

Alex Cunningham MP

Stockton North



Mr John Mulholland
Editor, *The Observer*
Kings Place
90 York Way
London
N1 9GU

Wednesday, 08 January 2014

Dear Mr Mulholland,

I read with great interest Toby Helm's article regarding the Prime Minister's devaluation of the "big society", and agree that strengthening our local communities has become a secondary objective behind a raft of ideological cuts in public services and a controversial programme of privatisation. However, I take issue with the claim that areas such as Port Clarence, in my Stockton North constituency, are tantamount to "charity deserts" with no charitable sector and little social entrepreneurship to plug the gaps left by a dysfunctional state.

The community of Port Clarence has worked extraordinarily hard to help themselves and has produced many success stories. One is the Clarendes Community Resource Centre, run by social enterprise Know How North East, which has emerged as a social hub and provides local services and facilities that are crucial to promoting a vibrant community.

The award-winning Post Office Local branch that opened in the Centre, the first of its kind in the country being operated by a social enterprise, is another, while the prescription ordering and collection service pioneered there ensured that access to vital healthcare services was not lost altogether when Government reorganisation of the NHS resulted in the withdrawal of vital nursing services.

The Horticultural Centre of Excellence, run as part of the Billingham Environmental Links Programme to deliver skills for the whole community, is further evidence of the social entrepreneurship in the area, working closely with schools to provide a valuable supplement to the national curriculum. And this is not to mention the fantastic work that these community organisations do with jobseekers and young people to nurture the skills and knowledge required to obtain and sustain work in the long term.

While Stockton Borough Council and partners did a good job handling the recent flood problems, the role of voluntary and community sector organisations cannot be overstated. Not only did they pull together and work tirelessly to ensure that services remained accessible, but also provided bases for the emergency response teams dealing with the aftermath. At the same time, the inspirational headteacher of the local primary school encouraged food donations for affected families and she and her staff gave up their Christmas dinner, opting to deliver it to those most affected. The Billingham Legacy Fund, another charitable group, raised thousands of pounds to help.

Continued...

It is clear there is a strong community sector in Port Clarence and that the comments from the Centre for Social Justice are as redundant as those made by the Conservative Lord Howell who described the North East as desolate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Alex Cunningham', written in a cursive style.

Alex Cunningham MP

Stockton Office: Unit 121, Stockton Business Centre, 70 Brunswick Street, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1DW

London Office: Alex Cunningham MP, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

London Tel: 020 7219 7157

Constituency Tel: 01642 345 291

Email: alex.cunningham.mp@parliament.uk

Website: www.alexcunninghammp.com

Twitter: @acunninghammp