I would like to begin by wishing you all a Happy New Year. 2016 brought a number of challenges for us in the Labour Party, and none more so than the crisis in our National Health Service.

There has been a lack of funding for crucial health services from the Government, and a number of different pressures on the NHS, from the Junior Doctors dispute to the ongoing issue of third party referral schemes by Clinical Commissioning Groups.

Durham has had some good news recently however, with the approval of a scheme for a new A&E department passed by the local authority. This new facility will also include a much bigger, state-of-the-art paediatric department.

I have raised the need for a bigger A&E department with the NHS trust for some time now, and finally it looks like the University Hospital of North Durham will get the extended facilities it needs.

I want to reassure you that the NHS will still be a huge priority for me in the coming months, especially campaigning against the use of third party companies by the local Clinical Commissioning Group, and the Sustainability and Transformation Plans. I hope to see many of you campaigning with me in the near future.
Constituency Visits

Roberta supports foodbank collections in Durham

I recently joined staff and volunteers at Tesco in Dragonville to support their work in collecting donations for the foodbank in Durham.

The increase in the number of people relying on foodbanks is a shocking indictment on the divisive policies of this Conservative Government.

Although I hope that we can soon return to a society where people cannot fall through the safety net to such an extent, I would like to applaud the work done by Tesco, The Trussell Trust and Fareshare to assist people who are in the awful situation of not being able to feed their families, and I will continue to support these collections in the future.

MP meets Mums In Durham Choir

Before Christmas, I attended Bearpark Christmas Fair, and had the opportunity to meet our local celebrities, the Mums in Durham Choir.

The Christmas Fair was a wonderful event, with lots of crafts and activities on hand, and music from the amazing Esh band.

The Mums in Durham Choir sang carols at the fair, and I was delighted to see so many local residents come together as a community to celebrate Christmas.

Many thanks to Marion Wilson, our superb candidate in Deerness for helping to organise this wonderful event.
Local Campaigns

**Local Elections**

As we now enter 2017, the local elections are looming large in our thoughts, and much of our campaigning will be geared towards supporting our excellent candidates.

It is vital that we return as many Labour councillors as we can, and so we will be focussing our campaign meetings on the elections as well. Our next meeting will be on 4 February 2017, and it is so important that all the branches have representation at the meetings to ensure that everyone is up-to-date with local activities. It would also be great to see as many candidates as possible on Saturday mornings.

Before our next meeting however, there is an LCF training day on 28 January 2017, that will help candidates get to grips with how to run their campaigns, and it is really important that all candidates attend. You can register your attendance at [www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/county-durham-labour-2017-campaign-event-tickets-31282557973](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/county-durham-labour-2017-campaign-event-tickets-31282557973)

**Roberta welcomes To-Let board consultation**

I was very pleased to hear that Durham County Council have begun a consultation on tightening up the regulations around To Let boards in Durham.

I have worked for a number of years with local residents, the local authority and landlords to try and address the proliferation of To Let boards across the city, and have consistently raised the fact that the voluntary scheme for landlords, which was introduced in 2009, was not working effectively.

Durham is a beautiful and historic city, and streets filled with To Let boards can detract from this. I look forward to working with Durham County Council to address this issue, and would urge everyone to take part in the consultation. You can find out further information by visiting [www.durham.gov.uk/consultation](http://www.durham.gov.uk/consultation).
Local Campaigning for the NHS

A recent Labour National Campaign Day to support the NHS drew a huge number of members to support our NHS.

Following the last All Member Meeting, local members descended on Durham to raise awareness of the crisis currently facing our health services across the country.

Update on the Teaching Assistants dispute

I was pleased to see that, following my meetings with teaching assistants representatives and Durham County Council, the local authority has suspended the dismissal and re-engagement of teaching assistants on different terms and conditions, and have instead agreed to carry out a joint review of their job descriptions and roles.

Although there is still some way to go until this dispute is resolved, this is a hugely positive step towards reaching agreement on this issue, and all strike action that was planned has been suspended.

I will continue to work closely with the local authority, Unison and teaching assistants to try and make progress on this difficult issue, and am pleased that work will now begin on the review early in 2017. I do hope that a positive outcome can be reached over the coming months.

Keep Our NHS Public Petition

I also recently accepted a petition from the Durham Keep Our NHS Public campaign group, which supports the NHS Reinstatement Bill.

This petition was signed by over 800 people, and I will be presenting this to Jeremy Corbyn early in February.

Along with Labour colleagues both in Westminster and the constituency, I will continue to do what I can to support our NHS services in the face of terrible mismanagement by the Tory Government.
I have continued to notice more people than ever attending my advice surgeries over the last year. With the Government’s cuts to local services set to continue, many of my constituents are finding it incredibly difficult to make ends meet.

I will continue to work to help those in our communities who need support, and I am committed to helping local residents who are dealing with the effects of the unfair and divisive policies being pursued by the Conservative Government.

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**MPs Christmas Drinks Event**

In December, I hosted a Christmas drinks event in Redhills. All local members were invited, as well as community groups and other organisations from around the constituency.

It was wonderful to see so many familiar faces, and some new ones too. It gave me the chance to thank those who have campaigned and worked so hard for Labour over 2016, and to welcome some new members to our constituency as well.

I had a great time, and always enjoy an opportunity to have a chat with you all. I hope to catch up with all members again very soon.

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**Advice Surgery Sessions**

I have continued to notice more people than ever attending my advice surgeries over the last year. With the Government’s cuts to local services set to continue, many of my constituents are finding it incredibly difficult to make ends meet.

I will continue to work to help those in our communities who need support, and I am committed to helping local residents who are dealing with the effects of the unfair and divisive policies being pursued by the Conservative Government.
National Issues

The Higher Education and Research Bill

I was invited to speak at the Political Affairs in Higher Education Forum about the Higher Education and Research Bill in my roles as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Universities, and as a member of the Public Bill Committee that scrutinized the Bill as it passed through Parliament.

During the second reading of the Bill, Labour raised a number of concerns about the proposal to link fee increases to the new Teacher Excellence framework, as well as other measures that would further the privatisation of the university sector. Sadly, the Government chose not to accept our amendments.

This event pulled together many different people from different areas of the university sector, and I was pleased to be able to take part in a very useful discussion on the next steps for the Bill. Along with Labour colleagues, I will continue to monitor the Bill as it passes through the House of Lords, and will push the government to protect our Universities.
Tackling Political Violence against Women

I was pleased to be able to attend the recent conference of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians to discuss ways to tackle political violence against women.

Across the globe, forty percent of women politicians suffer threats of violence and intimidation, and it is vital that work continues to make parliaments more representative of the communities they represent.

The conference was hugely informative and, although there is more work to be done, I will continue to push for an end to violence against women and girls across the globe.

Roberta speaks at ActionAid UK ‘Stand with Her’ event

I also spoke at an event hosted by ActionAid UK and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, to mark the “16 Days of Activism” campaign, which was aimed at reducing violence against women.

Horrific violence and intimidation is a reality for women across the world, with one in three women and girls experiencing some form of violence in their lifetime. I was pleased to be fully involved in the campaign, and the promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment is an issue that I will continue to support.
Westminster debate on Durham County Cricket Club

I recently had the opportunity to take part in a debate on the future of Durham County Cricket Club. As you will know, Durham was recently relegated to Division 2, and hit with an unprecedented points deduction before the new season. Not only this, but the club was barred from hosting international cricket.

I raised the importance of the club for cricket throughout the whole North East, and questioned the rules surrounding the points deduction from the club.

If the sport is to thrive in the region, we need a strong and active club to act as the focal point for fans, and young people interested in taking up cricket.

In my role as Chair of the Northern Group of MPs, I have asked for a meeting with the ECB, which will be taking place in February or March, and we will be working hard to try and ensure that any sanctions brought against the club are fair and reasonable.

Roberta speaks in WASPI debate in Westminster

I was pleased to be able to take part in a debate on the state pension age of women late last year. During my speech, I paid tribute to the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) group, and thanked them for the brilliant campaigning they have been running, and urged the Government to introduce transitional arrangements for women born in the 1950s, whose state pension age has increased.

I expressed my disappointment at the Secretary of State’s response to my letters about the unfair way in which changes were being made, and asked the Government to adopt Labour’s proposals to extend pension credit to those who were due to retire before the rushed pension age increase.

I will continue to work with the WASPI group in the future, and hope the Government put suitable measures in place soon.
Roberta welcomes the scrapping of Pay to Stay

Over the past few months, I have been leading for Labour as the Government’s Housing and Planning Act made it through Parliament, and Pay to Stay, which would have imposed higher rents on council tenants earning more, was one of the more pernicious parts of this Act.

Pay to Stay was nothing more than a tax on aspiration, and would create huge difficulties for existing tenants.

I hope this is the first of many elements of this Act that the Government will realise doesn’t address the housing crisis, and I look forward to more statements winding back similar measures.

Student Accommodation Conference

I was pleased to be the keynote speaker at the recent Property Week Student Accommodation Conference, and opened the event by discussing the need to have strong links between Higher and Further Education, and my concerns about the effect Brexit will have on students and universities.

I also discussed the need for sustainable student accommodation that works for both permanent residents and students, which is a challenge in Durham.

I will continue to work hard on this important topic, and look forward to similar events in the future.
Durham Cathedral award for Excellence in Fundraising

I was delighted to have the chance to attend a reception recently to celebrate the best examples of fundraising from a number of different charities.

I was particularly pleased to attend as Durham Cathedral was invited in recognition of it's fundraising work, and was recently a winner at the National Fundraising Awards.

It was wonderful to see all of the best examples of fundraising that different organisations use to connect supporters and donors to the causes that they care about, and I very much look forward to future events that celebrate this important work.

Roberta backs Postal Workers

Monday 12 December marked the fifth annual National Postal Workers Day, and I was delighted to be able to lend my support to this campaign.

National Postal Workers day is a chance for us all to recognise the hard work that our postmen and postwomen do in our communities, especially before Christmas, which is one of the busiest times of the year for the Post Office.

I will continue to support our dedicated postal workers throughout 2017, and will continue to champion the important service they provide.