

ENTREPRENEURS EYE

As the election for a mayor for York and North Yorkshire nears on 2 May, two regional business owners have been announced to represent Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Following **Ian Leech's** interview with the Conservative candidate Keane Duncan, here he hears from Felicity Cunliffe-Lister and David Skaith

If business success is a determining factor in the York and North Yorkshire mayoral election, Felicity Cunliffe-Lister must have a strong chance of winning in May.

For she and husband Mark, now the 4th Earl of Swinton, have turned their family's 20,000-acre Swinton Estate near Masham into a successful hotel and country club employing 150 people.

Prior to getting married in 2000 and taking on the estate, Cunliffe-Lister, 53, was a commercial property lawyer after graduating from Durham University. She only moved into politics formally in February 2023 when she won the by-election for the Masham and Fountains division of the then North Yorkshire County Council.

She tells *Insider*: "This opportunity came my way a little bit sooner than I would have chosen but at the same time you can't plan for these things. I'm fairly new to the party [Liberal Democrats] but I've always been left of centre or centrist.

"My legal background was a good base to start any sort of commercial venture and those skills are what I took with me into setting up Swinton. I hadn't run a hotel before and since then we've diversified so I know what a challenge looks like and it doesn't scare me. I understand what it is like to employ 150 people, run a business which is public facing and when it comes down to innovation, you've got to be nimble in business."



"I know what a challenge looks like and it doesn't scare me."

Felicity Cunliffe-Lister

Reassuringly for voters, she says she will leave politics out of the role if elected because she'll have a Conservative-led council to deal with in North Yorkshire and a Labour one in York. But she says that she is determined to fight for a better share of funding for the region as York is the least well-funded local authority in England.

Her mayoral campaign is being run on seven key policy deliverables: sustainable economic growth, skills and health, greener and cheaper energy, putting the heart back into the community, cleaner waterways, safer and stronger communities and integrated public transport

and an improved active travel network.

Like many people in North Yorkshire, Cunliffe-Lister is concerned about the disappearance of rural communities and she calls for an "honest conversation" about the impact of second home ownership. "For every house that's not lived in that's another family that doesn't use the school, another family that don't use the doctors' surgery and other key resources and then the community isn't viable and unravels quite quickly.

"Water is a big issue for us. As mayor, I will lead the campaign for the water infrastructure to be upgraded and pollutants

brought under control. Flooding also needs to be managed better, with upstream natural solutions and biodiversity measures that will filter and purify the water too."

North Yorkshire has the assets to be a leader in clean energy with water, wind and huge areas of open spaces, Cunliffe-Lister says. "Everyone talks about the big projects, but what we're not talking enough about is what we can do at home to generate our own power. There's nothing to stop farmers generating enough power of their own, to create their own hydrogen to drive their own tractors. It's not for free, but it's affordable."

On business sectors, she wants York and North Yorkshire to focus on industries with the best return for money such as tourism and agriculture but warns that a keen eye needs to follow the coming industries. She believes York could become a hub for excellence in media (it is a UNESCO city for media arts) and the whole bio-science economy of North Yorkshire is very exciting. A thriving skills and research base is essential though, she says.

And on tourism, the countless says: "As mayor, I would re-establish the Yorkshire brand with the other mayors because we lost Welcome to Yorkshire. What I really don't want us doing is splitting up into South, West and East Yorkshire and all competing because the brand that's known across the world is Yorkshire."