

# Mick Whitley MP

Building a Better Birkenhead



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# Newsletter

## Introduction

As we approach the start of British Summer Time it is vital that, like the clocks, we move forward to face the new challenges that face the Party as we move ever closer to a general election. The work of the CLP will be vital as the Party strikes as many blows as possible to Sunak and his motley crew in preparation for landing the knock-out punch come the general election. The work to get a Labour Government is already well underway. Let's keep it up here in Birkenhead.

## Mersey Maritime – Knowledge Is Power

In January I was alarmed to hear of Wirral Council's decision to pull out of its previous commitment to work with others to create a world class Maritime Knowledge Hub (MKH) on the site on the site of the old Central Hydraulic Tower in Birkenhead Docks.

The Hub would not only be a tremendous example of architectural regeneration – it will be a source of well-paid jobs. It will equip people with the skills needed to support the development of the maritime industry in the area. It will attract companies and inward investment into Birkenhead and the wider Wirral.

A report to the Council on 17 January had warned that there was no viable plan for the MKH and "the current balance of financial risk between public and private sector investors within the indicative proposals could not realistically be accepted by the council at the current time." When I heard of this potential collapse of the MKH project – which would mean the Council handing £9 million to the Combined Authority – I felt duty bound to intervene and help the various parties involved explore possible ways forward.

During March I held meetings with all the major players involved. I held discussions with Peel Waters, the national organisation Maritime UK, and with Council officers to consider ways in which the project could be put back on track. There was unanimity on the value of the project as a cornerstone of the

area's economic regeneration. There was also new clarity on the ways in which the MKH at the water tower could be funded.

Obviously, the financial aspects of these discussions are shrouded in commercial sensitivities, but it became evident to me that there was a real will to revive the project. There was a recognition that this was a key element in the regeneration of the Birkenhead and Wallasey docks, that it opened the way to becoming a highly valued resource for the national maritime sector and that it would bring a range of economic benefits across Birkenhead and the wider Wirral.

Thankfully, these combined efforts appear to have borne fruit. A new package for financing the project was discussed by the parties which would minimise the financial risk to the Council but still enable it to hold the lease on the site which in turn would provide a degree of security to prospective tenants of the Hub.

I was delighted to see the new report going to the Council this month which states, "The hydraulic tower is symbolic of both the rise and decline of Birkenhead and maritime industry associated with the docks. It is a prominent feature in the immediate area and its development could be symbolic of the re-emergence of Birkenhead from the economic decline it has faced over a significant period."

The job now is to move into action – and fast. With investment from Peel and support from Liverpool City Region the project can and must commence soon. We cannot afford to have a good idea and then sit on it, like hens hoping their eggs will hatch. We need to prove to potential tenants and investors that their future is coming to life – at the Birkenhead Maritime Knowledge Hub.

## The Future of Birkenhead Market?

Not sure how the press got hold of my letter to the leader of the Council, but for full disclosure of my position to the CLP here is the letter I sent in full in the hope of stopping the Council's Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee on 27 March 2024 from voting through the proposal to move Birkenhead Market into the old Argos store (see Stop Press below for the outcome of the Committee's meeting):

"Dear Paul,

Thank you for supplying me with the documents regarding the plans for Birkenhead Market.

As I am sure you understand it is my responsibility to respond with my constituents' interests and the interest of the town I represent as MP front and centre. Indeed, several traders and representatives of the Birkenhead Market Traders' Association (BMTA) have approached me to respond to the Council and its proposals on their behalf.

I have been involved in plans for the new market and its impact on the current traders for several years. Me and my team have attended countless meetings with the traders themselves, representatives of the Council and Council officials. My role has always been constructive. A member of my team played a key mediating role during an exceedingly difficult period of negotiations over a temporary alternative for the traders until a new market was built. I myself played a supporting role in helping the Council win its bid for the Future High Streets funding that was to be used to build the new market.

The many hours of meetings and the follow up work to those meetings was premised on the understanding that a new market would be built, that it would be in the main shopping area of the town and that it would be a centrepiece for the regeneration of my town. It was also premised on my standpoint, which has been constant throughout, that the needs of the traders would be paramount and that decisions would be taken in full consultation with them. At a meeting at the Lauries some time ago I secured the traders a place at the decision-making table. And progress resulted in agreements for a temporary solution and the eventual presentation of detailed plans for a new market to a very enthusiastic group of traders. There was a renewed optimism as these advances were made. Unfortunately, this mood was not translated into action and over time everything seemed to come to a halt. Attention shifted to the future of the Pyramids rather than the future of the Birkenhead Market.

We were initially told there were no plans to kill off the new market project following the Council's purchase of the Pyramids but rumours began to circulate that the new market project was no more and eventually at a meeting you and others held with me and my team in early December last year we were given the grim news that after almost three years in the making the funds were no longer available to build a new market. A total of £27 million had originally been earmarked for the new market. The current cost was projected to be £31.6 million, and the Council did not have the money to cover that increase. This was a bitter blow and was a retreat from the ambitious programme of Regeneration which the new market had previously been an integral part of.

The rumours had also hinted that the "new" market was now to be housed in a re-purposed Argos. With the publication of the assorted options outlined in the documents you kindly forwarded it to me, it would appear that these rumours were also true, or at the very least it was the option most favoured by the Council officials and is recommended in the summary report you sent over.

First, like the traders themselves, I want to express my profound disappointment at the decision not to build a new market on the old House of Fraser site. The lengthy delays in actioning the original proposal for such a project and now the abandonment of the proposal on grounds of cost should be recognised for what they are – a dramatic setback for the regeneration of my town. I believe there needs to be a serious review of why the project was allowed to drift to the point where the Council decided it is now unaffordable. An honest accounting of when decisions to deliberately stall the market project were made and implemented needs to be provided to the people of Birkenhead.

I also believe that the funding that was originally allocated to the project needs to be fully accounted for as the costs of the proposed relocation of the market are less than the original grant awarded.

Second, I need to relay to you the continuing dissatisfaction of the traders. They have contacted me to complain about:

- a) the proposed location of the new market
- b) the consultation process that has taken place.

On location the traders feel that a move into Argos will be disastrous for their businesses. They reject the arguments advanced in the summary report (proximity to bus station, car park etc.) and point to the fact that the site will be out of the way of the main shopping thoroughfare in

town, will be too small to attract new businesses to the site and will be unsuitable for several of the businesses that operate in the current Market.

I share these concerns and am worried that – as with the failure of St John's Market in Liverpool – this relegation of the market will threaten existing businesses and the livelihoods of the people they employ.

The report suggests that the Argos proposal is the only one that can be completed in the time limit set by the existing government for the spending of the available funds. While this may be the case the reality is that there will be a new government by the time that deadline comes around and that new government is highly likely to be considerably more sympathetic to the management of existing finances by councils engaged in meaningful regeneration projects. This political reality counts for far more weight in deciding the future of the Market than the time limits set by the current government.

That is why I would support the traders' requests to delay a hurried and potentially damaging move into the out of the way Argos site and keep alive options for a more suitable long-term solution to the issue of choosing the best site for a new Market. I would also argue that the full award from the Future High Street Fund be ring fenced to cover the costs of exploring and developing more suitable locations that could rescue the future of the Market as a centrepiece of town centre regeneration.

With regards to the consultation process, the representatives of the BMTA who contacted me explained that while meetings have taken place their concerns are not being listened to. At the most recent meeting there were Council Officers, James Quigley representing a company called Market Asset Management Ltd and three representatives of the BMTA.

At the meeting, the traders were concerned that there was no involvement from or representation of the people of the Wirral, and Birkenhead in particular, who had the interests of the town and its Market as their first priority. That is, there was no involvement from elected representatives who are accountable to local people. As a result, the traders' felt that Argos was a done deal, and the purpose of the meeting was to shoot down any alternatives they may have felt offered a more secure future for the Market and their businesses.

They added that it was their belief that while Green, Conservative and Lib Dem councillors had engaged with them directly the Labour Group had avoided any direct communication with them. Whether or not that is your view of the way things have been I obviously cannot say one way or the other. But as the traders have raised it with me as a concern it is my responsibility to make you aware of how they feel and see things.

Throughout this entire process my mantra has always been that with either the original proposal for a temporary market while a new one was built or a new location for the future if a new market is not going to be built, it is essential that decisions are taken in conjunction with the traders and their representatives.

Birkenhead is traditionally a market town. Birkenhead Market was a destination that people from all over Merseyside and Cheshire visited. It brought vibrancy, jobs, and money into our town. It is clear from the petition that was circulated on the need for a new market and from my post bag on the topic, the people of Birkenhead want an attractive market not a cheap third choice collection of stalls in an unsuitable location.

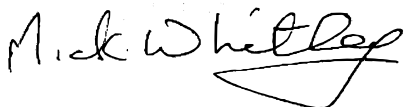
A new market or a revamped market that the traders believe has a future is the option you must consider because it is the option that meets the real needs of the people of Birkenhead.

And I agree with the people of Birkenhead. Places like Chester and Bury have revitalised their town centres and stimulated economic renewal through the investment and development of attractive markets. Birkenhead should do the same. Its people deserve better than the Argos offer.

Already many traders feel betrayed by the process. A considerable number have voted with their feet, closing, or relocating their businesses away from the Market. Those remaining are deeply concerned that they are being subjected to a process of managed decline and the fate facing them is going to follow the same route as the traders at St John's Market Liverpool – a failed revamp followed by a Council lock out as a result of the collapse of trade in a sterile new environment that customers are repelled by.

Any final decision taken on Wednesday that I regard as contrary to the interests of the traders, to my constituents, and to the revival of the town centre will be a disaster, not just for the Market itself but for the very future of a genuinely regenerated Birkenhead. That is why I am convinced the whole issue requires a rethink. A botched market will cause more problems than it will solve as the experience of St John's market over the water proves. It will hurt businesses and the many people they employ. It will deter investment and allow the shameful decline of Birkenhead's town centre to continue unabated. The Council must not be the authors of such a grim future. They should revisit the issue, look into further funding options, and listen to the traders and the people of Birkenhead. A failure to this now will surely rebound on the Council and its Labour Councillors well into the future.

Yours Sincerely,



**Stop Press: Last night the Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee decided to ignore the views of the traders, never took heed of the contents of my letter in respect of this matter and disregarded the needs of the people of Birkenhead by voting through the half-baked, ill thought out and entirely unsuitable Argos option. Sadly, Labour Councillors and Tory Councillors pushed through this vote.**

## Is a Victory in Sight for WASPI Women?

The Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO) has found – after a lengthy investigation – that the failure by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to adequately inform thousands of women that their State Pension age had changed constitutes maladministration. The PHSO also found that the DWP's failure had diminished the women's sense of personal autonomy and financial control.

The PHSO recommends that the DWP should acknowledge its failings and apologise for the impact it has had on complainants and others similarly affected. They also conclude that the women concerned are entitled to compensation by the Government, although, based on what the DWP has said during the investigation, the PHSO doubts that it will provide a remedy.

Consequently, they have taken the rare step of laying their report before Parliament, with a request for Parliament to identify a mechanism for providing an appropriate remedy for those who have suffered injustice. It will be up to Parliament itself to make the decision about how to rectify the injustice.

The main finding of by the PHSO represents a real victory for the 50's women. For ten years their case has been dismissed by too many commentators but now, following the first in-depth investigation, the maladministration they have suffered is set out in authoritative detail. The issue now is not whether the women suffered injustice and that they are entitled to redress; the Report makes clear that they did and they are. The issue now is what redress they should receive.

The government's response does not give me hope that there will be justice. The DWP said, "We will consider the PHSO's report and respond in due course, having co-operated fully throughout this investigation. The government has always been committed to supporting all pensioners in a sustainable way that gives them a dignified retirement, whilst also being fair to them and taxpayers." In other words, don't hold your breath – if they award anything it is likely to be well short of what the 50s women are rightfully owed.

My position remains the one I was elected on, as set out in the 2019 Labour Manifesto, It stated, "Under the Tories, 400,000 pensioners have been pushed into poverty and a generation of women born in the 1950s have had their pension age changed without fair notification. This betrayal left millions of women with no time to make alternative plans – with sometimes devastating personal consequences. Labour recognises this injustice and will work with these women to design a system of recompense for the losses and insecurity they have suffered. We will ensure that such an injustice can never happen again by legislating to prevent accrued rights to the state pension from being changed."

There be no departure from this position, especially since the women affected by this injustice have had to endure a further five years without any recompense at all. Labour should table proposals for the recompense of the women affected along the lines of those discussed in 2019, which involved average compensation payments of £15,650. This compensation offer should be revised in line with inflation. It should be a Manifesto commitment, costed and budgeted for in the Party's tax plans, which in my opinion should include a wealth tax that could be used to fund the compensation.

## **Hunt's Budget – a Whiskey in the Last Chance Saloon**

A last chance saloon was a bar in the USA where you could get a last drink before entering a state or region where drinking liquor was off limits. The first was in Caldwell, Kansas. Dating from 1869, it was the last place travellers could legally buy liquor before moving into Indian territory, where alcohol was banned.

Jeremy Hunt's budget was a bit like that – it was a tax cut tipple before an election taking place against the background of an entire public sector that had been squeezed dry by years of Tory austerity and cuts. And it neither fooled, nor pleased anyone.

The conservative right welcomed the cut in national insurance but felt it did not go far enough. Business felt that though it claimed to be a budget for growth there no measures to stimulate investment, and in particular nothing to help small businesses survive and grow.



Anti-poverty charities rightly condemned it as sham budget. Paul Kissack, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, described it as “a Budget for big earners and big owners” saying headline tax cuts do not “fill the gap for the millions in our country experiencing deepening poverty.” And while the household support fund been extended Kissack criticised the “short termism” of this measure, saying “extending a temporary support scheme for a paltry six months doesn’t equate to fixing the fundamental problem that made its existence necessary.”

Both the Labour Party and the Trade Unions saw the budget for what it was – a cynical pre-election tax cut in the hope of buying a few votes and a charter for the continued ravage of public services that are already broken and collapsing. The NHS faces its first ever major real term cut. Chaos is continuing in the court and justice services. Local government is racking up and ever-growing list of councils declaring bankruptcy.

This budget was indeed the budget of a bankrupt government. Labour’s job will be to immediately start to rebuild our economy and our services. We will need emergency measures to save those services, create jobs and restore hope across the country. But I do not believe the best was to achieve that is by stressing that we have no money and have to obey made-up fiscal rules. We can do with a bold programme of cash injections into our vital services, restoring the pledge to spend £28 billion on the Green Industrial Revolution to create jobs and tackle the climate emergency, renationalising all utilities and the rail, taxing the profiteering energy giants to the hilt and abolishing poverty pay, sticking to the commitments on workers’ rights and restoring the benefit system so that it abolishes the two child cap and raises benefits across the board to enable people to live without having to rely on foodbanks.

## Gaza – Ceasefire Now

The United Nations Security Council has finally voted to call for a ceasefire in Israel’s war on Gaza. The vote went through with the support of the UK government and the USA declined to use its veto to block the resolution from being passed.

The resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire also calls for the release of all the hostages held by Hamas and the opening up of Gaza to humanitarian aid to alleviate the terrible shortages that are on the brink of leading to a man-made famine in the strip.

If it is implemented then the planned assault on Rafah would, at the very least, be stalled. But it is a big if. The Israeli government has condemned the resolution, made clear it will take no notice of it and will press ahead with its murderous campaign against innocent Palestinian civilians, continue its barbarous blockade of humanitarian aid and prepare its assault on Rafah.

Netanyahu cancelled a scheduled trip by his government’s representatives to the USA in protest at that country’s refusal to veto the resolution and he has recalled Israeli negotiators from Qatar claiming that talks aimed at a truce had broken down. He has also made it clear that Rafah is in the Israeli Defence Force’s sites for a renewed ground offensive. All of this suggests that despite the UN resolution the pain of the Palestinians in Gaza is set to continue.

It is within the power of the international community – and crucially the USA – to ramp up the pressure on Israel with action to force it to observe the terms of the UN resolution and go further to push through a permanent ceasefire. The slaughter of the Palestinian people has to stop now.

## Out and About in Birkenhead

My first port of call this month was a meeting with the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation. This is now a regular fixture in my calendar and, together with other MPs across the region, we get updates. Unfortunately, given the Tories' managed decline of the NHS the updates often centre on the problems the service faces. But the commitment of the staff to providing the best healthcare they can is always a reminder of the value of NHS staff.

Talking of which, as I reported last month, I have been supporting the Clinical Support Workers on strike at Arrowe Park Hospital, together with my friend and colleague Margaret Greenwood (in whose constituency the hospital is based). As a result of the determination of the strikers – which I saw for myself when I visited the picket line – and their trade union, Unison, the hospital management have returned to negotiations and presented what the union have called a “much improved offer.” A vote on this offer is currently underway. Whatever the outcome the workers know that they have my full support.

As do the workers from the PCS union who are on strike against National Museums Liverpool (NML). Workers across the region's seven museums are calling for a wage rise and a £1500 award that they are entitled to under a national agreement but which the NML bosses are refusing to give to the workers.

I attended the annual meeting of the Merseyside Church leaders over at Friends House in Liverpool. The event is not only an opportunity to catch up on the social and charitable initiative undertaken by the churches, but also an excellent forum for some well-informed political discussion.

The crisis of Community Pharmacies has hit the news recently and I visited one chemist in Rock Ferry to see what the effects of this crisis are, first hand. The visit was informative.

As well as a meeting of the Freeport Board – where I made my support for the Maritime Knowledge Hub to be built at the water tower on Birkenhead docks (see previous article) – I managed to visit the Shafts Club during its Open Day on 22 March. I was made up to visit the superb new community hub and playing fields there. It has a long history and now has an exciting future too.

Congratulations to Janice and the entire team for all their hard work in making their vision a reality.

## Birkenhead's Voice in Westminster

### **The Budget:**

The major event in Parliament this month was the Budget. This is likely to be the last budget that the government delivers before the next General Election – and, if the polls are right, perhaps the last Tory budget that the country is likely to see in a very long time. You can read my contribution to the budget debate – in which I talk about the need for the Labour Party, now on the precipice of power, to embrace progressive tax reform to fund our ailing public services – here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-03-11/debates/E1C0237A-4AB2-46A8-B1CD-D276DCAA852A/details>



## **WASPI Women:**

This month, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) published the latest stages of its inquiry into the state pension inequalities. The report, which reaffirmed the PHSO's findings last year that there was clear maladministration in how the DWP communicated changes to the state pension age for women born in the 1950s, recommended that affected women be entitled to "level four" compensation of between £1000 to £2950. Although this falls far short of what many campaigners have been calling for – not least those who I have supported in their calls for full financial restitution – it does at the very least provide some sense of vindication for the thousands of women who have campaigned on this issue for so long. Speaking in Westminster Hall in the weeks prior to publication, I highlighted the necessity of the government acting swiftly to implement the PHSO recommendations, drawing attention to the grim statistic that one WASPI woman dies on average every thirteen minutes. You can read the transcript of that entire debate here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-03-12/debates/295CE461-0397-4037-9B8A-A8C94E9B10F9/details#contribution-1EE52E6D-971B-4D27-8298-A13A5F38FB03>.

## **Sewage Scandal:**

This month, the Financial Times highlighted the water companies' plans to hike water bills to pay for much-needed infrastructure upgrades to stem the flow of sewage into UK waterways. In the Northwest, residents could see United Utilities rising their bills by as much as forty percent by 2030, an amount that the Consumer Council for Water has warned will be unaffordable for most. This month in Parliament, I called on Ministers to ensure that it's the water companies and their shareholders – who were paid hundreds of millions of pounds in payouts last year alone – who are forced to pay for this sewage scandal and not the hardworking British public. You can see that exchange here: <https://x.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1769079940010455063?s=20>

## **Palestine:**

As we enter the sixth month of the Israeli siege of the Gaza strip, I am continuing to do everything within my power to promote meaningful measures to ameliorate the unbearable suffering being experienced by the civilian population of Gaza. First and foremost, this means continuing to call for the permanent ceasefire that's needed to address what has fast become the worst humanitarian crisis anywhere in the world. In addition to regularly attending meetings of backbench MPs examining evidence of war crimes in Gaza, I have this month also supported a letter coordinated by Green peer Natalie Bennett calling on the government to implement a visa scheme allowing displaced Gazans to reunite with their families in the UK and for the establishment of a sponsorship programme for Palestinians along the lines of the "Homes for Ukraine" scheme. I have also joined colleagues in writing to the Foreign and Business Secretaries, calling for the immediate cessation of all arms sales to Israel. You can read that letter here: <https://x.com/zarahsultana/status/1772898790053155083?s=20>

## **That's all folks**

**Mick Whitley MP for Birkenhead**