

THE BROOKES PUBLIC MEETING

on 23 SEPTEMBER 2009 in HEADINGTON

Chairman: Nick Welch

The aim of the meeting was to provide a forum of discussion of the major concerns local residents have about the impact of studentification in East Oxford on their lives and of how such problems could be resolved.

Guest Speaker: Professor Danny Dorling

Professor Danny Dorling, of the Department of Urban Geography, the University of Sheffield, gave a talk and answered a number of questions. Here is a digest of his various contributions.

He started off by saying that he was not bothered about the Brookes's proposed new building but was concerned about how Oxford has changed. His opening question was: Why do some areas have problems with students and others have fewer? Why do some areas have more problems with students than others?

In 1986 he was in Newcastle University for ten years and there was never a problem; this was not like Durham where students could be beaten up. Then he moved to Bristol in 1996 where there were huge problems: the university staff couldn't afford to get away from living near the students that they taught.

Six years ago he moved to Sheffield which didn't have a problem then in spite of tens of thousands of students. Now, however, there are problems and journalists are ferreting around on campus to see what is wrong.

Basically problems occur in areas where there is a high turnover of people.

It is a question of whether you have a lot of space and less demand, or the reverse. The former can be true in much of the north but is certainly not true in Oxford where the population is set to grow. The main problem is that Oxford is just a little too close to London; it is becoming a suburb of London. Its proximity is still attractive to many but the capital is also itself filling up rapidly and is undergoing a 'hollowing out' as a number move to more congenial areas still within commuting distance of the capital – areas such as Oxford, where current government policies are likely to lead to a substantial increase of the student population.

On the other hand, in Oxford, people on an average income with average jobs are moving out and not being replaced. It is a hard place to have families (it is like London and Bristol in this respect). Students (and others) are more than filling the gaps.

Oxford is an educational centre where not too many local children get to university, especially if they go to a state school. Oxford is an educational centre where not too many local children get to university, especially if they go to a state school. (Sheffield beats it in this respect.) The city is the third worst in the country with respect to local children getting into university (though the proportion of children whose parents are recent immigrants or asylum seekers is a factor). There has also occurred a big increase in private schooling.

Prof. Dorling then turned to ‘Baron’ Peter Mandelson’s big review of university funding. Behind this is the idea of variable fees – letting the universities set their own fees – and with this will come, he says, variable quotas. There is much political support for this although the NUS is against (and also the Green Party is against) as Cllr Craig Simmons later pointed out.). It would relieve the government of much of the onus of providing subsidies. The ‘Oxford brand’ would provide scope for the city’s universities to raise their fees in the free market and therefore the socio-economic range of the families able to afford them would narrow. Consequently, the percentage of students admitted from local schools would fall and the numbers of students coming in from more affluent families further afield would increase. Therefore, the need to find accommodation in Oxford would increase.

Furthermore, there was likely to be an overall increase in students not only at Brookes but also at Oxford University, since the current financial crisis had had a serious effect on the finances of the latter and both universities would be under pressure to admit more students either as undergraduates or postgraduates.

The result could be that, like some cities in the USA, Oxford could become a service centre for affluent students (as Cambridge is in effect now). For locals the question could be whether Oxford becomes like Cambridge, a place where people live in villages on the edge of the town rather than in the town itself....

Basically, he went on, we need more students from the locality. This is true of Oxford as it is of everywhere else. (There was a sardonic but appreciative reference to the ‘Socialist Republican State of Texas in the US where state universities offer lower fees to locals from socially deprived areas.) The city, he feels, does not need any more 18 to 19 year olds looking for accommodation. If there is to be any growth it could be in post-graduate education and research.

Social behaviour is an issue; it is easier (in the wider sense) for older people to behave themselves. Then there is the factor of ‘anomie’ (a lack of integration in social life and the alienation and loneliness that can be experienced by residents living in student-dominated communities). The prevalence and rapid turnover of occupancy of student housing has had a detrimental effect on the well-being of long-term residents, who experience a sense of dissociation from society as a result.

Very few local children go to Oxford University. Also how many Brookes students come from Oxford City, as opposed to Oxfordshire? A higher percentage of local children go to university in Sheffield than in Oxford (even though Sheffield’s primary schools do not on average have a tremendous reputation).

Other considerations:

- (1) The green belt could be under threat the more 18, 19 and 20 year olds you have seeking accommodation in Oxford;
- (2) A big lesson is: don’t overheat the south and kill off the north;
- (3) There has been a general shift to a commercial view of towns and communities. This is evident even in Professor Dorling’s own university department where students prefer the option of studying social geography that is more business-orientated. The idea of ‘selling one’s city’ has evolved as some cities have seen their population fall and unwanted houses being demolished. (Contrast past riots in both Newcastle and Oxford: in the former they burnt down houses, but in the latter they didn’t.)

Other Speakers And Contributors

JOHN SKINNER

He is a resident of St Mary's ward.

He started by saying that we need democratic control over change.

In 30 years or so up to the year 2000 the numbers of students in Oxford University have gone from 5,800 to 11,330.

In Oxford Brookes University (previously a polytechnic) the jump has been from 1,900 to 18,000 (there was a prediction in 1972 that it might grow to 4,000). The plan is now for Brookes to grow by up to 2% a year.

The threat of expansion is enormous. Look at the demographics in St Mary's, where in the census in 2001 49% were between 20 and 29 years old but the number of children was half the national average.

The results? School rolls will fall and the services for the old will be reduced. Rents are already high which is bad for those families that need social housing (they can only afford to live in the poor outskirts)

In one street in 1970 29% were in HMOs, in 1980 that was 3% and in 2009 it is 75%.

The shops in the Cowley Road have changed. Now there are nearly four times more restaurants, six times the take-aways, but a half the number of food shops. There seems to be a city plan to gentrify George St and make Cowley Road the night-time centre of the city with the attendant problems of noise, rubbish and the area becoming one of black plastic bags.

There is a need for balance and democratic consensus with universities publicly accountable. Expansion should only come with the assent of the community.

Some questioners brought up parking problems. PAUL FREESTONE of Aston Street believed that Brookes students were largely responsible for local parking problems. In a Hurst Street survey re parking mentioned by ANTHONY CHEKE it was ascertained that two thirds of the HMOs occupants were Brookes students. CLLR STUART CRAFT (of the IWC) observed that in some areas of Oxford estate agents specifically advertised 'student house to let' rather than 'house to let'.

Other speakers referred to the drinking culture. The Co-Chairman of the Anglo-Asian Association of East Oxford said that the Cowley road was 'saturated' with nightclubs. CLLR SIMMONDS said he believed the Licensing Act generally favoured the applicant and CLLR YOUNG said that the Government should change the licensing laws so that there was a return to earlier, tighter restrictions. (Others agreed with this)...

TONY JOYCE

He is Chairman of the Coordinating Committee of Headington Residents' Associations and also of the Oxford Civic Society.

He acknowledged that Oxford is a hard place to manage with very specific problems. He said that the extensive development of hospital facilities in Headington had

also put pressure on the local community and that one problem had been an approach that had seen consultation with each institution individually rather than bringing all the parties together to consider the situation jointly. There was a mixed record as regards liaison with Brookes and now there needed to be 'a very special sort of cooperation between the communities and the large institutions'. (HARRY EDWARDS also referred to the problems arising from the great development of the Headington hospitals.)

In a later contribution he urged any residents who were not already members of a residents association to set one up as the network of these associations was very effective in tackling problems, especially with the help of email. (One concern expressed by another person was how areas that did not appear to have enough residents to form an association could be represented.

(In the course of the discussion a number of people went on to say that the big institutions do not always want to share information.)

ANNE GWINNETT

She is Brookes' Director of Corporate Affairs and will now be chairing the Brookes and Residents Associations meetings.

She responded to various points made by a number of speakers.

She disputed some of the total figures given about the numbers of Brookes students saying that they include students not necessarily at Oxford: there are parts of Brookes University that are outside the city and there is distance learning. She pointed out that Brookes was not planning a big expansion and that recent growth had not been at Brookes' Oxford campuses. She also added that the figure of 2% annual growth was the maximum envisaged; it had been 0.5% over the last ten years.

She said that Brookes does take local children, taking 20% of its undergraduate students from Oxfordshire (though she did not have with her specific figures for Oxford itself). The University is, she maintained, proud of its work with local schools.

She added that Brookes has a significant number of students from lower socio-economic groups.

She pointed out that Brookes is in the process of developing 800 more places in student hall of residences. She said that financial issues are important: Brookes' students spend on average £12,000 a year with 25% of that on fees which leaves £9,000 for contribution to the local economy.

Brookes does talk regularly to its students, she added, about their responsibilities. It is very difficult to control the numbers of students living outside the halls of residence who bring cars into Oxford. Students who live in halls of residence are not allowed to bring cars.

She denied any Brookes plan to close Wheatley.

Finally, she said that more analysis of a number of key concerns has been instigated by Brookes.

CLLR CRAIG SIMMONS

He is leader of the Green Party on Oxford City Council.

He said that the Greens oppose variable fees. There is limit to what the Cowley Road can take: no more than 50% of its premises should be taken up with clubs and bars. ED6 is crucial in terms of planning. He is very worried that Brookes is trying to close one of its halls that has hundreds in it; if that happened it could certainly not reach its targets.

CLLR NUALA YOUNG

She is also a Green Party councillor.

In addition to her comments about the licensing laws she said that Oxford did not need further growth and that residents should put up resistance to any pressure from the South East England Partnership Board for further development.

She referred to the need to achieve a balance in housing and reduce the problems caused by drinking and anti-social behaviour by students.

SUE MALLETT

She said that whilst Brookes may bring in 800 new places but it has also got plans to sell 560 others. She said that with the increase in numbers from 2002-2009 there has been no net increase of rooms

Her further point was that Brookes “head leases” accommodation: this is one way of its massaging the figures, these numbers are counted in getting to the Brookes target of 3,800 places whereas the real problem is much bigger. She said that at a local inquiry the Inspector took a hard line on this on the grounds of Planning Rule ED6. She asserted that we need to fix head leases and close this loophole.

She finished by regretting that there was no real campaign against the Core Strategy in August 2008 (which calls for Brookes’s expansion) but there should have been. She thought that everyone should write to Andrew Smith MP (whose statement was read out just after the beginning of the meeting), a point made earlier by Sean Feeney who also said that at the next general election all candidates for Oxford East should make a statement on their standpoint regarding Brookes’s expansion.

PULLEN’S LANE ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION

The PLAS statement expressed dissatisfaction at being unable to comment on what they termed a ‘pre-emptive bid’ by Brookes, just prior to the Oxford Core Strategy hearings, or what Brookes had referred to as ‘putting down a marker’, to obtain exclusive rights to develop Pullen’s Lane allotments and Warneford Playing Fields, if/when these sites became available. This submission by Brookes was made just before the deadline for comments on the Core Strategy, which meant that PLAS members had no time to submit a comment themselves or obtain a seat at the table during the Core Strategy discussions. They had only been able to get a hearing through local residents’ associations that had secured seats at the table. This had made them ‘very wary’ of Brookes, who, they felt, should have behaved in a ‘less predatory’ way.

Resolution

Finally, a resolution was proposed. NICK WELCH got general approval for it.

A working group should be formed to include residents, councillors and representatives from: Oxford City Council (especially the East Area and the North East Area), Oxfordshire County Council, the local Residents Associations, the NHS, Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University to find ways to address the problems residents experience as a result of the presence of large public institutions in their areas, in particular those associated with 'studentification'. A follow up public meeting will be held in three months time with our elected representatives to review progress.

(These minutes have been compiled by Ken Lovesy with the help of other local residents. They have been sent in advance to all of the major contributors so that can verify that they do give a fair and accurate account of what they meant to convey at the meeting; a few contributors did suggest minor changes which have been incorporated.)