In May the people of Durham showed the Lib Dem/Tory Government that their policies are failing the North East. Labour held control of Durham County Council in emphatic style, gaining 24 Councillors, severely reducing the number of Lib Dems and Tories in Durham. Labour now has 94 County Councillors in County Durham.

Thank you so much to everyone who has been campaigning over the past couple of months. It was great to see so many volunteers and Labour party members giving up their time to support the candidates. This is a great result for Labour and I look forward to working with our councillors in the future.
Minimum Unit Pricing

Recently, I met with Anna Lynch, Director of Public Health for Durham, and Colin Shevills, Director of Balance, to discuss alcohol strategy including the level at which to set a minimum unit price.

The Government consulted on a minimum unit price and I was pleased to able be able to discuss this matter with Balance and Durham’s director for Public Health. Since then, the Government has scrapped its plan to set a minimum unit price for alcohol which is disappointing.

I believe we need to take action to tackle binge drinking without penalising the majority of people who drink responsibly. Binge drinking is a serious problem that increases anti-social behaviour and puts considerable pressure on the NHS.

Bedroom Tax Protest

I was joined by hundreds of people in our area to protest against the Lib Dem/Tory Government’s bedroom tax.

The Government are pressing ahead with this misguided policy despite the Department for Work & Pension assessment that highlighted that there is a shortage of smaller properties for tenants to move to.

In the City of Durham it is estimated that over 1,600 people will lose out because of this measure.
**Mount Oswald Application**

Unfortunately, the County Durham Planning Committee approved a planning application to build 291 houses on what is currently Mount Oswald golf course. Durham County Council received thousands of letters and signatures of objection from local residents but passed the application regardless.

We have fought strongly against this development and I am deeply disappointed by the decision. I would like to pay tribute to the local residents who have campaigned tirelessly to save Mount Oswald.

I have asked the Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government to call in the application for detailed planning permission and the Department will consider this when the detailed application is submitted.

**Roberta speaks to New College students**

I was asked to speak at Durham University’s New College to give their students a greater insight into how the Labour Party approaches politics and develops policies.

With the 2015 General Election the students were keen to know how Labour is building its manifesto and how the Party decides what policies to include.

I spoke to the students about Labour’s ongoing policy review and how, as a Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government, I have been engaging with the public, local councils, businesses and key stakeholders to identify the areas that we need to focus on.
Durham CLP Dinner

Durham CLP was pleased to welcome Jon Trickett, Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, to speak at our constituency dinner which was held at Durham’s Town Hall.

The dinner was a huge success, raising thousands of pounds for the CLP campaign fund and proved to be a fun night to meet fellow party members and to catch up.

I would like to thank all of the Labour Party Members, trade union members and local residents who attended for their generosity, and especially those who donated prizes for the raffle.

Roberta takes part in Student Union Debate

I took part in a debate at the Durham Student’s Union about the lack of confidence in the Government. This was a very lively debate and many students expressed their disappointment about the promises the Liberal Democrats have broken, in particular their decision to increase tuition fees.

Given the fact that youth unemployment remains at a staggeringly high level, it was not surprising that this was a key concern shared by the students. Many of them expressed their fears about being able to get a job after leaving university.
Robertaspeaks at Health and Housing Conference

The National Housing Federation held a one day conference in Durham last month. The conference brought together housing and health professionals and looked at these two areas could work more closely to create better outcomes.

I was asked to speak at the conference to give some insight into my experiences of working with these areas as an MP and previously as a councillor.

The workshop sessions and discussions gave attendees the chance to share their knowledge and indentify some commonalities.

The conference helped to devise innovative, cost effective and sensitive ways of working to improve the live of people in the North East.

Durham University Labour Club

Having worked closely with the Durham University Labour Club during the local elections, I recently met with the Club to thank them for all their campaigning efforts to support our candidates in the County Council and Parish Elections.

I am also very pleased to be Durham University Labour Club’s Honorary President for the coming year.

I hope that we can continue to strengthen the links between the local CLP and the University Labour Club.
Save our NHS Campaign

Following the passing by the Lib Dem/Tory Government of the Health and Social Care Act, despite huge opposition from the general public and medical professionals, the National Health Service has seen vast changes.

I met again with members of the campaigning group ‘38 Degrees’ from the local area. I spoke at the meeting, outlining my concerns about the changes to the NHS and updated the group on what action I have taken in Parliament recently.

Many people at the meeting expressed their concerns about the increasing levels of privatisation in the NHS and about the number of nursing posts that have been cut since 2010.

Roberta meets with Chief Constable and Police Crime Commissioner

In the past month I have met with Durham’s Police Crime Commissioner, Ron Hogg, and Durham’s Chief Constable, Mike Barton, to discuss neighbourhood policing.

During these meetings I raised a number of concerns and I am pleased to say that following on from these meetings a number of changes to neighbourhood policing in Durham have already been introduced.
Roberta speaks out against Government’s plan for East Coast Mainline

Earlier this year the Government announced its intentions to re-privatise the East Coast Mainline. This is despite the company returning more than £600 million to the taxpayer so far, with £800 million expected by the end of the financial year, and despite achieving the highest level of customer satisfaction (92%) ever recorded on the line.

Earlier this month, I spoke out against the Government’s decision to re-privatise the line in Parliament. On Friday 21 June I was at Durham station campaigning on this issue along with other Durham MPs, members of the local Labour Party and rail union members.

East Coast has provided a better service to the previous private operators of the line and I believe the Government should extend the franchise’s contract.

Keeping this line in public ownership provides us with a useful comparator for which to measure the performance of private companies against. At the very least, East Coast should be allowed to bid for the new franchise and Labour are calling upon the Government to amend the Railways Act to allow this.

I was pleased that so many people from across our region could come out today to show their support for East Coast and the excellent service they provide. It is clear that people want East Coast to remain in the public’s hands and we will continue to show our opposition to the Government’s plans.
I attended Labour’s Local Government Conference in Nottingham. The conference was very well attended and brought together Labour Councillors, Shadow Ministers, and all of those involved and interested in Local Government.

In a plenary session that I led, I spoke to Councillors about how we can ensure that communities have more power to improve their neighbourhoods. This session sparked some very interesting discussions and was extremely useful.

At conference, the Labour LGA Group launched a new report, One Nation Localism, which details best practice for Labour councils across areas of jobs & growth, housing, health & social care, education and child services.

Labour pledges to crackdown on payday lenders

In May, Labour set out how we would change local planning laws to give local communities more power to restrict the number of payday lenders on our high streets. We want to give councils new powers to permit people to shape their own high streets, so that local people can have a say about which types of shop they want to see and which they don’t.

I was asked to speak at the FINCAN Fair Finance about the issue. At the conference I raised my concerns about the high cost credit is affecting a lot of people in the North East, especially those who are struggling because of the Government welfare reforms.
The Budget was another missed opportunity and it does nothing to help the North East. The Government’s approach to regional growth so far has created uncertainty, deterred investment and held back regional and local economies.

Unemployment is still far too high and the Lib Dem/Tory Government are failing to create the jobs and growth we need as yet again the Chancellor’s growth forecasts were downgraded.

The Government are failing to address to the housing crisis. There is a shortage of affordable homes and they need to do more to increase the number of houses being built.

In the budget debate I called on the Government to change direction to

**Roberta speaks out about the lack of a regional plan**

**Roberta calls on Govt to keep Agricultural Wages Board**

The debate about the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) is, I think, a very important one. I spoke in the House of Commons on the issue, calling on the Government to drop its plan to abolish the AWB.

I highlighted the catastrophic effect this could have on the country’s 152,000 agricultural workers, not least in Durham, where well over 100 workers will be affected.

From talking to several of the young people studying at Houghall College, I know that they are worried about what will happen to terms and conditions in the sector following the abolition of the AWB.
Update on planning policy development

Despite strong opposition from Labour in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the Government forced through its Growth & Infrastructure Bill. Labour secured concessions to allow councils to opt-out of the Government’s badly thought relaxation of permitted development rights, and to place a duty on the Secretary of State to pay regard to the environment and natural beauty with regards to broadband in National Parks.

Although these concessions are welcome there are still many issues with the Bill. The very first clause gives the Secretary of State the power to strip Local Planning Authorities of their ability to decide planning applications where he deems the authority to be failing and is therefore profoundly anti-localist.

Queen’s Speech offers no change and no help

The Queen’s Speech was another wasted opportunity by the Lib Dem/Tory Government to set about the change we need.

Labour once again called upon the Government to introduce Labour’s real job guarantee to provide a paid job for every adult who is out of work for more than two years, as well as a youth job guarantee which would be funded by a bank bonus tax.

Labour set out an alternative Queen’s speech that included a Consumers Bill to tackle rip-off energy bills and train fares, a Housing Bill to take action against rogue landlords, and a Banking Bill to help British Businesses.

The Government also failed to bring forward Bills on the plain packaging of tobacco products, a statutory register of lobbyists or a Bill to introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol.
Social Care plans won’t do enough to help those with low incomes and wealth

Following the Queen’s Speech, I expressed my concerns about the Government’s social care plans which have been set out in the Care Bill.

I believe the proposals fail to address the growing funding gap in our social care provision and the additional pressure this is putting on local services. The Bill will do nothing to help the thousands of people who are already suffering with spiralling living costs and increases to home care costs.

I also raised my concerns about the lack of support in the Bill for indentifying and supporting young carers.

Westminster Hall debate on the High Streets

I was pleased to be able to speak in an important debate on the future of our high streets. I took this opportunity to raise my concerns yet again about the Government’s policy for our high streets. The Government have seriously let down the Portas pilots by not giving them the support they were promised.

I also questioned their decision to make it easier for bookies and payday loan companies to open. Nationally, there are now 20% more payday loan shops and 3.3% more betting shops than there were a year ago. These are taking the place of independent retailers, clothes shops and health food shops.

We want to give local authorities real powers so that local communities can have a real say in shaping their high street, differentiating it and making it something local people can be proud of.
On Wednesday 26 June I led a debate in Parliament on the future of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

With the Lindisfarne Gospels exhibition set to open this Monday at Durham University’s Palace Green Library, this was the perfect time for MPs to speak about the Gospels and their significance to our national and regional heritage.

The 1,300 year old Gospels are returning to the North East for the first time in 12 years and their return is the result of a long campaign spearheaded by myself, Durham University and Durham Cathedral.

I was very pleased to be able to raise the issue of the Lindisfarne Gospels in the House. The world renowned gospels are a great source of pride for the North East and a significant part of our cultural heritage.

I would like to encourage as many of you as possible to visit the exhibition which will run from 1st July to 30th September. I hope that the exhibition is a great success and that we are able to welcome the Gospels back to their regional home again in future.