

Professor Hugh Brady,  
Vice-Chancellor,  
University of Bristol

Andrew Waller  
The Noise Pages  
[www.thenoisepages.com](http://www.thenoisepages.com)

By email

27 January 2020

Dear Prof. Brady,

**Community Liaison Group**

I am dismayed to learn that the university has decided to disband the Community Liaison Group, which has provided a basis for discussions with residents for several years.

This decision and the way it has been conveyed appear to signal a retreat by the university from direct engagement with its nearest neighbours at a time when rapid expansion of student numbers calls for more communication, not less.

People living close to the university suffer disruption from night-time noise, careless waste recycling, and other issues caused by the large student population. These problems have worsened as the university has grown. Given your plans to bring several thousand more students into the city, many of us naturally worry there is more disruption to come. The nature of the university's engagement is therefore of some importance.

If you wish to maintain trust and goodwill among residents, I suggest you reconsider.

The Community Liaison Group has existed for at least a decade, providing a twice-yearly forum for residents (both groups and individuals) to discuss their concerns with representatives of both the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England. Others in attendance typically include the police, local councillors and occasionally officials from the city council or other relevant bodies. As an individual resident, I have attended since at least 2016 (in other words, pre-dating my creation of The Noise Pages website, [www.thenoisepages.com](http://www.thenoisepages.com)).

I became aware of the CLG's demise in December (usually a meeting is held that month). Having twice enquired when the next meeting would be, I received a Dec.17 email stating:

*With regard to the Community Liaison Group there are no plans to hold future meetings in that format.*

Contact with other residents who normally attend CLG meetings subsequently confirmed they had received no notification of this decision.

The irony here is obvious. We are talking about "community liaison", which signifies a process of two-way communication for mutual cooperation and benefit. Yet the university chose unilaterally to end

the process, and took no initiative to tell those who attend. Plus, it seems ill prepared to provide answers when people query why this is being done. I submitted questions on Jan. 6 and was told a response would be forthcoming. I am still waiting.

Please will you answer those questions, which I have reproduced overleaf (along with the full text of the Dec. 17 email to which they refer).

I hope that, in particular, you will clarify the decision to seek a “revival”, at some future date, of the Bristol Student Community Partnership. From descriptions on your website and in university emails to various people, the Partnership seems likely to be an institutional body run jointly with the city council in which residents will not participate. The university’s assurances of continued close contact with residents’ groups are not an adequate compensation: It appears you will in future communicate with groups separately, with the result that all sides will have difficulty seeing the bigger picture. I can see why this might seem attractive to the university—it puts you in a better position to control the conversation. But as a community-relations strategy, it suggests you are not comfortable with transparency or accountability.

**The failure to hold the usual December meeting** is doubly concerning because there are important matters relating to students’ impact on the community that ought to be discussed. Had a December meeting been held, I would have been asking for the following items to be placed on the agenda:

(a) **Your annual Move Out Move In campaign.** This is aimed at educating first-years in the issues they will face, and the behaviour expected of them, when they move into rented accommodation in their second year. The university’s then Community Liaison Officer told the July meeting of the CLG that the latest MOMI campaign had reached only half its target audience. This is a woeful result. It means that 2,000 to 3,000 students (by my reckoning) didn’t receive important messages. Little wonder there are problems when students move into the community. Properly preparing its students for “living out” is the most basic thing the university can do to avoid problems. It is also probably the most important—potentially more so than Partnerships or police operations (see below) or any number of other initiatives. MOMI is an internal programme, not dependent on outside factors, and the university is therefore wholly in command of the ingredients necessary to ensure its success.

I and other residents would like to know what steps you are taking to get better results this year.

(b) **The future of Operation Beech.** The university rightly gained some kudos this year for agreeing to pay for police officers to deal with noise complaints at night. As I’ve reported on my website, residents who contacted Beech for help often had high praise for the outcome. However, there is some surprise that officers didn’t receive more calls. There are several possible reasons, including, I suggest, that the very existence of Beech may have dissuaded some students from having parties—in other words, the low number of calls may signify success rather than failure. In any event, the key questions are how the university evaluates Beech and whether it will continue for the rest of this academic year, and into next. Some residents would probably like to discuss possible amendments, for example to the hours of duty or whether officers can deal with on-street noise as well as parties.

Do you intend to consult community groups on the future of Operation Beech, and if so how? And when and how will you decide whether it will continue?

(c) **Complaints and disciplinary statistics.** A key agenda item at CLG meetings was the university's report on complaints submitted by members of the public relating to noise and other issues, and how your disciplinary system responded. These have helped us to understand whether things are getting better or worse, and whether the disciplinary response is effective. There are some signs that this academic year has so far been a bit quieter than last. At the same time, there appears to have been a more lenient, or at least different, disciplinary response. In the absence of a meeting, I have asked for, and received, various data. However, it appears this information may have been compiled differently than in previous years, and I have so far not been able to make any meaningful comparisons. An email I sent to the university on Jan. 20 seeking clarification has not been answered. I hope you will recognise that the underlying data consists of complaints from members of the public, and the university therefore is effectively custodian of a community database. I think we have a right to request aggregate data in a form that enables us to draw conclusions.

I would be grateful for a response.

**In summary,** I suggest it would be in the university's interests as well as residents' to continue with the Community Liaison Group, at least for the time being. If the proposed Partnership ultimately offers a more effective format for all concerned, so be it, but the conclusion of those discussions is apparently still some way off. There is no logical reason to put community relations on hold in the meantime. If a meeting of the CLG were held in the next month, you would have an opportunity to explain your thinking about future formats directly to the people affected. This meeting could also address the issues I have flagged above.

Given the community interest in these matters, I intend to publish this letter via The Noise Pages website. I will similarly publish your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A blacked-out signature block, likely redacting the name of the sender.

Andrew Waller

Appendix 1: University's Dec. 17 email to me:

With regard to the Community Liaison Group there are no plans to hold future meetings in that format. The University is going through a period of reorganisation and it is proposed to relaunch the Student Community Partnership with the City Council and other partners – early discussions have been held with representatives with the City Council.

In future meetings will be held with the various community groups and any parties such as individual streets, neighbourhoods or groups that would like to discuss community relations with the University and the City.

Presently I don't have any further information but I am happy to speak to any groups about complaints received to date this academic year.

-----

Appendix 2: My request for clarification, sent on Jan. 6.

Dear [withheld],

I'd like to follow up regarding the email you sent me before Christmas (Dec. 17), replying to my enquiry about the Community Liaison Group.

It appears the university has decided not to continue with its twice-yearly meetings with residents' groups and is considering instead a revived Bristol Student Community Partnership.

I'd like to ask a few questions to try to understand the reasons for this change, and its implications:

- Will the residents (whether groups or individuals) who attended CLG meetings be invited to attend meetings of the Partnership? If yes, in what way will the Partnership be a better alternative to what currently exists? If no, then why is the university abandoning the current form of community liaison? (Your email indicated you will continue to talk to residents' groups individually, but the CLG forum allowed for collective discussion, which surely benefited both residents and the university.)
- What is the timetable for the Partnership's revival (with or without residents)?
- A key element of the CLG meetings was the university's presentation of figures for complaints from the public and the resulting disciplinary actions. Are these still being compiled? How will they be presented (or published) in the future? \*
- The CLG page on your website, which displayed minutes of past meetings, seems no longer to be accessible—it is still referenced on your "Students and the community" page, but the "Community liaison group" link no longer goes anywhere. Has this been disabled as a result of the decisions mentioned above?
- Why didn't the university hold a CLG meeting in December, as normal, and discuss its ideas for the future of community relations with the residents' groups themselves? Surely that would have been a more open and transparent way to

make this change (and, some might say, more courteous). Since the revival of the Partnership is apparently some way off, it seems there was no pressing reason to bring the current arrangements to an abrupt end.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been no public announcement of these plans. I forwarded your Dec. 17 email to a couple of the residents' groups with whom I'm in regular contact but have not yet written about it on The Noise Pages ([www.thenoisepages.com](http://www.thenoisepages.com)). I plan to do so this week, so any further information you can give me in relation to the questions above will help me provide a clearer picture.

\* If there is an analysis of the first-term statistics available, would you be able to send it to me--thanks.

Regards,  
Andrew Waller  
[www.thenoisepages.com](http://www.thenoisepages.com)

-----

Notes:

- 1 The recipient of my email above subsequently phoned me to say the university would reply, although it would take "at least a week". Three weeks have now elapsed.
- 2 The "Community liaison group" link referred to in the fourth bullet point has now disappeared from your website.
- 3 As advertised in the last paragraph of my email, I published an article in the evening of Jan. 6 about the university's decision to disband the CLG. It is available here:  
<https://www.thenoisepages.com/single-post/2020/01/06/UoB-Disbands-Liaison-Forum-Seeks-%E2%80%98Relaunch%E2%80%99-of-Student-Partnership>