

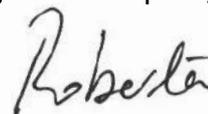
City of Durham CLP Report – January 2019

Welcome to my January 2019 Parliamentary report. This month has already shown how busy things are going to be both in Westminster and the constituency over the next year, and we will all need to be ready for the challenges we will be facing, and the campaigns we will be working on over the coming months.

I hope that this brief round-up gives you a flavour of some of the activities I have been involved in and some of the campaigns I have supported over the last few months.

As usual, if you have any questions or comments about anything in this report, please get in touch on mail@roberta.org.uk.

Best wishes



Brexit

As with much of the previous year, January has already seen a number of fast moving developments with regards to Brexit, and it continues to dominate proceedings in Westminster

As you will know, on 15 January 2019, the Government finally brought its Brexit deal before Parliament and I spoke during



Roberta speaking about the Government's Brexit deal in Westminster

the debate to explain that I would be voting against the Prime Ministers deal as it would make constituents of Durham poorer; dilute access to research funding, not provide any protections for the environment or rights at work, and threaten the Good Friday Agreement. Of course, the result of this vote speaks for itself, with the Government suffering an historic defeat, and MPs from all parties firmly rejecting the Prime Minister's deal.

I am receiving an unprecedented amount of correspondence from constituents who are hugely concerned about the Government's handling of Brexit, and I continue to meet with groups and organisations, including the North East Chamber of Commerce and local businesses, to try and deal with the impact of the uncertainty surrounding Brexit.

Leaving the EU with no deal in place would be catastrophic however and recent research shows that the North East would be affected the most by this outcome. Along with other Labour MPs, I will be doing all I can to ensure a no-deal Brexit cannot take place. Inevitably, Brexit will continue to overshadow much of our work in Westminster, and I will be doing all I can to prevent Durham being negatively affected by Brexit, and will continue to push for a General Election.

Universal Credit and Foodbanks



Roberta collecting food bank donations in Tesco

Tesco & Trussell Trust Foodbank Collection

As we all know, the policies being pursued by this Government have had a hugely negative impact on families across the area. The number of people accessing food banks continues to rise, especially now Universal Credit has been rolled out across Durham.

A huge amount of work is done by local foodbanks to help people who are really struggling. Universal Credit, which is supposed to support those on low incomes and low wages, unfortunately shows that Foodbanks are needed more than ever. But in any just society, we shouldn't need them.

Every year, Tesco partners with the Trussell Trust and Fareshare and encourages its customers to donate non-perishable items, and this is topped up with a further 20 percent donation from Tesco.

My thanks go to everyone who has helped organise the collection, shoppers who kindly donated goods, and of course to the dedicated volunteers at Durham Foodbank who do so much to support people and families in need. I am also really pleased that the CLP arranged for a food bank collection over Christmas.

Aldi Christmas Food Donation

As well as supporting the Foodbank collection in Tesco, I also worked with Aldi to help ensure that vulnerable people in Durham could have a meal at Christmas by helping them donate any unsold perishable food to a local charity.

I helped Aldi link up with DASH, a local charity which helps people who are either homeless, or about to become so. On Christmas Eve, DASH were able to pick up and distribute the food, ensuring that many vulnerable people in Durham were able to have a hot meal at Christmas.

My thanks go to both Aldi and DASH for their work in supporting vulnerable people in our community.



Roberta with staff from Aldi in

Advice Service in County Durham

I am being contacted by more constituents than ever who are dealing with a huge range of issues, and the impact of Universal Credit is proving an increasing problem for many people.

To try and ensure that people can be helped as quickly as possible, I have joined the County Durham Advice Service, a network of charities and organisations that can assist people with a range of issues, including benefits, housing and healthcare.

This network will allow me to get in touch with the relevant organisations much more quickly, and also allow other agencies to refer issues on to me straight away, as well as providing a way to keep in touch with agencies which specialise in dealing with these complex and often urgent issues.

School Funding

I recently spoke at the National Association of Headteachers North East Education Summit, and joined over 100 school leaders, staff and governors to discuss ongoing issues with school funding. It was clear there was huge concern about the current funding arrangements for schools, as they are simply not sustainable in the long term.



The North East Education Summit

I have followed this matter up with a number of schools in the constituency, and recently met the headteachers of New Brancepeth Primary School and Framwellgate Secondary School, to discuss not only school budgets, but also the lack of any funding for capital investment. Both headteachers were concerned about the condition of the school buildings, and there is no money in the short or medium term to address these issues.

I also met with the Headteacher of Durham Sixth Form Centre, as the funding for Further Education has also been affected by Government cuts, with a 22% decline in per-pupil funding for Sixth Form Colleges since 2010/11.

I have already contacted the Secretary of State for Education a number of times to point out that the current funding arrangements for schools and colleges are unsustainable, and have met with raised this matter with the council at a meeting for MPs. I will be meeting again with the Head of Education and Skills at Durham County Council to look at the council's education funding in more detail, and will be contacting the Secretary of State again to highlight the urgent need for more funding for schools and colleges.

Roberta backs the Raise the Rate campaign



Roberta backs the Raise the Rate campaign

To help draw attention to the huge drop in per-pupil funding for Sixth Form Colleges since 2010, during our discussions I joined the Headteacher of Durham Sixth Form Centre in backing the Raise the Rate campaign.

This campaign aims to put pressure on the Government to guarantee a big increase at the next spending review later this year, and I will be pressing the Government on this issue as well. You can find out more about Raise the Rate at www.raisetherate.org.uk

Children's Future Food Inquiry



Roberta at the Children's Future Food Inquiry hearing

One of the other issues that schools face of course, is providing healthy nutritious school meals to their pupils.

In my role as Vice Chair of the School Food All Party Parliamentary Group, I recently took part in a number of hearings as part of the Children's Future Food Inquiry, and heard first hand from children, young people and those who work with them

about the impact that food insecurity has on their day to day lives.

An estimated 4.1 million children are living in poverty in the UK, and it was truly shocking to hear stories of children going hungry, and the stigma that still exists around free school meals.

It is clear that more needs to be done to make sure that children have access to healthy nutritious school food, and ensure the stigma around free school meals is removed once and for all.

Planning

Roberta speaks at TCPA Annual Conference

In my role as Shadow Minister for Planning and Local Government, and Chair of the Planning Commission. I spoke at the Town and Country Planning Association Annual Conference, to not only highlight that work that had already been carried out by the Commission, but to explain what we would be looking at over the coming months.

The conference brings together a large number of councillors, planners, policy makers, academics and community groups with an interest in planning, and this year, the theme was 'blueprint for a better planning system'.

As this is the aim of the Planning Commission, the conference was very informative, with many delegates sharing some excellent ideas on how our planning system can be improved.



Roberta speaking at the TCPA conference

MP welcomes European Partnership for Urban Resilience



The European Partnership for Urban Resilience project (EPICURO) recently held its final conference in London, and in my role as Shadow Minister for Planning and Local Government, I welcomed delegates to Parliament as part of the final stages of this project, and to recognise the work that it has done in promoting climate change adaptation in urban areas across the world.

EPICURO has focussed on how cities can continue to grow and develop whilst dealing with the many environmental challenges they will inevitably face and have worked to share best practice on the resilience strategies that have been put in place already.

It is vital that we share information about how best to ensure cities across the UK can deal with any major problems that may occur, and will feed into a number of the themes the Planning Commission will be working on. This project is also a timely reminder of how important it is to work in partnership with different regions and countries.

MP speaks at Chartered Institute of Building Reception

As part of my Shadow Ministerial role, I spoke at the recent Parliamentary Reception organised by the Chartered Institute of Builders, and highlighted the need to push the quality of the built environment up the political agenda.

Following the Grenfell tragedy, and subsequent Hackitt Review, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure high quality in new buildings, and more rigorous standards introduced that will place the safety and wellbeing of people in our communities at the forefront of development.

The Chartered Institute of Builders has been working in this area already, but this reception and other events make sure that pressure is being put on the Government to learn the lessons of Grenfell, and take urgent action to strengthen building regulations.



Health Services

Roberta challenges Secretary of State on Public Health

I recently contacted the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to share my grave concerns about Government proposals to reduce Public Health Funding to Durham County Council by over £19 million, approximately 40% of the current public health budget.

This is a potentially hugely damaging move by the Government, and Durham County Council and the North Durham Clinical Commission Group have also written to the Secretary of State to highlight how serious this matter is.



Roberta speaking in the Chamber

This reduction in funding would have severe consequences for many important health services in the county, such as sexual health and drug and alcohol recovery programmes, as well as impacting on essential services provided by the NHS, which relies on the Public Health Grant to deliver cancer treatments, A&E services and vital mental health services.

Even more shocking is the fact that under the proposed funding formula, some of the more wealthy and prosperous areas of the UK, which have higher positive health outcomes and life expectancy, will actually receive more funding.

I will continue to challenge the Government over these proposals, as it is vital that we protect our much-needed health services in Durham.

Roberta raises Health Budgets at PMQs



Roberta questions the Prime Minister at PMQs

As well as contacting the Secretary of State, I took the chance to ask the Prime Minister why the government had taken the decision to slash Durham County Council's public health budget by 40%.

Chronic health conditions and obesity are higher in the North East than any other region. In fact, over 65s in Durham can on average expect eight years of healthy living after turning 65, compared with fourteen in the Prime Ministers constituency.

I was disappointed by the response of the Prime Minister, and this move will only serve to wider health inequalities across the UK, and place greater pressure on our NHS.

Public Sector Cuts

Government cuts and the prison service



Government cuts have continued to place increasing strain on our prison system, and so following on from meetings with the Governors of Frankland and Low Newton Prisons, I met with the Governor of Durham Prison.

Two of the major issues facing the prison service at the moment is the severe drop in staff numbers, and the increase of suicides and self-harm in all prisons. Poor mental health, combined with a lack of prison staff, is endangering inmates, officers, and healthcare professionals. To help combat this problem, HMP Durham is now home to a new mental health support unit - the first of its kind in the UK.

I met with staff working in this unit to find out more about the work they are doing, and will be pressing the Government to invest more not only in staffing budgets, but also into improving mental health provision to ensure our prisons are as safe as they can be for staff and prisoners alike.

Public Sector Pensions Westminster Hall Debate



Roberta speaking in Westminster Hall

At the end of December, I took part in a Westminster Hall debate on the future of public sector pensions. The Government intends to reduce its contributions to public sector pensions from 2.8% to 2.4%, which will have a huge impact on our already overstretched public services.

As the Government has so far failed to guarantee any additional money will be provide to these services to offset the cost of additional pension contributions. For example, by 2021, the police will need to find an extra £420 million. This equates to roughly a loss of a further 10,000 police officers, if a balanced budget is set. As Durham has a high number of public sector workers, this could have a significant impact on the constituency.

Despite the cuts that our public services have already had to deal with, the Government is now asking them to plan for the future without any idea of what their budgets will be, and I will continue to press the Government to properly support our vital public services.

Miscellaneous Issues and Events

Roberta unveils Bowburn Mural

I recently had the pleasure of unveiling the new mural in Bowburn Community Centre commemorating the end of World War One and the centenary of some women getting the vote.

This wonderful piece of artwork was created by the Bowburn Community Art Group, and funded by local councillors Stuart Dunn and Maura McKeon.



Alongside the unveiling of the mural, there was a performance by a local brass band, and I also spoke at the unveiling of the spectacular poppy nets created by the Cornforth History Group.

As it is now 100 years since the end of the war, and the first time women won the right to vote, it is vitally important that we continue to recognise the contribution Durham made to the suffragette movement, and the sacrifices that were made during the First World War. My thanks go to all involved for their hard work, and a truly memorable evening.

Roberta writes a 'letter to the future'

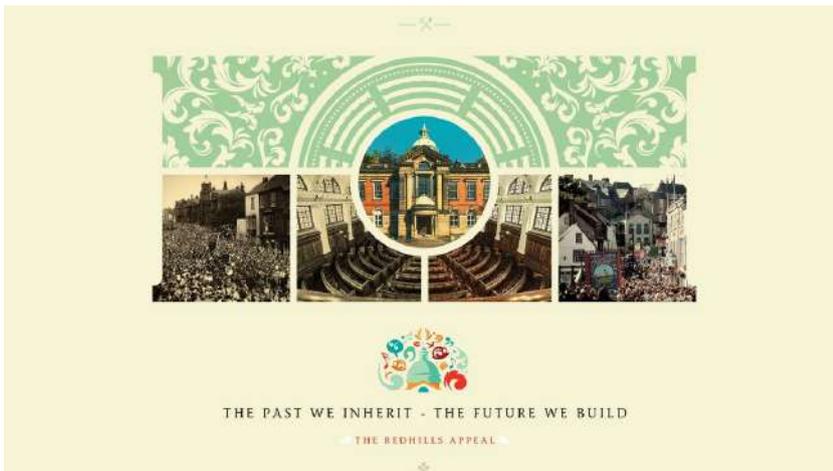


As 2018 was the year that we celebrated the centenary of some women getting the vote, one of the last acts I carried out to commemorate this was to write a 'letter to future' as part of the Vote 100 celebrations.

Many MPs wrote letters outlining their hopes for the future, and these were placed in a time capsule, which is due to be opened in 2028 - the centenary of equal voting rights for men and women.

2018 has seen many wonderful celebrations of the centenary of some women getting the vote, and I hope that the events in 2028 are just as good!

MP backs Redhills Appeal



2018 saw the Durham Miners' Association celebrating its 150th year, and I was so pleased to be able to support the launch of the Redhills Appeal.

This appeal is seeking to raise funds to restore and preserve this incredible building, which has

recently been voted in the top ten of irreplaceable buildings relating to Power, Protest and Progress.

The DMA is seeking to secure the future of Redhills as a centre for learning and performance, and preserve the important history of the region for future generations. You can find out more about the appeal, and how to help with this vital project at <https://redhillsdurham.org>

Advice Surgery Sessions



I have continued to see more people than ever attending my advice surgeries over the last few months, especially as Universal Credit has now been fully rolled out in Durham.

More and more people and families are being pushed into financial difficulty by this poorly administrated and unfair system.

As well as problems with benefits, I have continued to see people who need help with such issues as social housing, problems accessing health services and immigration issues.

It is clear that people are facing more urgent and complex issues,

and 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.

Planning Commission

Work continues on the Planning Commission, with a number of regional meetings having already taken place, as well as regular meetings in Westminster and a call for evidence having gone out.

As you will know, the aim of the Commission is to gather and examine evidence that will help set out a range of planning policy options for the next Labour Government. This is a really intensive piece of work, with the monthly regional and Westminster meetings to organise and attend with planners, developers and residents, and of course compiling the information we are receiving through the call for evidence.



The Commission has already visited Liverpool, Sheffield and Stevenage, and has started examining different aspects of planning, such as national infrastructure planning, the development of local plans and how projects can be developed with much more community participation.

The Commission will continue to meet throughout 2019 to examine the issues that different regions are facing, and we have already heard so many useful contributions about how the planning system can be improved, and the next Labour Government can put in place policies that ensure the planning system is fit for the future.

Miscellaneous Westminster Campaigns

It has been a really busy few months for campaigning in Westminster, and here is a roundup of some of the campaigns I have supported that affect constituents in Durham.

Roberta supports Safer Over 65s campaign

People over 65 are disproportionately affected by electrical appliance fires in their homes, so I joined Electrical Safety First, a charity that works with all sectors of the electrical industry to reduce deaths and injuries caused by electrical appliances, to back the 'Safer Over 65s' campaign.

It is vital that we do all we can to protect the more vulnerable residents in our communities, and you can find out more about this and other campaigns at www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk

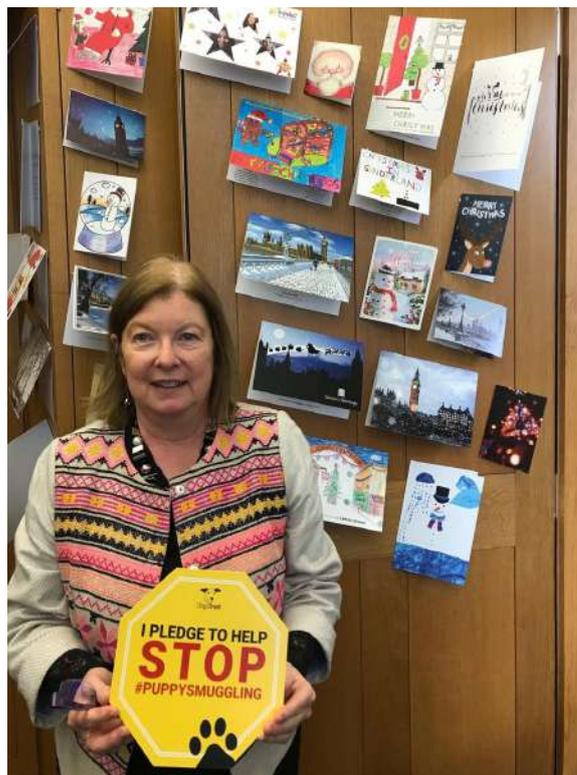


MP supports Dogs Trust Puppy Smuggling Campaign

After being contacted by a number of constituents, I attended a Dogs Trust event to highlight the work they are doing to combat the illegal trade in puppy smuggling.

The Dogs Trust has been investigating puppy smuggling since 2014, and has uncovered a significant amount of evidence that shows how easy it is for unscrupulous breeders to circumnavigate existing laws, and import animals that are too young to travel, and have not been properly vaccinated.

The Dogs Trust has called on the Government to take action on this, and I was happy to help support this cause. You can find out more about this campaign at www.dogstrust.org.uk



Roberta backs Guide Dogs 'Access All Areas' campaign



Over the last six months 75% of assistance dog owners have been refused access to a restaurant, shop or taxi, so Guide Dogs UK is highlighting this important issue in its 'Access All Areas' campaign.

Under the Equality Act, guide dog and other assistance dog owners have the right to enter the majority of services, premises and vehicles with their dog, and so I joined a number of assistance dog owners to draw attention to the difficulties they face in accessing services and areas that many of us take for granted.

You can find out more about this campaign at

www.guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/campaigning/access-all-areas

Giving Tuesday



I was really pleased to be able to support Giving Tuesday—the day when everyone is encouraged to do something to support their favourite charity.

Giving Tuesday began in the UK in 2014, and since then has become one of the biggest days of the year for charities across the country., with millions of pounds being raised for good causes.

Giving Tuesday will be returning in 2019, so if you want to find out more about how you can get involved, visit www.givingtuesday.org.uk

MP supports Christmas Jumper Day

Friday 14 December 2018 was Christmas Jumper Day, and I joined organisers Save the Children to support this annual campaign.

Every year, Save the Children encourage people to sign up their campaign, wear a Christmas Jumper to work or school, and donate £2 towards the charity.

Save the Children do important work providing essential food, healthcare, education, and protection to millions of children around the world who cannot access these vital services. You can find out more about this campaign, and how you can get involved at christmasjumperday.org



Roberta supporting the Christmas Jumper Day campaign

Looking Forward

There is of course plenty to do over the next few months, with Brexit once again being the key focus in Westminster. Alongside this however, we still need to continue challenging Government decisions around issues such as education funding, health budgets and Universal Credit.

I will also be speaking about planning, and the ongoing work of the Planning Commission at the upcoming Local Government Conference, and will continue to meet with planners, councillors and residents throughout the country as part of the Planning Commission's work.

Alongside this, I will continue to campaign on issues that affect constituents in Durham, and of course keep pressing for a General Election.