle.

The Office

As usual the office is very busy. Anne is doing her best to help me keep abreast of the community and campaign issues. Paul and Aimee are dealing with phenomenal amounts of casework and Christine is trying to keep the whole show running. Emma and Vinny in London are also being tested to the limit!

Please get in touch...

If you have any thoughts or comments on any issues in the constituency, you can always contact me using the following details:

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