Chancellor's Commission Essay Competition: The University of Warwick – Supporting, Inspiring and Engaging a Region

The University of Warwick finds itself nestled in a region to which it can lend its powerful skillset. The area that this essay will be focusing on in particular will be the West Midlands, especially Birmingham and Coventry, and Warwickshire. This essay will also draw upon my own views as I believe a personal opinion can help to shed light on some of the ways Warwick University could positively help its local community. Issues to be discussed will include challenges facing young people, greener living through sustainability, rural economy, and the current issue of the construction of 'High Speed 2' (known as HS2). Firstly, however, this essay will focus on housing.

Housing has been ranked as the most urgent issue in need of address for local councils in a recent survey[1]. Speaking to local MP Mr Chris White, of Warwick and Leamington constituency, he observed more people in need of houses than there were houses to accommodate them[2]. Though housing issues face the whole nation, it can be argued that the Mr White's constituency faces a more unique problem as he stated how the housing crisis is coupled with issues of congestion and public transport[3]. Many students can attest to these problems, with the latter appropriately summarised by Warwick University's SU President in a recent open letter to Stagecoach[4]. Indeed, Mr White's discussion of the background to the housing issue is punctuated by Warwickshire County Council's community strategy plan for the next decade which states how *"housing affordability is still an issue, particularly in certain parts of the County"*[5]. Furthermore, the report supports Mr White's view that issues of congestion and transport should be given consideration along with housing: *"we must ensure that we do not look at housing growth as an isolated issue. It is of key importance … that the services likely to be needed by local people are considered alongside"*[6]. Warwickshire is therefore faced with the issue of how to increase availability of affordable housing whilst also managing congestion and improving transport links in the local area.

In the West Midlands, the problem is just as dire with one report warning that *"only around half of the homes needed to meet demand in the region are currently being built"*[7] and demand set to increase. Obstacles to fixing this problem have also been noted in the locality, like in Birmingham, where it was observed that some homes have not been built despite attaining planning permission[8]; the council's planning committee even notes that frustration targeted at them is misplaced: *"there's a chorus … that we are the problem … well the killer fact in [the report revealing homes not built] is the amount of planning permission granted … over 90 per cent of the houses … have still not started after a year"*[9]. Thus, the issue of pushing developers to act quickly to reduce the pressure on the housing market appears. Indeed, Birmingham is a leading light in trying to encourage new housing development[10] but their vast array of empty properties in need of refurbishment should be a priority too. In December 2013, around 7730 homes in the private sector were revealed to be empty in Birmingham[11], which, while low given Birmingham's size, is still a high figure. Indeed the cost to develop these houses is barely a problem, with 37% owners of unoccupied homes revealing in 2012 that less than £10,000 actually needed to be spent on their properties[12]. With initiatives such as are being implemented, there is clearly hope for the housing crisis in the area.

So where is Warwick University's role in all of this? Discussing with Mr White, he assured me that the university undoubtedly had a role in providing *"data"* to support authorities, giving insight into the scale of the problem.

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[1] (Kelly, 2015)
[2] (White, 2015)
[3] Ibid.
[4] (Leigh, 2015)
[5] (Warwickshire County Council, 2009)
[6] Ibid.
[7] (National Housing Federation, 2015)
[8] (Elkes, 2015)
[9] (Clancy, 2015)
[10] (Elkes, 2014)
[11] (Birmingham City Council, 2013)
[12] Ibid.

However, he accepted the council had its own research departments to deal with this[13]. It is without doubt that the presence of the university and its huge student population adds to the housing pressure in nearby Leamington Spa and Coventry. This is seen in other university towns such as University of St Andrews which has similarly pressured the housing market, leading to *"lower-income, local households being pushed further away from the town"*[14]. A report published by that university suggested an expansion of University halls of residence to accommodate a further 200 people which would have the effect of bringing some students out of the local housing market, making room for locals[15]. Warwick University could learn from this, especially as it would reduce the local congestion issue too; after all, it has a large estate, with plans to develop already in place[16]. I mooted this idea with a fellow first-year student who thought that moving to an area like Westwood rather than Leamington Spa for next year would have made things easier[17]. He identified issues of *"having to find time out of my busy week to view properties"* and *"inefficient solicitors [sorting] out the contract"* among others[18]. He did, however, mention his excitement to live in Leamington Spa for the nightlife so an off-campus solution might not have been to his taste; for others, it can easily be argued that a Westwood-esque solution would be better-suited, especially given the problems highlighted by Mr Brittan[19]. On a lower level, petitioning Stagecoach has proven to be effective with the company laying on more buses to help resolve the transport crisis following the aforementioned open letter[20]. Ultimately, this is a mostly supportive role for the university to take in the area.

We now move to looking at young people in general. I spoke to the team manager for the Coventry branch of the NSPCC who summed up the situation there as follows: *"the level of child poverty … is worse than the England average and the health and well-being of children … is generally worse"*[21], citing the Child Health Profile June 2015[22]. Similar is seen in Warwickshire with its five local authority districts ranking an average of 216/326 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2015[23] and 40% of those living in Birmingham's super output areas (SOAs) being within the 10% most deprived in England[24]. The NSPCC discussed how the Coventry team has sometimes been unable to meet demands for their services, highlighting the issues faced there[25]. In terms of job prospects, in a recent review on post-16 education and training institutions, the Skills Minister noted *"we have a productivity challenge in England … we can … [drive] up productivity by developing a professional and technical education system"* which ensures young people are *"on a high quality route to employment"*[26]. As previously identified, using IMD, there are significant areas of the West Midlands and Warwickshire identified as deprived[27]. The Sutton Trust, examining youth opportunities, found that students living in such areas *"were less likely to go on to advanced level courses than students who lived in more affluent neighbourhoods"*[28]. Moving to sexual health, a specialist team in Warwickshire[29] and their 'Respect Yourself' campaign[30] can be seen as instrumental in keeping both the teenage pregnancy and sexually-transmitted illness (STI) diagnoses rates under the national average[31]. However, in the West Midlands, teenage pregnancy is above the national average, the under-18 conception rate at 28.9 per 1000 in 2013[32]. However, there is some hope with the number of STI diagnoses being lower: 718 per 100,000[33].

[13] (White, 2015)
[14] (Miller, 2013)
[15] Ibid.
[16] (Warwick District Council, 2015)
[17] (Brittan, 2015)
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] (Leigh, 2015)
[21] (Bayliss, 2015)
[22] (Public Health England, 2015)
[23] (Mann, 2015)
[24] (Bradnam, 2015)
[25] Ibid.
[26] (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, 2015)
[27] See fn23 and 24
[28] (Sammons, Toth, & Sylva, 2015)
[29] (George Eliot Hospital NHS Trust, 2015)
[30] (Warwickshire County Council, 2011)
[31] (Public Health England, 2013, 2014)
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

Warwick University can support, inspire and engage here too. The NSPCC informed me of the university's large-scale research project with Professor Jane Barlow[34] but stated there were also other ways to help. The NSPCC suggested that Warwick University could support the charity and ChildLine through volunteering and fundraising[35]. Mr White suggested that university societies should intervene; he hoped more people would join charitable societies like Warwick Mind Aware to make a difference[36]. Certainly, there could be a drive to inspire students, 'freshers' in particular, to start on a benevolent path during their studies, using incentives like a membership fee reduction or the chance to win something upon joining, perhaps. Personally, I think the scope of this is limited as it relies on the commitment of students whose time might already be restricted. Instead, I think peer mentoring is more workable. Warwick operates a successful outreach system with several Widening Participation (WP) programmes. A mentoring job, with an inherent commitment as well as a wage, is far more likely to get results in the local area, I believe. WP graduates such as myself are helped immensely and are often inspired to go on to help others in a similar way, proving the sustainability of such programmes. One charity's report reveals benefits of engaging pupils through mentoring include reducing bullying and promoting confidence and self-esteem[37]. Furthermore, the university's presence in promoting such sexual health services as present in Warwickshire could go some way to reducing STI diagnoses and teenage pregnancies in the West Midlands. Indeed, this is where Warwick Outreach could extend, advising local young people. From a basic level, Warwick could promote public lectures and seminars to local young people to inspire them to pursue higher education and increase their chances of reaching a good university despite their deprived background. This has been a successful programme elsewhere[38] so it is arguably worth investing in, as well as it being a profitable marketing opportunity.

Moving to sustainability, Coventry has excelled in promoting green living, being recognised as one of the UK's top 10 greenest cities as early as 2011 and it continues to promote a strategy rivalling its neighbours[39]. It was noted how Coventry outperformed Birmingham by *"improving air quality and making sure that no Coventry resident is further than 300 metres from a park"*[40] and the sheer effort Coventry have put into promoting greener living has been revealed elsewhere, for example, through Coventry Recycling Club[41]. In the general West Midlands, there is a sustainability strategy in place promoted by *"the sustainability advisor for leaders of the West Midlands"*[42], Sustainability West Midlands. Their 2020 strategy hopes for a *"30% decrease in … emissions"*, to be achieved through energy efficient actions and *"a 20% increase of renewable electricity generation"* from 2010[43]. The report noted a 6.38% decrease in carbon emissions 2010-13 but as this falls far short of the 30% target, clearly the strategy is not working as well as hoped[44]. In Warwickshire, their Sustainable Community Strategy[45] has identified separate environmental targets among its nine sustainability goals, showing a distinct focus on making the area greener. For outcome 7.1 *"our environment is clean, green and sustainable"*, Warwickshire has already seen *"recycling and composting rates [improve] dramatically"*[46] but they are still looking to halve emissions by 2026 to achieve national and international targets[47]. Thus, it can be argued that progress has certainly been made, but more could definitely be done. So how can Warwick University help local authorities achieve the goals set out in their action plans?

Once again, there are multiple ways the university could support sustainability in the local area to help authorities to achieve their targets. While Warwick University already supports campaigns such as Student Switch Off[48] and RAWKUS[49], there is always more to be done. In terms of local action, the University of Worcester arrange an annual Go Green Week which seeks to promote action on climate change to engage students with a range of fairs,

[34] (Bayliss, 2015)
[35] Ibid.
[36] (White, 2015)
[37] (The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2010)
[38] (Garner, 2014)
[39] (Styles, 2011)
[40] Ibid.
[41] (Coventry City Council, 2015)
[42] (Sustainability West Midlands, 2015)
[43] (Mall & Rogers, 2015)
[44] Ibid.
[45] (Warwickshire County Council, 2009)
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] (National Union of Students, 2015)
[49] (Warwick SU, 2015)

competitions and activities which teach attendees about energy alternatives and community action[50]. By encouraging students to attend through food fairs, which are popular when promoting local produce in our university plaza, a desire to care about the local environment is instilled. Perhaps a greater focus on sustainability is needed, with one article discussing how making commitments through goals, which are then progressively monitored, similar to local councils, should be encouraged in universities[51]. From an academic side, research opportunities could be offered, perhaps with attractive subsidies to encourage participation. Warwick University seeks to engage, and through engaging its students via ambassador roles and sustainable programmes involving student leadership, a proactive attitude to resolving local environmental problems is encouraged. For example, there could be a system similar to the Warwick Welcome Service (WWS) database of jobs; students interested in volunteering in local community projects can look online to see available jobs, for example, the rejuvenation of a green space in Birmingham, and work on it. This inspires positive attitudes towards sustainability on a personal level as well as on the university community level.

The final general issue to discuss is the local economy. Warwickshire was chosen to pilot one of five rural growth networks (RGNs) to *"reduce barriers to economic growth in the countryside"*[52]. In Warwickshire, the RGN helps businesses to start up, innovate and grow; it also has several success stories to its name such as Act on Energy which is a not-for-profit organisation *"providing independent and impartial energy efficiency advice to residents and the public sector"*[53]. This is certainly an example of businesses and government working together to promote sustainability, which is the sort of integration that Warwick University can replicate. I spoke to Invest in Warwickshire, who have a similar aim in supporting business growth for the benefit of the economy[54] showing the amount of work to increase economic growth in the region. In terms of economy, the Midlands Economic Forum discussed how the area is strong in exports: between 2008 and 2014, exports grew by 70% in the West Midlands[55]. In fact, the West Midlands is the only UK region to run a trade surplus with China[56]. Furthering this work, plans for increased cooperation between local authorities in the West Midlands have been recently revealed, with the creation of the West Midlands Combined Authority to increase job prospects and investment to rival *"the might of London"*[57] responsible for 10.5% of UK exports[58].

With all this positive work, some might think Warwick University has little to do to support economic growth in the region but not only do recent news articles report the West Midlands *"lagging behind in economic growth"*[59] but Invest in Warwickshire argue the university has a *"really significant part to play"*[60]. They claim that the proximity to the university's *"world-class"* facilities is a *"key influencing factor for companies"* due to the high level of skilled graduates and the research and development (R&D) work happening on campus, like with Jaguar[61]. The attractiveness of Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) was also complimented[62]. Therefore, investment in these areas on campus should be promoted to support the area's growing economic productivity. Furthermore, Warwick University has a role to play in actively inspiring students to undertake economically prosperous research or course subjects like engineering, as well as supporting graduates in finding jobs.

From economic growth, we now examine a current issue which many believe could burden the economy: the construction of HS2. Problems, including obstacles to regional development – particularly worrying given the housing crisis – economic growth, and local wildlife, were all raised with the construction of HS1, especially in academic materials[63] but though Warwick University's own plans for development have not been affected by HS2 construction

[50] (University of Worcester, 2015)
[51] (VanderBeek, 2013)
[52] (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2015)
[53] (Warwickshire County Council, 2015)
[54] (Richardson, 2015)
[55] (Midlands Economic Forum, 2015)
[56] Ibid.
[57] (Morris, 2015)
[58] (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2015)
[59] (Walker, 2015)
[60] (Richardson, 2015)
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] (Gibb, Knowles, & Farrington, 1992)

plans[64], it is noted in a report under Q6.26 that HS2 *"could impede on any future expansion to the south"*[65] if desired by the university. This could throw into jeopardy any regeneration of local areas, then threatening the economy. In terms of wildlife, the impact from HS2 has been described as *"devastating"*, affecting *"irreplaceable ancient woodlands … and priority species along the route"*[66]. However, along with these disadvantages, there is much potential for local economic prosperity after construction. For example, HS1 was designed to develop 10,000 housing units which, though incomplete, had the potential to not only reduce the severity of the housing crisis but also improve economic prosperity[67]. Removing substantial amounts of local traffic for HS1 has been crucial in reducing carbon emissions too, complementing the goals of local authorities[68].

   Such a controversial issue as HS2 undoubtedly requires the university's intervention, whether that be on behalf of the government or locals affected by it. The University of Birmingham announced that it was chosen to train engineers set to work on the HS2 rail link due to the presence of the HS2 college in its city[69]. Given Warwick University's similar proximity to construction sites, it can be argued that it could support training of other HS2 employees, or indeed to offer support in issues faced during construction such as the recovery of archaeological treasures, as conducted by Canterbury Christ Church University during HS1[70]. Alternatively, the university could choose to support local people through the creation of spaces to discuss the construction. For those who are concerned about how they might be affected, special seminars and lectures could be organised to objectively inform and provide information for locals to claim compensation or seek legal advice. For the latter, Warwick Law Society members could be engaged, supporting the community through its pro bono services, offering free legal advice for those affected by construction, informing them of their rights and whether they should take their issue to a higher authority. Indeed, from a basic level, research into the consequences of HS2 can support local decisions so this could also be conducted by the university.

   In conclusion, Warwick University can support, inspire and engage its local area by simply encouraging its students to be good citizens, working to the benefit of the local community during their studies. This can be achieved by investing a minimal amount of money, with the exception of the on-campus housing project discussed above, and often by promoting the students to initiate the action themselves. It all starts with identifying the issues and then moving to engage current institutions like Warwick SU or Warwick Law Society to investigate local problems and try initiatives to help out. Ultimately, greater cooperation is needed between local authorities and the university to decide what the focus should be in local communities, for the benefit of both parties, as well as students and locals.

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[64] (Warwick District Council, 2015)
[65] Ibid.
[66] (Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, 2015)
[67] (AECOM; ATKINS, 2013)
[68] Ibid.
[69] (University of Birmingham, 2014)
[70] (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2008)

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