

NOTES FROM THE SECOND UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY FORUM 29 JANUARY 2019

Vice-Chancellor's welcome and panel introductions

- The Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor Robert Van de Noort (AVC) gave an overview of the University including its contribution economically and socially to the town and region. He also talked about some of the challenges that universities face, including sharing some recent headlines on tuition fees, free speech and Brexit.
- The AVC outlined how the University works in partnership in a range of ways, including but not limited to, local authorities, business organisations, arts and theatre groups, and health and wellbeing groups.
- Two students from the Institute of Education spoke about their teacher training degree and their role in the community. This includes supporting teachers in local schools and helping to organise community events, such as the Universal Voices community choir. They shared feedback from schools and parents and spoke about how rewarding they find studying and working in Reading.
- The AVC gave an update since the last Community Forum (May 2018) and highlighted the 4-page handout which had been distributed to the audience (see separate attachment). A short film was played from the Never OK campaign to highlight how anti-social behaviour is unacceptable (see www.reading.ac.uk/neverok)
- The panel were then welcomed to the stage:
 - Professor Robert Van de Noort, Acting Vice-Chancellor, University
 - Cllr Tony Page, Deputy Leader, Reading Borough Council
 - Sgt Matt Foskett, Wokingham Local Police Authority, Thames Valley Police
 - Sgt Chris Davis, Reading Local Police Authority, Thames Valley Police
 - Ali Perry, Activities Officer, Reading University Students' Union
 - Dan Bentley, Welfare Officer, Reading University Students' Union
 - Sarah Gardner, Community Relations Manager, University

Question and Answer session

The University gave attendees the opportunity to submit questions in advance, following feedback from the last forum. However only a few people wished to do this, so the majority of questions were taken on the night. Questions mainly came from local long-term residents living around the University campus, including Reading, Earley and Shinfield.

Shinfield housing development

The University has sold a large amount of land for housing development in Shinfield, which has had a negative impact on the historic villages. Housing agents have been bullying and intimidating towards local long-term residents.

- Professor Robert Van de Noort, Acting Vice-Chancellor, responded to say that the University works in partnership with local authorities to help meet housing demand. However, the University follows local authority guidance (in this case, Wokingham Borough Council) and would not be in a position to determine the size of the housing development.
- Robert Van de Noort stated very strongly that bullying behaviour was not acceptable, and asked for the residents to provide more information about the agents with some examples, so the University could fully investigate and take appropriate action.

- Cllr Tony Page, Deputy Leader of Reading Borough Council, said whilst he could not comment on Wokingham Borough Council, he could confirm that very challenging housing targets have been set by central government. Cllr Page also noted that infrastructure improvements have to be included as part of housing developments.

Growth in student numbers and student accommodation

Where will the University accommodate its growing numbers of students and why does it not build on campus grounds?

- Robert Van de Noort stated that the University had carried out a capability study to review all potential areas to build new accommodation, or expand existing accommodation. St Patrick's Hall was identified as the best option because it was one of the oldest halls and the least popular based on student feedback so in need of updating.
- Robert Van de Noort stated that the University would like to bring more students into University-managed accommodation because we know this is the best way to support them and to manage behaviour, and it would free up housing stock. However he noted that although the campus is large, a lot of the ground is not suitable for building, for example there are a number of protected conservation areas.
- Cllr Tony Page stated that he was not convinced about the University's projections for growth in student numbers, particularly in the context of an uncertain future regarding Brexit. He noted that the forthcoming appeal by the University against the Council's decision to reject the proposed plans to expand St Patrick's Hall would be held in the Town Hall and be open to all.
- Cllr Tony Page noted that private accommodation in the town centre is unaffordable for the majority of students. Robert Van de Noort clarified that the University does not manage the halls in the town centre - these halls are built and managed by private companies, who are not contracted to, and do not work with, the University.

There are a number of unregistered Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Reading, which impacts on both students and community members. What is being done to tackle the backlog at Reading Council?

- Cllr Tony Page acknowledged the backlog in the Council's Environmental Health team and said he would look into the issues outlined by the resident. He also noted that unregistered HMOs are an issue across the UK.
- Dan Bentley, Welfare Officer at Reading University Students' Union (RUSU) noted that poor quality housing and absent/unresponsive landlords is a recognised issue for a number of students and RUSU's Housing Advice Team had seen an increase in requests by students for support.

University Street Support Team

How is the University Street Support Team measured and how will issues be managed when student numbers increase?

- Sarah Gardner, Community Relations Manager, outlined that the University had spent considerable time discussing ways to address complaints about late-night noise on residential streets, and that the scheme was developed based on residents' feedback and the expertise of Reading Council and Thames Valley Police.
- Sarah Gardner stated that the wardens complete reports at the end of every shift, which are then reviewed by the University and flagged actions are followed up. The University also has regular reviews with the managers of the street wardens where they address any concerns and consider feedback/suggestions. All feedback is recorded by the University and this will be used to evaluate the scheme when the pilot ends in June.

- Sgt Foskett and Sgt Davis from local police teams both commented on the scheme being a positive investment by the University especially given the challenges around current police resources.
- The Acting Vice-Chancellor asked for views on the University funding PCSOs and Sgt Foskett said they do have some PCSOs funded by other organisations in Wokingham. However it was noted that if there was an emergency issue, all PCSOs would have to attend, which could reduce their effectiveness.

Student poor behaviour

A large number of long-term residents in Redlands and Park wards shared information about poor behaviour, including student neighbours being inconsiderate and noise in residential areas as students socialised late at night. Many residents felt issues had got worse over time, and that the University and local landlords needed to do more.

- Dan Bentley, Welfare Officer at RUSU noted that community engagement was one of the Students' Union's priorities. He highlighted the Never OK joint campaign with the University (www.reading.ac.uk/neverok) and agreed landlords need to take more responsibility to support students and manage inconsiderate behaviour by tenants.
- Ali Perry, Activities Officer at RUSU outlined the ways RUSU is working with students to change behaviours and attitudes, including the Good Lad Initiative. (www.goodladinitiative.com/for-university-students).
- Residents were also referred to the Community Engagement update for more information about work being carried out to improve relationships between students and local long-term residents (see separate attachment).

Parking in residential areas

The recent parking schemes put in place by Reading Council have displaced parking to the Earley side of campus, with negative effects to local residents.

- It was noted that the Community Relations Manager and the Acting Vice Chancellor would be meeting with Earley Town Councillors to discuss this issue and look at potential solutions (meetings are in the diary for February).