

We've had a very positive and enthusiastic response to the draft Economic Recovery Plan we published recently. The plan is a great example of a balanced approach to different priorities, with the overall goal of improving prosperity and quality of life here in St Helens.

On this subject, last week's Star featured a letter asking why plans were passed last year for a new Home Bargains distribution centre at the M62 Omega site in Bold, on a site in the greenbelt. It's a fair question, and one I'm happy to try and answer in the short space I have.

The development will create more than 1000 new jobs when fully operational; the developers will provide £1.8m for Bold Forest Park and create a new public nature conservation and woodland area; they'll launch a local employment scheme; and they will give £750,000 towards a bus service from St Helens to Omega to help enable local residents to access jobs there.

Importantly, there's no brownfield site in the borough where development and investment of this size could happen.

So the question is 'Do we need these jobs?'. And the answer, for several reasons, is yes.

First, St Helens has a higher unemployment rate than the regional average (5.6% compared to 3.9%) and youth unemployment is significantly higher (21.3% compared to 9.7%). Second, around a quarter of children in St Helens are growing up in poverty. And third, it's especially important in this part of the borough because parts of Bold, Clock Face and Sutton are within the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the country in terms of employment deprivation.

We need to do what we can to tackle these stark facts, and we need to do so as part of a balanced approach taking account of other priorities including protecting the environment and tackling climate change.

That's why in the draft local plan we want to protect 59% of the borough as greenbelt, plus parks and open spaces. It's also why we've published a climate action plan, and why we've pledged support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which incidentally include access to jobs, growth and tackling poverty.

It isn't easy balancing all these important things, developing a viable plan, and delivering on it. But that's what we're doing, for the good of the whole borough.