

City of Durham CLP Report – March 2018

Durham Issues

Walkergate Safety Issues



As you will know, on 7 February 2018, a young student sadly lost her life outside the Missoula Bar in the Walkergate complex.

This awful situation raises a number of complex and interwoven issues, such as the

suitability of the Walkergate development as a location for the night time economy, the council's licensing policy for Durham, and policing strategies within the city amongst others.

I have for many years raised concerns about public safety in Walkergate, especially since the local authority began granting late licenses to a number of establishments in the complex, and I was disappointed to learn that the Health and Safety Executive could not oversee these investigations.

It is vital that the public have trust in the outcome of these investigations, and so I have written back to the HSE to express my disappointment, and to the Minister to ask which body has the authority to oversee proceedings. I have also followed this matter up with Durham County Council to make sure it is in contact with the HSE to access as much specialist help and advice it needs to make sure the investigations are completed as quickly and comprehensively as possible.

UCU strikes in Durham

As you will all be aware, University academics are currently taking strike action as a result of proposed changes to their pensions by Universities UK.

I have met with a number of representatives from UCU, and recently spoke at the UCU 'Teach Out' event at Redhills in Durham.

Sadly, talks taking place between UCU and UUK under the auspices of ACAS last week did not lead to any agreement being reached, and it is really important that all parties can get back to ACAS as soon as possible so that an acceptable compromise can be reached.



Durham Academics Visa Application

Two Durham University academics, Dr Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Dr Arely Cruz-Santiago were recently contacted by the Home Office to inform them that their application for a Tier 2 Visa to remain in the UK was refused due to time spent outside the UK working on a humanitarian project in Mexico. Although the couple were born in Mexico, they have spent the last 11 years living in the UK with their young daughter.

Following this decision, I made contact with the family, and wrote to both the Immigration Minister and the Home Office to ask that any deportation action be stopped until the family could investigate other options to remain in the UK.

I am sure that you will be delighted to hear that, following my communication with the Home Office, the initial decision has been reviewed, and the family have now been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

Sherburn Hill Primary School Site

Before Christmas, Durham County Council announced plans to consult on the closure of Sherburn Hill Primary School site and in January and February, I held two meetings with local residents to discuss this move, and the impact it would have on the village.

Should this school close, it would leave Sherburn Hill with no community facilities at all, as the Sure Start Centre and the Community Centre have both closed in recent years.

Sadly, despite huge local opposition to this move, the council have decided to press ahead with the closure. I have once again raised this matter with the senior officers to highlight the impact this would have on the village, and to encourage them to reconsider this damaging proposal.

I will of course continue to support the residents of Sherburn Hill in their fight to save their school.



Advice Surgery Sessions



Roberta meeting with constituents

I have continued to notice more people than ever attending my advice surgeries over the last few months, with more and more complex issues.

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 and access the services they so desperately need.

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.

Constituency Visits

Roberta visits HMP Frankland



I had the chance to catch up with the Governor of HMP Frankland to discuss the challenges our prisons will be facing in the future.

I also met with representatives of the Prison Officers' Association to talk about the issues prison staff are facing. Officer numbers have been dramatically reduced since 2010, and this is putting a huge amount of strain on the remaining staff.

I will continue to liaise with the Prison Officers' Association on this matter, and also press the Government for more support for prison officers.

Prince Charles visits Durham



As one of those things you have to do as an MP, I recently met with Prince Charles, when he visited Durham.

His Royal Highness received a warm welcome from all who came along, and while in Durham he

unveiled a commemorative plaque honouring Dame Elizabeth Bowes, who lived in Durham, and is an ancestor of his through The Queen Mother.

I joined His Royal Highness to tour the Open Treasure exhibition, where he unveiled a commemorative plaque to declare it open, and also had the pleasure of hearing some wonderful music in the Cathedral from local youth choirs.

Campaigning in Durham

Campaigning on Universal Credit

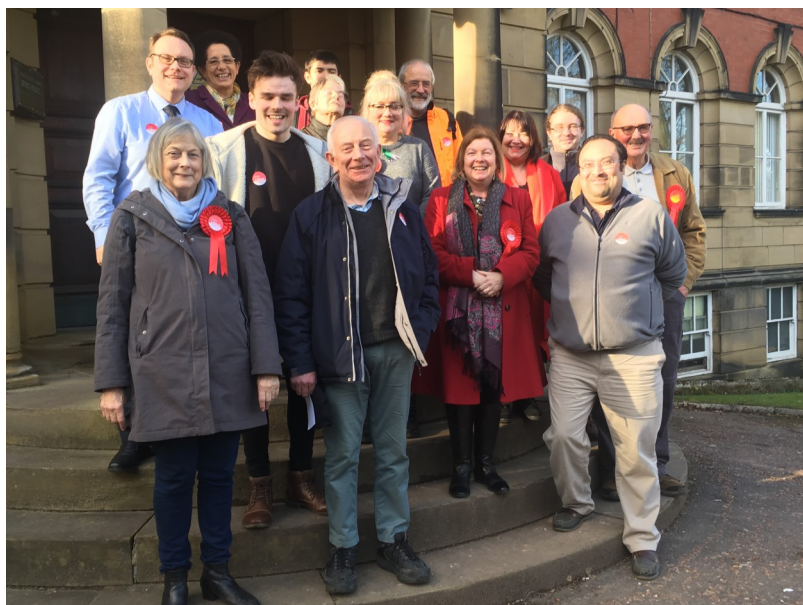
After our last All Member Meeting, I was really pleased to see so many Labour members campaigning on the impact the roll out of Universal Credit is having on constituents in Durham.

It is clear that the poor management of this system is causing huge amounts of problems for people, and pushing families into poverty and debt, and leading to an increase in evictions across the UK.



My thanks go to everyone who came along to highlight this important issue, and it is important that we keep spreading the message that a better system has to be put in place by the Government.

Durham City Parish Council

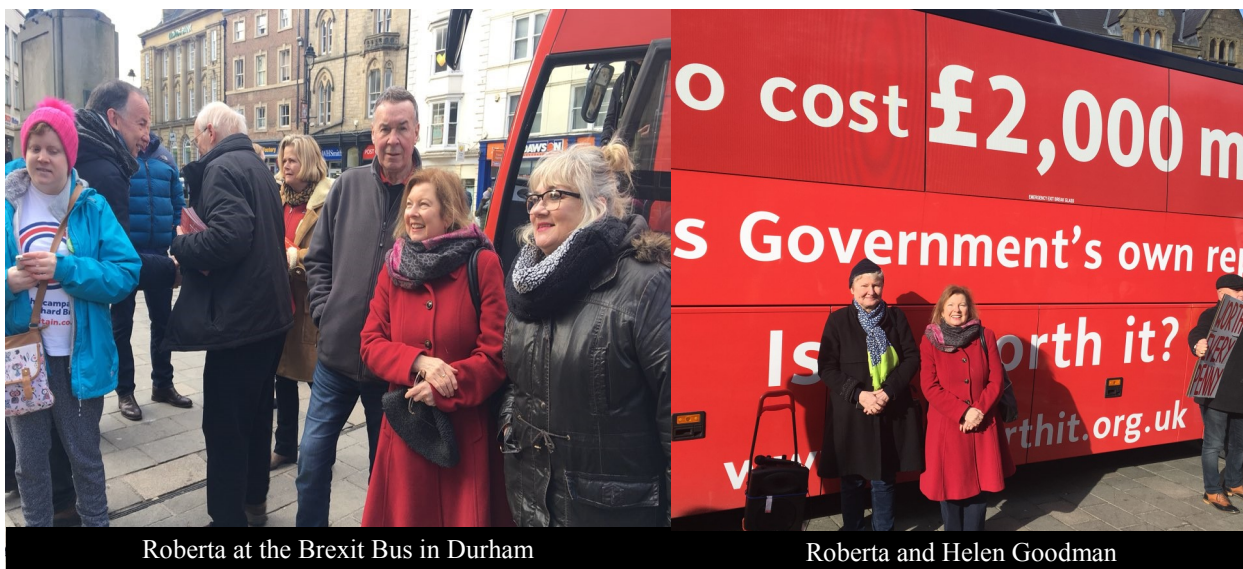


As the elections for the new Parish Council for Durham City are looming, I joined some of our excellent candidates and other members for some campaigning in the city.

It was great to see the enthusiasm of everyone who came along, and we had a really good response from the people that we spoke to.

It's really important that we give our candidates as much support as possible, so I would encourage anyone who wants to help to get involved in the campaigning.

Brexit Bus visits Durham Market Square



Roberta at the Brexit Bus in Durham

Roberta and Helen Goodman

The Brexit Facts Bus recently visited Durham Market Square, and I was pleased to be able to speak to those who came along to highlight the impact Brexit will have on our region.

The bus was intended to help get the message out about the benefits of remaining in the EU, and as a net beneficiary from EU funding, the North East could be hit very hard by a poor Brexit deal. It was good to see the discussions taking place amongst those who came along, and all the speakers made strong points on the impact EU membership has had on the region.

As we move closer to leaving the EU, it is becoming clearer by the day Brexit will have a huge negative impact on the UK, and it is vital that we continue making the point about the negative impact Brexit will have on the North East.

Roberta backs TUC HeartUnions week

I was delighted to join local members to celebrate the TUC's HeartUnions week in February, and highlight the important work done by our trades unions.

HeartUnions was a week of activity throughout England and Wales that focused on the good work that unions do and showed how unions offer everyone a voice at work.

It was great to see such strong support in Durham for trades unions, and I look forward to next years event. You can find out more about this an other TUC campaigns by visiting www.tuc.org.uk



Roberta and local members during HeartUnions week

Women's Gala Launch



Roberta at the launch of the Women's Gala

I was delighted to join up with those involved in organising the Durham Women's Gala, to officially launch the event and to mark 100 years of women's suffrage. The gala itself is scheduled to take place in Wharton Park on Saturday 30 June 2018.

In the year that marks this major milestone, it is fitting that the Women's Gala should return to Durham for the first time in decades.

My thanks go to Maura McKeon for the brilliant idea to revive the Women's Gala, and for the work that she and others have done in getting this project off the ground.

Women's Banner Group

As well as celebrating 100 years of Women's suffrage with the launch of the Women's Gala, I also dropped into the Durham Women's Banner Group, who were celebrating International Women's Day.

The Women's Banner Group was formed in 2018 to celebrate the work of female trade unionists, politicians and community activists.

This meeting was organised to discuss which women should feature on the banner and to share stories of their achievements. All those who came along made some compelling arguments as to why their choice should be included.

It was really inspiring to hear stories of what women had done to secure the vote and fight injustice in the past, and I really look forward to seeing the completed banner at this years Miners' Gala.

To find out more about the group, you can visit www.facebook.com/womensbannergroup



City of Durham Ceilidh



My thanks to Sheila Williams and everyone involved in organising the fantastic Labour Party fundraising ceilidh in Framwellgate Moor.

The event was really well attended, and a wonderful time was had by all, with lots of great company and some incredible dancing. My thanks also go to Aurelia Smith and Maura McKeon for being such fantastic partners! I really hope to get along to more fundraising events in the future.

Congratulations must also go to our Fundraising Officer, Hannah Walter who, following the Ceilidh, welcomed a new baby boy into her family!

Government statement on Planning



At the beginning of March, I was in Westminster to respond to the Government's statement on the new National Planning Policy Framework.

Once again, the Government is trying to tinker at the edges of planning policy, while house building in the

UK still remains far too low. Over 120,000 are currently living in temporary accommodation, and 5000 people are sleeping rough, yet the Government have continued to take control of planning away from local communities and slashed local authority budgets, meaning planning departments are far too stretched, and houses aren't getting built.

These plans are not only unhelpful but misguided, and seem to be another attempt to shift the blame for Government failures onto councils, and it is clear that the Government still thinks planning is something that is done to local people, and not something they have any say in.

Labour wants to empower communities, putting them at the heart of decision making, with neighbourhood plans being central to a new, streamlined system of plan making and along with Labour colleagues, I will continue to press the Government to give local authorities the powers they need to properly address the housing crisis in the UK.

MP celebrates Women's Suffrage

In February, I was very pleased to be in the House of Commons to take part in the debate on the centenary of women's suffrage.

We have come a long way in last 100 years in terms of progressing women's rights, but must recognise much still to do to address abuse, violence, inequality and poverty that women face daily across the world.

This milestone acts as encouragement to redouble our efforts to work towards equality for women, and I took the chance to highlight the important work being done by the Commission on the Status of Women Meeting at the UN in March. I will continue to work hard on this issue both inside and outside Parliament.



Housing, Planning and the Green Belt

I recently took part in an important debate in the chamber on housing, planning and the need to protect the Green Belt.

Although it was pleasing that there was a consensus on the need to build more homes, I highlighted the need for the Government to ensure that planning policies do not put pressure on local authorities to allow inappropriate development on protected land - and it must strengthen planning departments so that all plans and proposals are rigorously assessed.

I will continue to push the Government to take steps to ensure that development is in the right place, and with the right infrastructure, and that our Green Belt is fully protected.

Roberta calls for resolution to Yemen crisis

Following the recent information released by the International Rescue Committee on the appalling situation in Yemen, and the UK draft UN statement, I have written to the Foreign Secretary to highlight the need for any future draft to call for a full lifting of the Saudi blockade & fully address civilian suffering in Yemen.

Yemen is plagued by widespread violence, poverty, malnutrition and cholera, amounting to one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.

Within the UN, the UK takes responsibility for issues in Yemen, and it is vital that the UK leads the effort to secure a resolution that calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities and pushes to secure the participation of all parties to resolve the crisis. For more information on the dreadful situation in Yemen, you can visit the IRC website at www.rescue.org/country/yemen.

Roberta challenges Government cuts to local services

Following on from the National Audit Office report on the cuts to funding for winter repairs, and the reports that the recent freezing weather will increase the number of potholes on our roads, I called on the Government to increase funding for local services.

Government cuts mean councils are struggling to provide local services and look after our local road network. Funding for Winter Service has been cut by 38% and spending on planning and development has fallen by 52.8% in real terms since 2010.

This Tory Government has overseen the destruction of local public services and facilities with little care or understanding of the consequences and, along with Labour colleagues, I will continue to highlight the need for proper funding for councils.

Roberta backs the Children's Funeral Fund campaign

I recently added my name to a letter from my Labour colleague Carolyn Harris to the Prime Minister calling the Government to introduce a Children's Funeral Fund to cover the cost of cremation and burial fees.

Carolyn has been working with CLIC Sargent to campaign on this issue, and the cost of a funeral can push many grieving parents into debt during an already impossibly difficult time. I was pleased to be able to support this incredibly important campaign.

162 cross party MPs signed the letter, and I will continue to support this incredibly important campaign in the future.

MP speaks at District Councils Network event



I was pleased to be able to speak at the District Council's Network event in Warwick.

It is clear that, as the Government continues to cut budgets for local authorities, our councils are being placed under more and more pressure to deliver vital services, as the need for those services increases.

I was pleased to be able to highlight the vital role that councils and councillors play in our communities, and also addressed

the need for more funding and better support for planning departments.

Labour will be launching a commission on planning in the summer of 2018 to help identify how planning departments can be better supported in their work.

Roberta meets with Myanmar Ambassador

As I reported to the CLP in November, last year I visited Bangladesh with the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, to see the conditions Rohingya refugees were facing.

Although a deal has been struck between Myanmar and Bangladesh to repatriate Rohingya refugees, there are still concerns about the safety and security of refugees who wish to return, as well as the speed with which Myanmar is allowing them to return.



I therefore recently met with the Myanmar ambassador to discuss these issues, and to fulfil our commitment to those in the refugee camps to raise their plight and our grave concerns with the Myanmar Government. It was a very difficult meeting, but it is vital the Rohingya who return to the country have proper safeguards and citizenship rights.