

City of Durham CLP Report – January 2018

Happy New Year

Welcome to my regular All Members Meeting Report. I would like to start by wishing you all a Happy New Year.

2017 was an incredibly busy year for us all in the Labour Party, with both local elections and a snap General Election taking place, and my thanks go to all of you for the incredible work you did in campaigning for the Labour Party over the past year. 2018 will undoubtedly bring more challenges our way, and I look forward to working with you all throughout the coming year.

Durham Issues

Social Care in Durham

One of the critical issues in Durham and across the UK is the continuing crisis in our Social Care services.

As I reported last year, the Government has reduced local authority care budgets by £4.6 billion since 2010, leaving a funding gap in social care of £2.1 billion by 2020. This means that across the UK, over 400,000 fewer people are receiving publicly funded social care.

I have recently held a meeting with key heads of service to discuss the future of Social Care provision, and have asked care providers across the county to complete a questionnaire detailing their experiences, and highlighting areas that might be improved, both locally and nationally. This will help shape the discussions of the next meeting and identify solutions to local issues.

I will continue to work with care providers, NHS trusts and the local authority to help support their efforts in providing much needed care, and will keep pressing the Government on the urgent need for proper funding for Social Care services in Durham.



Supporting our Health Services

As well as discussing social care issues in Durham, I also met with representatives from NHS Trusts and the Clinical Commissioning Group to discuss the provision of health services in Durham.

It is clear that the NHS is in need of more funding, and NHS staff are under increasing pressure, as the crisis over the winter has shown.

The NHS remains a priority for me, and this meeting was very helpful in identifying the challenges our health services will be facing in the future, and I will continue to liaise with our health services to address local issues.

MP holds meeting to discuss Sherburn Hill school

I recently held a meeting in Sherburn Hill to meet local parents who are very concerned about recently published proposals to close the Sherburn Hill primary school site.

This site was amalgamated with the Sherburn Village primary school in 2015, and the intention was that these two sites would remain in place under the banner of one school. Durham County Council is now consulting on proposals to close the Sherburn Hill site entirely, with children currently studying there moving to the Sherburn Village site.



My thanks go to everyone who attended the meeting to share their views, and I will continue to liaise with Durham County Council on this issue.

Roberta works with Gilesgate residents

I recently held a meeting with a number of residents of the Sunderland Road estate in Gilesgate, and helped them start the process of setting up of a new residents group for their local area.



It has been clear for some time that this part of the city really needs some investment, and at a public meeting, many people raised issues such as anti-social behaviour and the state of the local environment with me. Once in place, this new residents' association in place to help us put together some much needed projects to improve the area.

Roberta meets with Bishop of Durham

The Diocese of Durham plays a hugely significant role in the area, and so I was pleased to be able to meet with the Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler to discuss the pressing issues that local people are facing.

We discussed the problems with our Social Care and health services, the need to support refugees in Durham, and the wider need for more community development throughout the area.

It was good to hear of the work that the diocese does in our communities, and I will continue to work with the Bishop of Durham to support local residents.

Tackling homelessness in Durham

Over the past few months, many of you have said that homelessness seems to be on the rise across Durham, and so I met with a number of different agencies to discuss this issue, and the response to this problem.

The meeting was attended by Durham County Council, The Bishop of Durham, the police and other faith groups across the city, and I was pleased to hear of the work they do to help people who are homeless, including providing meals and clean and dry sleeping bags for those in need.

Durham County Council are working closely with all groups across the constituency who come in to contact with homeless people, but it was clear that more needs to be done.

The local authority continues to deal with people presenting as homeless through its Housing Solutions team, and has a number of locations that offer temporary accommodation, but this continues to be an issue across Durham, and I will continue to liaise with different agencies to try and tackle this. If you have concerns that someone is sleeping rough, you can report this to Durham Housing Solutions on 03000 268 000.

MP supports fundraising for Blood Bikes



I recently visited TSB in Durham to join staff in supporting their chosen charity for the coming year, Northumbria Blood Bikes.

The blood bikes offer support to hospitals and health care sites by delivering essential blood and other urgent medical supplies out of hours, and is a charitable organisation set up and run by volunteers. TSB generously donated £300 to start the fundraising drive, and I was pleased to be able to support the fantastic work that these volunteers do.

You can find out more about the Northumbria Blood Bikes at their website www.northumbriabloodbikes.org.uk

Roberta congratulates winners at Active Durham Awards

In my role as Parliamentary Sports Champion, I had the opportunity to attend the Active Durham Sport and Physical Activity Awards and present an award to the winners of the Sports Club of the Year category.

These awards promote sport and physical activity across County Durham and recognise the achievements of coaches, clubs, individuals, volunteers and schools over the year 2016/17, and it was wonderful to see their hard work rewarded.



Christmas Card competition



Towards the end of 2017, I once again held a competition for local primary school children to design my Christmas card.

This card is sent out to organisations and charities across the North East, as well as fellow parliamentarians both here in the UK and overseas.

There were hundreds of fabulous entries, but the winning design this year was by Yinuo Wang, from Finchale Primary School. My thanks go to everyone who took part in the competition.

MP's Christmas Drinks

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 throughout a very busy 2017, and to welcome some new members to our constituency as well.

During the drinks event I also held a collection for Rohingya refugees, and we raised a fantastic £100 on the night. This has now been paid in to the DEC Rohingya Emergency Appeal, and my thanks go to everyone who so generously donated.

I had a great time, and always enjoy an opportunity to have a chat with members and our local community organisations. I hope to catch up with everyone again very soon.



Roberta meeting with constituents

Advice Surgery Sessions

I have continued to notice more people than ever attending my advice surgeries over the last few months. With cuts to local services, and changes to benefits set to continue, many of my constituents are finding it very hard to make ends meet.

I will continue to work to help residents who need support, and who are struggling to deal with the effects of the unfair and divisive policies being pursued by the Government.

The EU Withdrawal Bill

The EU Withdrawal Bill was debated over eight days in November, as the Bill reached the committee stage, and unfortunately, the Government had the numbers to vote on the amendments that the Labour Party put forward.



Despite this, the Government did suffer a defeat in its attempts to circumvent Parliament, and not give MPs a meaningful vote on the final deal to leave the EU.

This Bill has raised significant concerns as it would put a huge amount of power in the hands of Ministers to amend legislation without proper Parliamentary oversight. Although these issues remain, this amendment to the Bill is a step towards Parliament having a proper say on the terms of Brexit.

Return to Planning

It was recently confirmed that I am to return to the Shadow Communities and Local Government team, and take up the position of Shadow Minister for Planning.

I'm very much looking forward to joining up with the Shadow Communities and Local Government team again, and we have much to do in developing Labour's planning policies going forward, and holding the Government to account.

The Trade Bill

I recently spoke in Parliament during the second reading of the Trade Bill, to speak up for sustainable development and call on the Government to put fair trade at the heart of an independent British trade policy.

This Bill does not contain sufficient detail on the relationship the UK will have with developing countries, as many rely on trade with the EU and the UK. Unless the Government puts sustainable development and fair trade at the heart of an independent trade policy, the livelihoods of millions of people could be at risk.

Along with Labour colleagues, I will continue to press the Government on the need for more detail on trade policies, and the importance of fair, sustainable international trade arrangements.

MP supports free school meals



In January, the School Holidays Bill returned to Parliament, and I spoke to support the work of my Labour colleagues in seeking to address holiday hunger.

Child poverty is at a seven year high, and wages are falling, meaning that families are worse off. I believe it is unacceptable that so many children are at risk of going hungry in school holidays and, along with Labour colleagues, I will continue to support this Bill, and press the Government to put fully funded schemes in place to address this.

Roberta calls Westminster Hall debate on Rohingya crisis

Following on from my trip to Bangladesh with the UNHCR to see the conditions Rohingya refugees are facing, I called a Westminster Hall debate to discuss the UK's response to this dreadful humanitarian crisis.



I reiterated the need for Britain to commit to the funding needed to ensure conditions in the refugee camps are tolerable for as long as the Rohingya are in Bangladesh.

We also discussed the deal signed by Myanmar and Bangladesh to let the Rohingya begin returning to their homes, and reconfirmed that any refugees returning home should do so voluntarily, and that their safety must be ensured.

The international community needs to put pressure on Myanmar to ensure the Rohingya are granted a safe return, and I will continue to press the Government to do all they can

Supporting the Human Habitation Bill



I was in Parliament recently to speak in support of the Fitness for Human Habitation Bill, a Private members Bill brought forward by my colleague Karen Buck.

This Bill aims to reintroduce a minimum standard for all rented properties that will ensure homes are fit for people to live in, and give people the right to take their landlord to court over unsafe and poor housing conditions.

More than 29,000 rented homes in the North East have a hazard which poses a "serious and immediate risk to health and safety", according to the recent official statistics. This is the equivalent of 1 in 15 rented homes in the region.

Thankfully, the Bill was passed with cross-party support, and will now be scrutinised by a Parliamentary Committee. I was pleased to be able to speak in support of this much needed Bill, and we are one step closer to giving renters more power, and dealing with unsafe living conditions.

Roberta meets Prison Officers Association



Roberta with members of the Prison Officers Association

Along with my staff in Westminster, I recently joined members of the Prison Officers Association who held a rally calling for an improvement in working conditions for members of the union.

The POA has repeatedly highlighted the dangerous conditions that prison officers are being forced to work in, due to cuts in staff and increased problems within prisons, and I was pleased to be able to support the POA in its fight to protect its members.

MP challenges Office for Students Appointments

Like many people, I was very concerned by the appointment of Toby Young to the board of the newly created Office for Students. Both his lack of experience in academia, and his past comments about women, sexuality and working-class people, suggest that he not the right person to fill this public position.

As co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group, I wrote to Jo Johnson, the Minister responsible for universities, to ask that he make public the criteria by which he and his department deemed Toby Young to be a suitable candidate. I followed this up by requesting that all information relating to the appointment process for all board members is made public, as it is vital that these positions are subject to proper scrutiny.

Although Toby Young has since resigned, questions remain over the way the Government carried out due diligence on the candidates for these positions, and I will continue to press the minister to make this information available.

Roberta backs WASPI inquiry

I recently joined colleagues from all Parties for the launch of the Women Against State Pension Inequality inquiry, which seeks to identify a solution to the problems facing WASPI women, and feed into a Bill that would require the Government act to deal with this situation.

Due to changes in the timetable for pension age equalisation, some 1950s-born women will receive their pension much later than expected without adequate notice to make arrangements for their future.



I also spoke in the WASPI debate in Parliament and raised the issue of the particular unfairness of women in their sixties who have got a full record of contributions being made to wait to access their pensions.

MP speaks at POST UK Research in Parliament Event

I recently spoke at the launch of a POST UK report on the role of research in Parliament.

This report examines the different ways research finds its way into Parliament, the purposes it serves and how it is used.

It is vital that MPs have access to the best possible research and evidence and that we can prioritise reliable information, so we must keep working on open dialogue between Parliamentarians, academics and researchers.



Roberta speaking at the POST UK event

You can read the full report at www.parliament.uk/documents/post/POST_Role%20of%20Research%20in%20UK%20Parliament%202017.pdf

Speaking at the Policy-UK Brexit event

In my role as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Universities, I recently spoke at a Policy UK event to discuss the impact of Brexit on the Higher Education Sector.

This event looked at the impact on perceptions of the UK Higher Education Sector across the world, and what needs to be done to ensure that the UK remains a welcoming and competitive environment to attract the best students from across the globe.



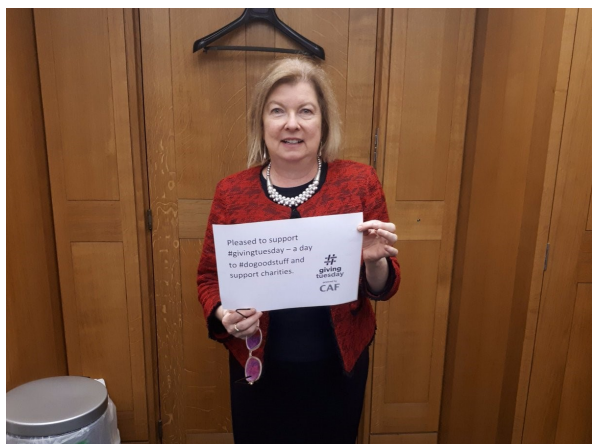
Roberta speaking at the Policy-UK event

This was a very interesting and informative discussion, and it was clear that the Government will need to do much more to address the impact of Brexit on our universities and colleges.

I look forward to taking part in further discussions on this in the future, and will continue to press the Government on the need for further support for our Higher Education institutions.

Supporting charities on Giving Tuesday

So many charities carry out fantastic work in Durham and across the UK, and Giving Tuesday is the day where we all get the chance to focus on the vital work they do.



Giving Tuesday has been recognised in the UK since 2014, and now runs in over 70 countries worldwide. On the day, everyone is encouraged to support any charity in any way they want, and it has become one of the most important days of the year for charities across the country, with millions of pounds being raised for good causes.

Giving Tuesday is organised in the UK by the Charities Aid Foundation, and in 2017 took place on 28 November. I was pleased to be able to highlight this worthwhile campaign.

MP campaigns on World AIDS day

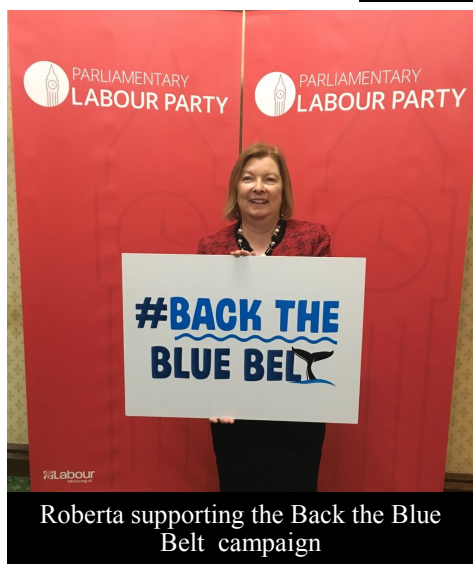
In December, many events took place to commemorate World AIDS day, and I was pleased to be able to show my support for people living with HIV, and to commemorate those who have died from an AIDS-related illness.

It is important to recognise that, despite scientific advances in the treatment of HIV there is still a need for further research and education around the virus.

I also spoke in the Westminster Hall debate on World Aids Day, where I called on the Government to better integrate their work on HIV/AIDS into the Department for International Development's overall strategy, and to show more political leadership on the issue globally.



Roberta backs the Blue Belt



I recently joined Labour colleagues in supporting the #BackTheBlueBelt campaign to protect the oceans around 7 of the 14 British Overseas Territories.

The Blue Belt will be a series of protected areas of ocean that are home to a number of endangered species, and the world's largest coral atoll. This campaign calls on the Government to reaffirm the UK's commitment to ocean conservation, and to work with overseas territories to deliver on the Blue Belt pledges.

You can find out more about the pledges, and how to support the Blue Belt campaign at greatbritishoceans.org