

UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY FORUM 26 SEPTEMBER 2019: STRATEGY SUPPER MEETING REPORT

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Executive summary

Event outline

The University Community Forum 'Strategy Supper' was held on the evening of 26 September 2019 and hosted by the Vice-Chancellor Professor Robert Van de Noort.

The event opened with a hot meal and informal discussions. The formal programme began at 1830 including:

- An update on the developing University Strategy, given by the Vice-Chancellor (approx. 20mins).
- A facilitated group discussion, on how we can improve community engagement, led by Sarah Gardner, Community Relations Manager, and academic colleagues (approx. 40mins).
- A Q&A session, for guests to ask the Vice-Chancellor questions, led by Professor Claire Furneaux, Teaching and Learning Dean (approx. 50mins).

Minutes were taken by two Events Officers and facilitators, which can be seen on page 4.

Publicity and attendance

The event was publicised via the University events diary (distributed to over 6,000 individuals and community organisations); on the University website; and social media channels. It was also publicised to community groups, including East Reading Safer Neighbourhood Forum; Earley Neighbourhood Action Group and local ward councillors in Reading, Wokingham and Earley. Local council and police teams also publicised the meeting.

The event was open to anyone with an interest in the University's impact on the local community, and the University also invited the leaders of local authorities, local ward councillors and local police teams in Reading, Wokingham and Earley.

The event was well-attended, with around 100 people. This included University and RUSU staff; the CEO of Reading Buses, approximately 8 ward Councillors from Wokingham, Early and Reading and representatives from a number of community/residents groups across from Reading, Earley and Woodley.

Feedback on the event

We received 45 feedback forms at the end of the event, and 14 separate emails with detailed feedback.

The collated feedback forms showed a number of positives:

- The majority of people found the length of the event to be just right (38 out of 45).
- The majority of people felt they had enough time to participate actively (38 out of 45).
- Almost everyone found the venue easy to find (44 out of 45).

It would appear from the collated feedback forms that there was mixed feedback on the format and content and potentially further room for improvement:

- 18 people found the event informative and 27 people found it average.
- 19 people felt it was the right balance between updates, discussions and 'Q&A'; 11 people wanted more Q&A; 14 people wanted more discussion and 3 people wanted more updates.
- 13 people found the group discussions very useful, 28 found them average and 3 people found them not useful.

There was a space for additional comments on the feedback forms and the most commonly repeated comments were:

- A number of people found it hard to hear during the group discussions which impacted on their ability to engage.
- A number of people talked about the need for landlords/letting agencies to play more of a role in improving community relations.
- A number of people remarked on the hospitality, including the excellent food and the warm welcome.

Actions following the Community Forum meeting

The University will focus on improving the number of community groups it meets and works with, and improving the way we communicate with local community members. We will do this in the following ways:

- The University has committed to holding a University Community Forum twice a year, hosted by the Vice-Chancellor.
 - The next meeting to be held on Thursday 26 March 2020.
 - Meeting reports will be published within the same term on the website (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/about/working-with-the-community>).
- The University will hold a new series of partnership meetings with key officers at Reading and Wokingham Borough Councils, to discuss community issues (including those raised at University Community Forum Meetings) and find partnership solutions.
 - The first Reading and Wokingham Student Strategy Partnership meeting will be held in the Autumn Term 2019, and will continue on a termly basis.
 - A summary will be published on our website within the same term (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/about/working-with-the-community>).
- The University will create a Community Leaders forum which will be held twice a year, with the first meeting held in Spring Term 2020.
 - We will invite ward councillors, faith group leaders, chairs of residents' meetings, trustees from local non for profits and local small businesses.
 - The forum will help determine the best ways to work with local community members.
 - Summaries of meetings will be published on our website within the same term (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/about/working-with-the-community>).
- The University would like to hold smaller local community meetings – either bringing key groups together to co-create solutions to issues, or holding community based events such 'university coffee mornings' or 'community open days'.
 - We will discuss these ideas with community leaders and internal colleagues before determining the best way to do this.
 - We will take the proposed solutions in the group discussions to these meetings.
 - We will update on this at the next University Community Forum.

Minutes of the meeting

These minutes have been compiled from shorthand minutes taken by two Events Officers and notes made by table facilitators - with thanks for their diligence.

An update from the Vice Chancellor

- The University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Robert Van de Noort, welcomed everyone to the forum and explained the focus of the meeting would be on the developing University Strategy, with a chance for people to share their views.
- The new University strategy focuses on four key principles:
 1. Community - a diverse, thriving and supportive community of colleagues and students.
 2. Excellence - making sure we are the best we can be in all areas of teaching and research.
 3. Sustainability – environmental and financial.
 4. Engaged University – ensuring everything we do has a benefit to those around us, including our local communities.
- The University started consulting on the new strategy in the early summer with staff, students and external community members.
- The fourth principle has resonated with those who work at the University, our key partners and our neighbours. We know we need to improve in this area and would like attendees' advice on how to do this - this will be the focus of the group discussions.
- Finally, Robert gave examples of some local partnerships we are currently working on:
 - Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's has a site on campus to help young people aged up to 18 who have mental health difficulties.
 - We've been working for five years to bring the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) onto campus.
 - Working with Reading Borough Council to support Reading Abbey's 900th anniversary.
 - Determining how we can support the Theatre Arts Reading Trust if it is successful in securing Reading Gaol as an arts and community venue.
 - We are changing the way we manage the Thames Valley Science Park (TVSP) to ensure businesses use the space benefit the local area.
 - Working with local authorities on their climate change emergency actions.
 - We've secured free space at London Road for New Directions (Reading Council's adult education service), a start in bringing back 'lifelong learning'.

Group discussions

- The Vice-Chancellor handed over to Sarah Gardner, Community Relations Manager, for the group discussion session.
- Sarah explained that the University would like to spend the next 30-40 minutes discussing how we can put the 'Engaged University' principle into practice. She noted that everyone at the meeting – University staff, students and members of the community – want a University we are proud of which is of benefit to the local community, town and region.
- The group discussions were facilitated by an academic colleague on each table, and focused on the following questions:
 - How might the University and the wider community work better together?
 - How might we encourage students to feel part of the local community?
 - How might we (University and local residents) create a more sustainable and beneficial local environment?
- Some of the key issues and solutions discussed in the groups and presented to the forum are listed below (*please see the appendix on page 9 which captures the discussion notes in full*).

- o Effective communications from the University are an issue – you are either 'in' or 'out' of the loop. Three proposed solutions are to (i) make better use of community representatives; (ii) hold 'Meet the University' coffee mornings with staff and students and community volunteers (iii) hold community 'Open Days'.
- o Students do not necessarily have a sense of pride in their community readily instilled. Three proposed solutions were to (i) use sports to create relationships between local residents and students; (ii) use University law students as mediators to help resolve household issues; (iii) use street representatives / neighborhood wardens.
- o Expansion of the university puts pressure on the community, at the same time that gentrification is pushing out long-term residents. Proposed solutions included: (i) share University facilities with the community or build in community facilities into new developments, e.g. shared green space or shops; (ii) have a 'University Planning Portal' where people can see developments happening and sign up for alerts (iii) University students and staff educating young people in the community about sustainability.

Q&A session

Shorthand code:

VC – Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice-Chancellor

CF - Professor Clare Furneaux, Teaching and Learning Dean

SG – Sarah Gardner, Community Relations Manager

1. **Richard Bennett, Reading Civic Society asked if there was a Reading Borough Councillor in room.** Several RBC Councilors raised their hands including Cllr Liam Challenger, Labour Councillor for Katesgrove and Cllr Josh Williams, Green Councillor for Park. Cllr Ruth McEwan, Labour Councillor for Church also attended.
2. **A local resident (name withheld) asked who the Community Relations Officer was as she had never heard of her or seen her.** Sarah Gardner (SG) introduced herself and outlined her role. She confirmed she attended regular community meetings (and received a round of applause from other local residents). She acknowledged it wasn't possible to meet everyone, but she would be very happy to introduce herself to the local resident at the end of the meeting.
3. **Stuart White, Redlands School Governor and local resident noted how welcome international students are in the community and asked how we can better support those who have English as a second language.** The Vice-Chancellor (VC) noted that the University is undertaking research into this - sometimes there may be a concern around a loss of face for not speaking English very well. Because of this, we are working in partnership with universities in China to teach English programs or support a year abroad to aid language learning. Professor Clare Furneaux (CF), noted that faith groups and host family schemes can also be very beneficial to helping students to integrate, and asked the room if they had ideas around 'adopting' a student.
4. **Kerry Renshaw, local resident asked if there needs to be a cap on the expansion of the University and if so how should it be applied?** The VC noted a cap would be very tough for two reasons: (i) the number of 18-year-olds will increase (by 25% in the next 10 years and many may want to attend established research intensive universities like ours, and (ii) tuition fees have not increased for 7 years and inflation is 3% a year - if we don't increase student numbers we have to make some difficult financial decisions. However, the VC noted that the University does not want to repeat the same growth we have seen in the last 5 years, because it has been too fast. We need to ensure any growth is manageable, and that we have the right facilities, including accommodation and teaching space, and that we work with community groups. We have

considered distance/online learning, shorter degrees, apprenticeships but one thing we do know is that students want to be inspired by quality and community learning.

5. **Roger Williams, local resident asked how many students are enrolled each year (in numbers not percentages).** The VC said we have around 20,000 students across the world. 4000 of these students are not in the UK. A 3% increase would equate to 600 additional students a year however that increase might be outside of the UK. The VC said he had recently visited the University of Reading and the Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology (NUIST) where we have 1200 students. We have to rethink our strategy as the previous rate of growth was too fast and not manageable.
6. **Nada Al-Sanjari, Councillor, Woodley Town Council said that we have to consider gentrification and ensure local residents are not pushed out.** The VC said that we want to students to live in University-managed accommodation, rather than private rentals/ Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs). However the challenge is that local residents who live by the campus do not want us to expand current halls of accommodation. Before we grow student numbers we want to be sure that we can house them to give them a good student experience and not impact negatively on the local community. Reading Gaol is a good example – it could go to the highest bidder to be developed into flats but Reading Borough Council and the University we would like it to remain a publicly accessible cultural space for Reading. However it will be a huge challenge as it is a complicated, listed building on top of sacred monument.
7. **Howard Dobbs, local resident, noted that at the previous forum meeting in January the VC told the community that the University was planning to sell some land and local residents said at meeting that there was a possibility that land would be better used for constructing halls. What is current situation with the land sales and what that land will be used for?** The VC asked which land but this was not clarified. The VC noted that there were a number of residents from Shinfield at the meeting in January and raised the issue of land sales then. The VC confirmed we had sold land from our three farms, in close collaboration with local councils who need to meet housing targets. We are interested in ideas around how we use land going forward, for example the University of Oxford builds housing for staff and post-grads students who cannot afford to live close to the University.
8. **Andrew Mickleburgh, Councillor, Wokingham Borough Council and Earley Town Council noted that at the previous forum meeting in January there was a distinct lack of ward councillors, so is pleased to see many more this time. He noted that all his communications with the university have been extremely positive and handled with great professionalism but the university could use local councilors more effectively to access wider community and to help the two borough councils work across boundaries.** The VC noted that he meets regularly with the Leaders and CEOs of both borough councils, and has also met a number of the ward councillors to identify ways of working together. SG said that as part of her role, she communicates with ward councillors, including both listening to collated concerns from residents and updating them on University activity. SG wants to work more effectively with councils and has set up a Reading and Wokingham Student Strategy Partnership to bring together the two borough authorities and strategically plan how we can work together across boundaries to help students be positive members of the community. She would welcome ward Councillors' help to ensure we are working the best we can with the local community.
9. **Dave Dymond, Chair of East Reading Safer Neighbourhood Forum said it was disappointing that Thames Valley Police had not sent a representative, especially as they deal with complaints about student behaviour.** SG said the Thames Valley Police (Reading and Wokingham) were invited and had confirmed attendance but given resource constraints it is highly likely they have

been called to an emergency issue. The VC noted that other partners had attended, including the CEO of Reading Buses, Robert Williams, which was welcomed as bus stops are often a complaints hotspot.

10. **Ross Bannister thanked the University for organising the event and giving people an opportunity to ask questions. Until recently ran mental health support group for local community but one big problem we had was finding a venue. The University has great facilities – how can they help our group pursue our aims?** The VC was in support of this and advised that Ross writes to his office. Daisy O'Connor, Reading University Students' Union (RUSU) Activities Officer, said RUSU is independent, with 40 volunteering groups that work within the community. She offered a discussion with Ross, at the end of the event, to see how RUSU could help.
11. **David Betts, alumnus and retired member of staff, said that there is no formal machinery for alumni or retired staff to have a voice in the University.** The VC said that alumni support and involvement is very important and we have a number of ways for alumni to contribute, but that he agrees we could do more and will take this away as an action.
12. **Mary Bather, Whitegates Residents' Association (ACER) and Woodley and N. Earley Community Forum was pleased the university was asking the community what it wanted rather than deciding for it, however she was disappointed that the University had not recently shared its car park facilities with a local school. She asked if the University will use its academic expertise in Architecture, Real Estate and the Environment to ensure that developments are attractive, user friendly and environmentally friendly.**
The VC said that the University does bring in knowledgeable academics but acknowledged we could do more to ensure our ethos of environmental sustainability and community is carried throughout development projects. One example of the way we are doing things differently is the Thames Valley Science Park (TVSP) which now scores business tenants based on what it can do for local community and environmental impact. In terms of sharing facilities, we need to better understand what the community needs and how we can service that. We then need to balance that against teaching and learning requirements and consider how we cover costs of keeping facilities open (portering, cleaning, security etc). We are already trialing sharing our facilities at London Road, where we have given free teaching space to New Directions, Reading Council's adult education service - something that clearly fits with our educational remit.
13. **Jessica Di Luccio, local resident asked when the University is going to start demonstrating some Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure its response to residents?** The VC stated that the University Strategy will include clear KPIs and as an academic, he agrees with the need for evidence and the right ways to measure targets.
14. **David Hare, Councillor, Earley Town Council asked how the University is being made more environmentally friendly and how it can help towns become more sustainable?** The VC pointed to the People & Planet's University League (<https://peopleandplanet.org/university-league>) which is an independent league table of UK universities ranked by environmental and ethical performance. We are currently ranked in the 'first class universities' category but we are 28 out of 29 universities in that category - so not where we want to be yet. We are carrying out high quality research in climate change and being an 'engaged university' means using that research to help those locally. Some of the things Reading and Wokingham Councils have asked us to do is help them tackle congestion on roads and help teach younger generations about the climate emergency (not that the younger generations seem to need our help!). One of my ambitions is that we are the first University to commit to offsetting its own carbon footprint created from flying, by charging academics a levy, which we then use to create woodlands on our lands.

15. Mike Wolff, representing New Road residents said thanks to the University for organising and that the New Road residents are thankful to be able to meet in this way. His question was from one of the residents, who noted that a fortnight ago a University groundsman was spraying a particular weed-killer on paving slabs, which has high carcinogenic properties. He wanted to know if the University considers it safe to use strong chemicals and pesticides in a place where families and children use and is there a policy to phase this out? The VC said he could not answer this as he is not close enough to the details, but he will ensure we investigate and ensure our practices align with our environmental objectives. There is clearly still a lot of work to do to reach out ambitious targets.

16. An unnamed University employee who works in administration in Maths and Stats asked why don't we employ more local young people in the lower ranks? This would offer them development skills and would have less impact on the environment. Currently we employ graduates who often travel by car and often leave after one year. The VC acknowledged this has been raised by staff before and he recognises the argument. The University can't legally discriminate by offering jobs based on where somebody lives, but we could explore other options to invest in own colleagues and those that live locally, such as through the apprenticeship levy.

Appendix: Group Discussion Notes

Overview

The group discussions were overseen by the Community Relations Manager and facilitated by an academic colleague on each table. The groups focused on three following questions and were asked to identify issues and solutions:

- How might the University and the wider community work better together?
- How might we encourage students to feel part of the local community?
- How might we (University and local residents) create a more sustainable and beneficial local environment?

The comments from the discussions were captured and collated below.

Question 1: How might the University and the wider community work better together?

Issues:

- Communications are limited – in or out of loop.
- Opacity re planning e.g. St Pats and 3G sports pitch.
- Elitism.
- Housing issues.
- Too many community groups – not everyone knows how to contribute to consultation.

Solutions:

- Improve communications via opt-in emails and use community reps.
- Proactive engagement with Councillors – regular newsletter.
- Go to the local groups' established forums e.g. discussion boards and post there.
- Personal approach – need more University representatives visiting community groups to hear from them directly.
- 'Meet the University' coffee mornings with staff and students and community volunteers.
- Bring a resource – publicise an event, leaflets, posters.
- More work with local primary schools.
- A liaison place on each residential street at a defined time – to listen to views, engage.
- Hold events off-campus in the community – bring the University to the town.
- Park run.
- Apply expertise and learning so community benefits e.g. Psychology students working on depression.
- Involve local alumni.
- Use local councillors and representatives from other local groups to find out how best to interact with the local community.

Question 2: How might we encourage students to feel part of the local community?

Issues:

- If you are a permanent residence you have a sense of pride about what Reading is and what it stands for. As a student you might not come with that sense of pride instilled, how do we engage early on to deliver sense of pride so that good behaviour in community occurs?
- How do students become good citizens? How do we (long term residents) become good neighbours?
- How do we link up students and the community?

- Cheap housing and inappropriate behaviour – noisy, drunken. These leads to students being an easy target for accusations.
- Lack of respect when students are in big groups.
- The role of halls as a community has been lost.
- Change in support provided by students in halls.
- Societal change and young people's expectations.
- Student bubble and students away from their own communities where they may feel more accountable.
- Transient nature of student population.
- Growth in numbers / sustainability.
- Perception - students, particularly when off-campus, often receive a bad press, with complaints from local residents regarding noise, littering and other antisocial behaviour. In actual fact the local community often suffer as much, if not more, from the activities of non-student residents.

Solutions:

- Engage landlords to encourage good behaviour - could we instill community pride in them so that they then instill the good behaviour messages to their tenants?
- Landlords should put themselves to the students, introduce themselves and they will appreciate what we do for them (this was directly from landlords).
- Mediation on streets so there is representation from students, land lords and residents.
- Link up students and the community through sports e.g. UoR teams play local teams.
- Joint community and student activities.
- Open Evenings per faculty - address peoples interests more, rather than have one big open day.
- Local residents open days.
- No alcohol events.
- Encourage students to behave responsibly, to be responsible to themselves, the university and the community.
- Diverse students across cohort.
- Students volunteer more, in those days when they could go to church they will come back and want to serve the community due to what they have learnt.
- Events for students in the community e.g. supper nights – free meals. Chance to meet neighbours.
- Control the drinking - charge more for alcohol on campus or organise lower alcohol events.
- Area wardens in residential neighbourhoods which students can also get involved with.
- Community and residents working with letting agencies and Councils on HMOs – matching lifestyles and noise levels.
- Communicating how disciplinary procedure works and how to make complaints.
- Stop touts selling club tickets to students in halls.
- Students need to be acquainted with information regarding refuse collection, parking etc and reminded of the need to respect other residents early in their residency, so that they become integrated into their local community quickly.
- Many residential areas have local residents' associations and community forums who would welcome a student, or a couple of students, who live in their local area, to their meetings. This would help the students to find out more about the local customs and the concerns of local residents and also help the local residents to think of the students as 'human'.
- Some residents' groups have street representatives. It may be that if the group received the addresses of the houses of new students they could organise a visit from the street rep who could answer any questions and act as a go-between with the other residents.
- Neighbourhood wardens, such as the one that MERA (The Maiden Erlegh Residents' Association) organizes.

Question 3: How might we (University and local residents) create a more sustainable and beneficial local environment?

Issues:

- Informed about developments / wider community engagement / not enough consultation with local residents.
- Landlords who do not look after properties and who live abroad.
- Traffic and parking, including contractors.
- Motivating students to engage.
- Gentrification - locals are moving into flats or spaces they can't afford to access. Those who live close don't want extra halls of residents and often that means private rentals which does push out local non-student residents.
- Not enough sharing of facilities.
- Expansion of the university, the location of HMOs in residential areas and the sale of university land for residential development.
- The Reading area is relatively prosperous and this leads to pressure on housing, parking, green spaces and the transport system.

Solutions:

- University should share information about wider estate and how it fits together strategically, give info on how it is managed, be transparent. Through consultation explain why decisions are made.
- Have a 'University Planning Portal'.
- Being informative about developments we might be taking, how that affects wider community engagement – ripple effect.
- Platform where community groups could sign up to be informed of more by the University – give them updates, (people sign themselves up for it).
- Student outreach program, going and doing work in the community whether that be working with the elderly/school children.
- The sharing of facilities (such as the empty carpark on Woodlands Ave) should be considered as part of an overall strategy rather than relegated to the Grounds / Property Dept.
- When converting properties into house shares / HMOs, the University should consider the impact of increased number of parked cars on the local streets.