

City of Durham CLP Report – May 2014

Constituency & Community News

Labour claims European Victory in the North East



Roberta campaigning with North East MEP candidates and Durham CLP members

Firstly, I would like to congratulate Labour’s newest Members of the European Parliament for the North East, Judith Kirton-Darling and Paul Brannen, and also give my commiserations to Jayne Shotton. Our MEP candidates ran a very strong campaign and whilst campaigning with them I saw that the policies that Labour are putting forward are really resonating with voters across the North East.

The next Labour Government’s priority will be dealing with the cost of living crisis and addressing the problems in the NHS, not getting out of the European Union. Labour will reform the EU so it works better for Britain and will introduce a new law to stop powers transferring to Europe without the British people having a say.

MP calls Public Meeting to Discuss the Bus Station and County Hospital site

I am holding a public meeting on Monday 2nd June to discuss the proposals for a new bus station at the top of North Road, and the planning application for the redevelopment of the former County Hospital site.

Signet Planning have submitted plans to Durham County Council to redevelop the County Hospital site into student accommodation. Alongside this, the Council have also released plans for a new bus station, and the removal of the roundabout at North Road.



An artist's impression of what the new bus station might look like

Plans for both of these schemes will be displayed in Durham Town Hall, the Market Place between 4pm and 6pm on Monday 2nd June. Immediately following this in the Town Hall a public meeting will be held to discuss the County Hospital (6-7pm), and then the bus station (7-7:30pm).

Both of these schemes have potentially huge implications for the City of Durham, and will have a real impact on the character of our historic city. I look forward to having the opportunity to hear what local residents think about these plans.

Roberta spends a day with an Ambulance Crew

On Tuesday 15th April I had the chance to join an emergency crew from the North East Ambulance Service to observe them working. I went out with Jenny Young and Denis Canavan to see the absolutely vital work they do for our communities, and I had the opportunity to discuss with them the challenges they face when working, and how they deliver the high quality care people need. The crew also had the chance to raise their issues with me, and I hope to follow up on these in due course.

This was not the first time I have had the opportunity to observe an Ambulance Crew, and I am always amazed by their expertise and dedication. It is vital that these services are protected, and I will continue to meet with representatives from the North East Ambulance Service to discuss how they will maintain high quality coverage in our region.



Advice Surgery Sessions

I have continued to notice more and more people attending my advice surgeries over the last year, with the Government's cost of living crisis continuing to hit local families. Cuts to local government are impacting on the services that my constituents can access, and energy bills and food prices continue to rise.

As more people struggle to make ends meet, Labour will continue to demand that the Government restore the value of the national minimum wage, and will encourage employers who can afford to do so to pay the living wage.

Roberta welcomes the development of new bungalows

On Friday 9th May I was pleased to officially open some new affordable housing specifically for people aged 55 and over in Durham. The housing includes six two-bed bungalows at Cuthbert Avenue, Sherburn Road and represents a £740,000 investment in the area.

There is a huge demand for affordable housing that also enables independent living for older members of our community. These new properties will fulfil housing needs in the area and also give residents a better quality of life.



Roberta shows her support for Durham Women Rising

I was delighted to have the opportunity to attend the Durham Women Rising for Justice event at the Gala Theatre and also to go along to their One Billion Rising public event in the Market Place. These events aimed to identify a number of issues that need to be tackled in our society in order to eliminate violence against women and girls.

I am proud to support Durham Women Rising for Justice and be part of their work to encourage a change in our culture, a move towards full gender equality, and their campaign to promote awareness of issues affecting women locally.

Durham School Question Time

On Friday 25th April I took part in a Question Time debate at Durham School, where students from a number of local schools were asking the questions.

The debate was a welcome opportunity to talk with students about how to improve opportunities for young people, but also about many other pressing contemporary issues such as climate change, foreign policy and higher education.

Given the fact that youth unemployment remains unacceptably high, it was not surprising that many students expressed their fears about being able to go to university or getting a job after leaving school. It was fantastic to see the levels of engagement among the students who took part and I hope the debate encouraged their interest and enthusiasm in such important topics.

Roberta meets with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

On Friday 16th May I was pleased to have the opportunity to visit some of the graves that are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in our area. I visited graveyards in Hett, Witton Gilbert and Croxdale, and it was fascinating to hear of the work that is carried out by the Commission in this country and throughout the Commonwealth.



It is important that we remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives during wartime, especially during the centenary year of the First World War. The Commission does vital work ensuring that their heroism is not forgotten.

The Chancellor's Budget does nothing for Durham

On 19th March the Chancellor announced the Government's Budget, which proved that people are worse off under the Lib-Dem/ Tory Coalition. There was no action to deal with the cost-of-living crisis facing many people in Durham and the North East who are on average £1,600 a year worse off under David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

Millions of working people on middle and lower incomes in the North East are not feeling any recovery at all while those earning over £150,000 a year have been given a tax cut. In the debate on the Budget that followed, I questioned the Government on why there was nothing in the Budget for our region and highlighted the Government's complete lack of support for our region's economy.

The Budget also announced even more deregulation of key planning laws.



Roberta welcomes Labour's GP Guarantee

As part of Labour's plans to improve services for patients and ease pressure on local hospitals, I am pleased to support Labour's new guarantee for patients to be able to see a GP within 48 hours or the same day in an emergency.

GP surgeries across the country will be given an extra £100 million a year to achieve this massive improvement in standards, and this will be enough to pay for an additional three million GP appointments every year. It will also ease the pressure across the NHS and save millions of pounds by reducing the number of patients going to A&E departments.

MP speaks out about Durham Free School funding

I have written to the Government a number of times to ascertain the amount of money that has been diverted to this ideological experiment from the Department for Education's budget. It has finally been revealed that the Free School in Durham has cost taxpayers almost £900,000, which works out at £30,000 per student—almost 5 times higher than the average for the sector. It is clear that the Free School is not good value for money for the taxpayer.

In May, I questioned the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, about the cost of the free school and asked why successful local schools, like St Leonard's Catholic School, have been told by the Schools Minister that there is no money available for the investment they desperately need when such vast amounts are being spent on free schools.



Debate on the Private Rented Sector

In March, I spoke in a debate about the private rented sector. There are now 4 million households in the private rented sector, the highest ever number. It is now more important than ever to address some of the long-standing and growing issues that affect so many people, including affordability, poor standards, and a lack of regulation of letting agents.



That is why Labour will introduce three-year tenancies to give people the certainty they need, limit the amount rents can rise by each year and ban letting agents from charging tenants fees for tenancy agreements.

Roberta presents student petition against the sale of student loan book

In March, I presented a petition to Parliament on behalf of university students and residents of Durham that urges the Government to abandon the sale of the student loan book to the private sector. There is a great deal of concern that this decision will be accompanied by an increase in the financial burden placed on graduates, and would result in a retrospective hike in tuition fees.



Roberta presenting the Durham Students' petition to the House

Only Labour will tackle the scandal of low pay

I am pleased to support Labour's plans to strengthen the national minimum wage to ensure people in Durham who do a hard day's work are rewarded for doing so. Families are on average £1,600 worse off since 2010 and the value of the national minimum wage has declined by over 5%.

This is why the Leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, commissioned an independent report to investigate ways to strengthen the national minimum wage. The report recommended linking the national minimum wage more closely to median earnings, and a Labour Government will take steps to do this. Labour will create a fairer economy that works for everyone, not just a few at the top.

Roberta speaks at Commonwealth Conference for Women Parliamentarians

In March I was delighted to attend the inaugural conference of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians from the British Islands and Mediterranean Region at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting in Edinburgh. The theme of the conference was Enhancing the Participation of Women in Politics.

At the conference, I gave a presentation about the lack of female representation in parliaments and explored some measures that have been taken in other countries to address this imbalance.

I also recently attended a Labour Women's conference in Belfast which looked at ways to increase female participation within the Labour Party. Both conferences were very productive and gave delegates the opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences about the main barriers women face when trying to enter into politics.

I look forward to working with parliamentarians and party members as we try to overcome these obstacles.



Roberta speaking at the opening session in Edinburgh

MP meets with Prime Minister of Lesotho

In April I was delighted to meet with a delegation from Lesotho in Westminster that included their Prime Minister. During the meetings I was able to speak with parliamentarians about the great work that the Durham-Lesotho link does in the country and discuss ways in which we could look to strengthen and improve the partnership.

Future of the Land Registry

A recent Government consultation proposed unprecedented changes to the Land Registry, including transferring most of the Land Registry out of the civil service either to the private sector or as a Government owned company. Many constituents have contacted me expressing their concerns about these proposals, and the potential impact this could have upon local jobs.

Durham has had a Land Registry office for nearly 50 years and it has been estimated to be worth over £10m to the local economy. The Land Registry provides a valuable national service that returns considerable value for money to the taxpayer as well as providing thousands of highly skilled jobs. Since the consultation ended I have met with both PCS and Ed Lester, Chief Executive of the Land Registry and I will continue to work with PCS and local stakeholders on this matter.

Communities and Local Government (CLG) Questions



At CLG questions in March, I expressed my concern about the Government's failure to effectively plan for extreme weather and to take the necessary steps to reduce the devastating impact of flooding, like that seen this winter, through the planning system.

In the following month's CLG questions, I highlighted the Government's poor record on developing brownfield sites ahead of undeveloped and Green Belt land. I called on the Planning Minister to reintroduce Labour's landmark brownfield first policy.

Labour pledges to repeal the Lobbying Bill

I am pleased that the next Labour Government will repeal the Lib-Dem/ Tory Government's gagging law. We will repeal this illiberal law and will instead legislate for the real reform our politics needs.

In the legislation to repeal the Act, Labour will introduce a universal register of all professional lobbyists backed by a code of conduct and sanctions. Labour will also consult with charities and campaigners about the reforms needed to both ensure transparency in our election and to protect freedom of speech.

Government must provide clarity on plans for English Heritage

In April I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on the future of English Heritage. The Government has announced plans to split English Heritage, outsourcing the running of key sites to a new charity and creating a non-departmental public body, Historic England to cover its planning role.

Our national heritage is too important to gamble on an unknown future, and the Government must provide some clarity about their plans. The whole of our heritage is a national resource for public benefit and it is absolutely essential that the heritage of areas such as Durham are secured and protected for future generations.



Update on planning policy development

In my role as a Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government, I met with a large number of organisations and stakeholders to discuss a broad range of issues that come within my portfolio, including building regulations, energy efficiency, the importance of community consultation and involvement in any new development.

I have given speeches to the National Residential Landlords Association, the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Smith Institute and the Town and Country and Planning Association. Recently I have spoken in a number of parliamentary debates where I have been challenging the Government's planning policies and questioning the Planning Minister on why he is taking away powers from local councils and communities, making it harder for people to have a say in shaping their local areas.

Visits to Harlow in Essex and Stroud

On Friday 11th April, I visited Stroud and met with Labour's Parliamentary Candidate for 2015, David Drew, and local Labour activists to discuss how Labour will tackle the planning issues the community is facing as a result of the Government's recent changes to planning laws. In March I spent a day in Harlow and visited a new housing development at Newhall to see first-hand the innovative ways local councillors and planners are creating affordable, environmentally friendly homes for the local community.



Discussing planning in Harlow



Roberta meeting with local residents in Stroud