

The following open letter was sent to Helen Gordon, President of the Council of the University of Reading, on 16 September 2022. We await a response.

Dear Ms. Gordon

University of Reading – Reputation at risk

I am writing to express my significant concerns as regards the damage to the reputation of the University of Reading arising from the plans to build 4,500 houses at Hall Farm. These plans are completely inconsistent with the four stated research themes of the University below;

1. Agriculture, Food & Health – the Centre for Dairy Research at Hall Farm has been active for many years and whilst clearly the work of CEDAR could be transferred to another location it seems inherently wrong for the University to be closing such a facility at this time when security of food production and organic farming are high profile public issues. In order for the University to apply its expertise on global issues such as the impact of climate change on food production, hunger, poverty and diet, surely the University needs more resources like Hall Farm?
2. Environment – As the University seeks to bring together “Reading’s world-leading strengths in research relating to the environment”, just down the road at Hall Farm it will be providing an example of what has gone wrong as regards our custodianship of the environment. Building 4,500 homes on a site which is rich in bio-diversity and green fields is completely inconsistent with your research aims.
3. Heritage & Creativity – As the university seeks on one-hand to engage with the local community, it puts “two-fingers” up at the people of Arborfield and the surrounding settlements, that have already witnessed massive house building in recent years.
4. Prosperity & Resilience. It seems ironic that Housing and Cities is one of the main themes in this research area, yet rather than help provide new or radical solutions the University plans to stick to the model of the past few years of maximising profit to itself and the developers by cramming as many houses as possible onto a greenfield site.

All the good publicity and kudos which the University should accrue as it progresses its research themes and seeks to engage with the local community will be more than lost by the plans to build such a substantial number of houses at Hall Farm. Specifically;

- The plans will lead to the effective urbanisation of this side of Reading; from the University, through Spencers Wood, Shinfield, Arborfield through to Sindlesham and ultimately Wokingham.
- The planned homes at Hall Farm will undoubtedly create wide ranging traffic problems, in an area already facing major traffic issues with little public transport infrastructure, including no train station.
- Environmental factors also make the Hall Farm site unsuitable for housing, with part of the site standing on a flood plain and the site including ancient woodlands and areas of natural biodiversity.

- The reputational risk of the University is further challenged due to the historic problems of sites which have been developed in the local area on University land. Problems, which have led to discussions at the University as to whether it should take a more hands on role as regards any development of Hall Farm (UoR Council minute January 2022).
- The plans are a continuation of the unbalanced house building by Wokingham BC, where 97% of new homes in the past ten years have been built in the south of the borough and just 3% in the north. The University in effect siding with the discredited Conservative Council leadership, which aimed to avoid housebuilding in the north of WBC. A policy which was a significant factor in ending Tory control of the council in May this year.

Continuing with the housing proposals at Hall Farm is completely at odds with both the stated University of Reading Research Themes and its Community Action Partnership. Now is the time for the Council of the University to take greater oversight and control of this issue. From a governance perspective there seems to have been very little discussion and challenge by the Council, as inferred by the minutes of meetings. For example, I would note that reports of the University promoting the Hall Farm site were reported by the press in March 2021, several months before the matter appears to have been discussed by the Council at its July 2021 meeting.

The Save Our Loddon Valley Environment (SOLVE Hall Farm) group of which I am a member has had cordial discussions with the University as regards alternatives to housing at Hall Farm, but it was clear that the management team at the University remains firmly wedded to the 4,500 homes plan. A plan that will lead to significant damage to the reputation of the University. We remain keen to engage with the University on this matter and more details of the work of the group can be found at www.green4grow.org.

I look forward to hearing from you

Cc All members of the University Council
Paul Lindley (Chancellor)