



APPG on Students: roundtable on integrating students in well-established communities

Monday 9 November 2015

Attendees:

Ben Howlett MP, Bath (Chairing)
Paul Blomfield MP, Sheffield Central
Oliver Colvile MP, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport
Flick Drummond MP, Portsmouth South
Rachael Maskell MP, York Central
Caroline Nokes MP, Romsey and Southampton North
Jeff Smith MP, Manchester Withington
Daniel Zeichner MP, Cambridge
Cllr Anita Lower, Anti-Social Behaviour spokesperson, Local Government Association
Mark Stanley, Vice President – Societies and Community, Bangor Students' Union
Dot Kirk, Senior Community Organiser, Brighton Students' Union
Hattie Clark, University of Brighton
Harriet Pugh, Community Officer, University of Manchester Students' Union
Alex Ferguson, Deputy President, Liverpool Guild of Students
Pam Tatlow, Chief Executive, million+
Catherine Sezen, Senior Policy Manager, Association of Colleges

Alexander Lee, Lewis Cooper and Fleur Priest-Stephens from the National Union of Students attended to provide secretariat support.

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Chair's opening

Ben Howlett, Vice-Chair of the APPG and chairing this event, welcomed guests to an exciting roundtable discussion. As there are 22,000 students in Bath and North East Somerset, he said he was well aware of community relations issues. He hoped the roundtable would address the key challenges that students and local communities face, including how local communities could engage with students in their area. He argued that students can often get bad press locally and it's important to support them to get better at communicating all of the good work they do. As an example, he identified recent fundraising efforts from Bath Students' Union in his constituency.

Mark Stanley, Bangor Students' Union



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Mark began his speech by identifying that Bangor is not a big city, but that students comprise about half the population. They have a big, noticeable impact and make up a significant part of the local community.

Bangor University was founded by the local slate mining community, so is built on a heritage of community engagement, and Bangor Students' Union continues to engage with non-student residents in that spirit. There are many examples of the students' union leading initiatives in the local area and welcoming non-students into their activities, for example recently on mental health, on the environment, and through societies – from athletics to debating groups – who invite local people to participate.

He identified how the student population of Bangor share many of the same concerns that non-student residents do in the community. These include concerns over: houses in multiple occupancy (HMOs); the quality of education; local transport and how easy it is to get to Bangor; and, health and the quality of health services in the local area.

He highlighted that, in keeping with these shared concerns, students' unions can do a lot to lead local projects and initiatives that aim to better the situation for everyone in the community. For example, Bangor Students' Union leads the 'Love Bangor' initiative, which works with local stakeholders – from the university to the council. He argued that this project can really unite the local community and show what students can do for non-student residents. One project that 'Love Bangor' runs is called 'Out and About', which provides a bus for the elderly across north Wales.

However, he identified how there is a risk that 'Love Bangor' can be seen by the community as a standalone solution to problems, and as a service. It is important to make it a more collaborative project between students and non-students. This, he argued, can address a perception amongst non-student residents that students get more from the university being in the local area than they do. It's important to bring non-student residents in.

The roundtable then explored issues related to these discussions, and the shared concerns of student communities with non-student residents:

Oliver Colville suggested that, as well as it being important to bring local communities in to students' unions, it's important that students' unions feed into the local community. He suggested that there should be clearer ways for students to express what they want to local authorities. Mark Stanley was in agreement.

Caroline Nokes explored the ways in which students and non-student residents share concerns, in particular around HMOs.

- Mark Stanley suggested that the principal concerns for students were the quality and affordability of accommodation, which also worry non-students. Nobody wants to live in an expensive, sub-standard house.
- He said that non-student residents can offer express concerns about the number of lettings boards outside of properties, (which Caroline Nokes said constituents had reported to her), as well as about the appearance/standard of the front of accommodation. Mark Stanley stated that students worry about these issues too.



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- Cllr Lower stated that, on the point of lettings boards, there are local government powers to regulate these, and outlined how Newcastle Council is using these powers very effectively to remove boards.

Participants discussed problems relating to the construction of purpose-built student accommodation, that isn't actually being called for by students.

- Cllr Lower expressed concerns about student accommodation that gets built but goes unused, often if it is too expensive for what students want to pay. This had been her experience as a councillor in Newcastle. She identified how this can create tensions in local communities that feel it is the fault of students that accommodation is being abandoned in their areas.
- Alex Ferguson identified similar problems in Liverpool, where purpose-built accommodation wasn't actually finished in time for the start of the academic year. This meant students inevitably found other places to live and whole accommodation blocks went unused.
- Caroline Nokes highlighted that this was not just a problem in the north, but had been her experience in Southampton too.

Dot Kirk, Brighton Students' Union, with Hattie Clark

Dot Kirk is a member of staff at Brighton Students' Union and leads projects that unite students and non-students throughout the local community. She spoke about how Brighton has introduced Community Organising to make sure student and non-student residents communicate and collaborate.

Hattie Clark is a student at Brighton and had volunteered in the Community Organising project, before now being employed part-time by the students' union while she completes her course. When she volunteered, she went out into the local community to knock on doors and collect people's concerns. She had worried when she went to university that, by living in a city, she would lose the sense of community she had felt in her more rural childhood home. This was not the case, she argued.

Dot Kirk outlined how she had expanded community organising at Brighton. Both students and non-students volunteer in the same teams to go out door knocking and supporting local campaigns, as well as encouraging students to volunteer locally. This can help get students into local networks, she argued, which can have a big impact of student retention rates for the area and improving students' employability and options in the local area.

Dot identified a number of different initiatives used by Brighton Students' Union. This included: a 'Good Neighbours' guide, which explains to students how to behave in the local community in a practical, not patronising, way; 'Hello' postcards, which students can use to introduce themselves at the start of the year; and, welcome events, which are held in community spaces, that can bring students and non-students together.

She argued that it's important to help students make the first contact with neighbours because this can then make subsequent contacts easier (for example, if they need to notify neighbours about a party) and it can help make both students and non-students more understanding of each other. Part of this is 'creating the space for conversations',



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and she explained how Brighton Students' Union is helping students and non-students take advantage of opportunities to champion local community spaces (including a community pub).

Brighton Students' Union is now expanding its model of community organising by providing training to other students' unions and offering support to others to facilitate productive relationships in local communities.

The roundtable then explored issues relating to facilitating conversations between student residents and non-student residents in the community:

Harriet Pugh identified how there had been tension between Manchester Students' Union and local stakeholders when she had begun her sabbatical role. However, all it took was the first conversation – as Dot had been saying – to help find common problems and look for joint solutions. She is now working with community organisations on a joint campaign about housing licensing. She argued that it is important to build decision making processes that include young people.

Ben Howlett argued that the discussion was showing just how important it is for students' unions to tell the local community about its successes. For example, it was important to tell the local paper about work the students' union was doing, or had done, so that the message would spread amongst non-students. He suggested that this is something that MPs could advise students on, as they can be very effective at building relationships with local media.

Pam Tatlow mentioned examples of courses at universities that included accreditation for community volunteering. Pam Tatlow discussed how this can be a very good way of encouraging students to get out into the local community.

- Dot Kirk confirmed that Brighton University does this, and Hattie Clark had completed a module on community volunteering as part of her course.
- Harriet Pugh suggested that research done in universities that can help the local community – for example, analysis of local transport routes – should also be able to form accredited parts of courses.
- Alex Ferguson discussed similar examples at Liverpool.

Cllr Lower discussed how some universities offer mentoring programmes so that students can mentor disadvantaged children from the local area. She knew of anecdotal examples of where students had gone on to support children to apply to university, when previously the children would never have considered it.

Catherine Sezen identified how conversations with local communities can also be supported through further education institutions. She discussed how work experience and youth social action achieves not only community engagement, by getting FE students out into local area, but also helps them develop employability skills.

Catherine also identified how, from her experience in FE colleges, student parking issues could be a big problem for non-student residents. Having a single point of contact



to deal with these issues can be very effective, she argued, and especially if the response was positive and prompt.

Returning to education, Ben Howlett questioned whether there was a sense that much of the focus on addressing student accommodation needs was on first year accommodation – to the neglect of second and third year accommodation. This, he suggested, could then cause other issues to escalate because those are the years when students are then pushed into HMOs, when they are more likely to use their own cars and create parking problems, and when they're more prominent in non-student residential areas.

Cllr Anita Lower, Local Government Association

Cllr Lower is the spokesperson for anti-social behaviour at the Local Government Association (LGA), and also a councillor in Newcastle. She discussed how she was there to approach the issue from the other side, and how for councils there are two main challenges in integrating students: anti-social behaviour, and providing advice/information to students.

On anti-social behaviour, she emphasised that it was important to remember that students themselves suffer from other students' behaviour. She said that, in Leeds, one-third of complaints about students came from other students. Problems of noise, litter and behaviour can prove costly for councils to deal with, she said.

She expressed concern over the Anti-Social Behaviour Act, and argued that this should not become a 'stick to beat students with'. It was never intended as that, and the most effective way of tackling anti-social behaviour was to start from the bottom and through relationships between students and non-students, rather than jumping into more formal processes.

However, she identified that local authorities don't only have a responsibility for tackling the impact of anti-social behaviour on local communities; they have responsibilities to advise and support students too.

- For example, she discussed initiatives to identify the risks of burglary in student housing. Students spend a lot of time out of their accommodation (at lectures, in the library, etc) and HMOs often don't have alarms. Local authorities can run awareness campaigns that involve putting notices/resources through open windows to identify risks to students.
- Another example of advising students relates to their safety. She highlighted how councils can take different actions to discourage binge drinking and to identify potential local hazards (such as the dark tow path by the river in Durham), which can keep students safe.

The three main challenges she saw for local authorities in integrating students were: noise; drinking; and ensuring students recognise their responsibilities to their local community. She acknowledged that the transition to university can be an overwhelming time for many students – when they often acquire greater independence over their lifestyle and also their finances – and it was important for their own safety as much as



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community cohesion that there are effective measures to support them through that period.

The roundtable then discussed issues related to the challenges that local communities, local authorities and students' unions must tackle:

Harriet Pugh stressed that it is important to remember that it isn't only students who are behind these issues. The problems may not be caused by students but other young people in general, and it can be easy to confuse the two, she argued. She highlighted that the more underlying problems to many anti-social behaviour problems are therefore low alcohol prices, disengagement among young people, and other structural problems.

- Cllr Lower agreed that students and young people can often be conflated. However, she argued that there is often that *perception* amongst non-student residents that it *is* all students and that, for example, it can be easy to characterise all young people living in HMOs as students – when in fact they can be from the local area themselves, or young professionals.

Ben Howlett questioned whether it is, therefore, just a communication problem and whether students should be better supported to talk about the work they are doing locally.

- Dot Kirk welcomed support to promote work better.
- Cllr Lower agreed, but worried that it's too easy to sell a bad story, which makes it harder to spread the message about any positive work.

Oliver Colville stated how he has recently begun a surgery in his students' union, so that student constituents can raise issues with him more easily. He identified how this can be an important step to improving conversations between students and non-students, and he said that he will make sure to take a local councillor from his constituency along to his students' surgery to help build links and improve understanding.

Rachael Maskell identified a problem with drinking in York. She discussed how the students' union is leading 'dry streets' initiatives to help tackle the problem, and she highlighted how projects like this can help build links between students and local councils.

Guests discussed noise problems, and Cllr Lower emphasised how its important that responses are proportionate. There are circumstances in which formal or civil sanctions might not be appropriate, and might be dealt with more effectively in other ways. Responding proportionately can also help prevent tensions between students and non-student residents.

Paul Blomfield highlighted how important it is to bring all of this information, and suggestions about responding to common issues, together.

NUS, as secretariat to the APPG, will compile examples of best practice and evidence on related issues to produce an advisory resource for Members about common issues around integrating students.