# Full transcript of Fire and Wire: Episode 8 – Oxford’s local and global engagement

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Well hello everyone, and welcome to this next edition of Fire and Wire. I'm absolutely delighted to be joined today by a fabulous colleague here from the University of Oxford, Professor Alex Betts, who is professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs, and he's based in the Department of International Development. But he's also working with me in the leadership team as the Local and Global Engagement Officer, a new post that I created at the start of my tenure. Welcome to Fire and Wire.

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

I'm delighted to join you.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Maybe I could just start by asking, what was it that drew you into this world of international development and particularly working, you know, with the refugee community?

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

Well, I started out studying economics at Durham University, and as an undergraduate, I had a summer vacation with a lot of time, not much money. And it was the time of the Kosovo crisis, when hundreds of thousands of Kosovar refugees were making their way across Europe seeking asylum. And I had a chance to go and do voluntary work in the Netherlands in a reception centre for asylum seekers, and that really drew me in. I wasn't doing very much, I was spending my night staying in the reception centre, organising games and activities for kids, helping to build a playground.

But I had a chance to meet people from all around the world who had experienced war, persecution from Iran, Iraq, Pakistani Christians, people from Bosnia, Kosovo and Liberia. I met people with skills, talents, aspirations. At the time, I was studying economics and it never occurred to me that actually we could look at people a bit differently, not just as humanitarian subjects and victims, but people with a contribution to make to society.

A Bosniak lawyer taught me the basics of public international law, an Iranian Olympian played table tennis with me; I was dreadful but he managed to somehow improve my game a little bit. So I came away thinking, actually, as an economist, I want to do a dissertation in this area and wrote a thesis on the economics of refugee protection.

And that was the start of my journey, that led me to do my MPhil in International Development, my DPhil here in International Relations, and the research that really focused on why states provide economic opportunities and the right to work to refugees, and the conditions under which refugees can make economic contributions to wider society.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Fantastic. Well, what a journey. And we've had recent challenges in this country in the context of how we've managed refugees, but do you have a lot of positivity and hope that we're getting better at trying to recognise the opportunities and the benefits, let alone the kindness that we should give to refugees in terms of the economic impact that they can make?

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

So when I started doing this type of research, there were relatively few political scientists, relatively few economists thinking about these questions. It was really only around 2015/16 with the European refugee crisis, that more and more graduate students started working on these questions, that they were seen as not just questions for anthropologists or international lawyers, but questions where we needed to look at the politics quite deeply.

And I think what's also happened is there's been a demand for that research from policymakers, from people in government, international organisations, NGOs. And so what I've found is as a researcher, I've been drawn into the impact agenda, to think about not only how do we do research for peer-reviewed articles or for university press books, but how do we really translate that for people working in refugee camps around the world, the organisations that need to know what's going to move the needle and change practice on the ground?

Not every message I try to translate to governments, lands. We see rising numbers of asylum seekers, displaced people. Every year, the UN Refugee Agency announces the number of displaced people, over 100 million displaced people around the world, well over 30 million refugees. That's the size of a medium-sized country of displaced people. And yet, simultaneously, there's declining political will to offer asylum and it's caught up in the broader immigration debate, where migrants have become the scapegoats for politicians, not just on the far right, but mainstream moderate politics.

And what I try to do as a researcher is ensure, not that I espouse unrealistic aspirational policies, but the question is, how do I take research to policymakers in a way that's pragmatic and can make a difference?

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

So the University provides this extraordinary space to support refugees and to give them, you know, some opportunity to, again, exercise the talent that they want to use and contribute back to the country. Can you tell us a little bit more about your role in developing that and just, you know, for those who don't know that we're a University of Sanctuary, what does that mean?

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

The University has an extraordinary history of accepting people from refugee backgrounds. We can go right back to the First and Second World Wars, and we can see that in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Oxford hosted and nurtured many professors from displacement backgrounds who went on to do extraordinary things, to be some of our leading scientists.

It was really fantastic that in May 2023, we became a University of Sanctuary and we were able to build on Somerville and Mansfield being our first Colleges of Sanctuary. And what that involved was really needing to commit to be a place of welcome and inclusion for people from displacement backgrounds. And over the last few years, we've been able to increase dramatically the number of scholarships, particularly graduate scholarships, that we offer people from refugee and displacement backgrounds.

We're now up to around 50 a year across a whole range of scholarships provided by the University, by colleges, various scholarship schemes. What we've tried to do is ensure that we support them when they are here, before they arrive, on course, and with their onward journeys. So now we have a dedicated Sanctuary coordinator, we have a University of Sanctuary Committee, and the role of all those structures is to support a cohort, provide them with a cohort experience, ensure they get to know one another and they can be supported with questions from visa, access to challenges they may face as a result of their families, facing difficulty in countries of asylum and around the world.

It's been really exciting to see that community grow. It's diverse and it's a talented group who reflect the amazing, and in many ways, untapped talent of refugees and displaced people around the world. It should be our business as a university to look for talent, no matter where it is. Nurturing that and supporting that is extremely important.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Couldn't agree more. And I was reminded of just that just this term sadly, attending the funeral of my doctoral supervisor, Professor Sir George Radda, a refugee that arrived here penniless from Hungary in 1956, a young man leaving his siblings behind and his parents. Given the opportunity, because some university professors were out there helping young students think about coming and having refuge here in this university.

And he came, didn't speak a word of English, but used the periodic table to conduct an interview and was taken on and then had this extraordinary career as a fellow and tutor at Merton in Chemistry, became the leading developer of magnetic resonance imaging and spectroscopy, ran a research team, trained hundreds and hundreds of clinicians and scientists. Was head of the Medical Research Council.

You just look at this man's life and the contribution that he was able to make, and the gratitude until his, you know, dying days, of what the University but also the country gave him. And it’s just one illustration of what can come from just that little bit of kindness and support at a key stage of people's lives.

You still do a bit of traveling abroad. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the, the work that you do where you've got sort of, experimental test centres, if you like, or places?

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

So one of the really exciting things that me and colleagues have developed is the Refugee Led Research Hub based in Nairobi, and it's really trying to do what it says on the tin, to support refugees who are aspiring researchers, to have the opportunity to build research careers so they lead at all stages of the research process on questions that matter to them: refugees’ access to work permits, refugee-led organisations’ impact, and why they’re neglected by humanitarian donorship and humanitarian funding. And we also try to ensure that people who are involved in those programmes have a pathway to access graduate scholarships around the world.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Yes. Fantastic. Well, what work. It's so inspiring. Just to hear a little bit.

Well, let's pivot now, because I'm sitting here at the table with you and I have this glossy brochure, [Beyond Town and Gown](https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Local_engagement_report_2025.pdf), in the context of the role that you've been taken on in my leadership team. Could you tell us a little bit about sort of the journey you feel you've been on, in rising to the challenge I set you, which is if we're going to sort of talk the talk on a global level, we need to be able to walk the walk locally, in terms of some of the needs here.

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

I’ve absolutely loved working on local engagement. I've lived in Oxford for the past 20 years and it's become my home. And so the chance to have a role in which every day I get to discover new parts of the community, meet amazing people working in our schools, in our local organisations across government and business is really inspiring, but also to get to learn about all the things that we're doing across our colleges and universities, often below the radar. People are doing extraordinary things with local impact, and what we've tried to do is start up some new things, get our students and our colleagues involved in local engagement, ensure we build stronger relationships with the city, the county, the communities on our doorstep, and be a better neighbour. But we've also realised we need to tell a better story about what we're doing.

We need to be more joined up and ensure that people across the local community know that the University is open, that it's accessible, that they can visit our colleges, that the gardens, libraries and museums that we have offer extraordinary programmes and are part of the University. Sometimes you might enter the Arboretum or the Botanic Gardens and not know it's part of the University. We want to get that message out there.

So this report, which we're really excited to launch, [Beyond Town and Gown,](https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Local_engagement_report_2025.pdf) is a way of demonstrating a real commitment of the University to work locally, to work in partnership, to be collaborative, but also to showcase some of the many areas in which we're already doing some great stuff. That is a starting point we can build on, and it covers areas like our schools outreach work, how we're building bridges through sport, some of our emerging cultural programmes that have community impact, how we want to be part of shaping an inclusive economy, our sanctuary work...and it's been really exciting to put it together and showcase some of the amazing things colleagues across the whole collegiate university are already doing. We know it's just a starting point. We know it's going to take time to turn the page on 800 years of Town and Gown, but there's real momentum and it's been great to work on.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

As I've often said, I am Town and Gown. So having been born and bred here, and it does matter you know, for both the town to understand that many of us who work here, you know, and raise families here, you know, we are very much the town as well as working for the University. But there's so much that we all doing and have been doing, but to be able to sort of curate that and bring that together, I think has been really helpful for everyone, but also to do a bit more listening and to sort of realise, okay, well, where could we make maybe more impact? Rather than having 20 different schemes on X, we could pull it together and use that firepower of the University, to make a real difference in certain areas, and I think that now is the next stage for us.

But we of course want to play out on a national and international stage as well. I know that you've been instrumental in helping think about our Oxford-Berlin Partnership and some of the other sort of particularly European partnerships that that we have. How are we as a University, making sure that we've got good relations with our European colleagues, particularly in the university sector? And how do you see that shaping up going forward?

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

I think it's really important, whether it's locally, nationally or globally, that we have the greatest positive impact we can have socially, economically, environmentally, and that we do that obviously primarily through our teaching and research. But as an organisation that we think systematically and strategically about that. At the global level, it's really important that we make the most of our relationships with Europe.

Since Brexit, I think the University has tried a number of things to re-establish strong connections with different parts of Europe. One of the most obvious is our multi-institutional partnership with a series of Berlin universities, the Oxford-Berlin Research Partnership. It's been going for about seven years now, but we're really trying to put it on a more strategic footing.

A lot of our research in the University emerges bottom up, and rightly so. It comes from researchers, their own ideas, it comes from within departments and our divisions. But the question is where and how can we add value from the central University and the Oxford-Berlin Research Partnership is striving to do that. It's striving to say, how can we identify where there might be untapped potential connections between things our researchers are doing in areas that might be around democratic resilience, ageing societies, quantum…we've got good emerging connections with the four main Berlin institutions with which we work, and how can we connect them with researchers doing similar or related things on the Berlin side, and then put them on a pathway where those conversations can flourish and turn into world-class research and access funding? So we're trying to put in place the resources, the support, that can really mobilise that and do something with it.

Now, this isn't just about Oxford Berlin, it's about that wider set of connections with Europe. And there are other things going on, Irene. We recently went up to London and you signed a new memorandum of understanding with the Université Libre de Bruxelles based in Brussels, a longstanding collaboration supported by a wonderful foundation, the Wiener–Anspach Foundation, that provides mobility opportunities for our students, early-career researchers, visiting professorship opportunities, postdocs…it's a great example of what can be done with those institutional collaborations that create opportunities for us, but also our partners.

It's really important that we are part of Europe. As Britain reconnects to Europe in the aftermath of Brexit, but also that we look beyond Europe, that we think globally of where and how can we build support for our colleagues to build strategic partnerships, whether it's in Africa, whether it's in the Far East, whether it's looking west at the United States, and whether we're thinking about research, educational opportunities and the digital opportunities to extend our reach or whether it's around innovation, an area that you've done such a great job in championing, to say let's support our spin outs and start-ups to scale to the US and elsewhere.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Yeah, no, absolutely. I think the opportunity is, is, you know, just awe-inspiring almost what we can do because, you know, just the great brand recognition that Oxford has, the presence that we have had, you know, over millennia, you know, in terms of contributions to not just the nation, but the world.

Well Alex, just to finish. You like me like a bit of running, but you are in a different league to me. Let's be frank. I mean, I'm schlepping in my latest marathon at 4:45, which I think is not too bad considering I have no time to train. But you whip in at like 2.5 hours a marathon, which is just insane. I don't know how you do it on top of everything else I make you do. And, a father of three young children. But sport matters to you like it matters to me. And you've also been really great at taking on, the challenge of how can we put sport more central to, again, what we do as a University to make sure that our offering of sport at a university-level is what it should be for a global world-leading, number one – again listeners – University of the world. I really feel we're not there yet with our particular offering down at Iffley Road. So maybe just finish by telling us, you know, our ambitions around what we can do down there and what help we need.

**Professor Alexander Betts:**

Well, first of all, it's incredibly inspiring having a Vice-Chancellor who can go to the Chicago Marathon and run it in 4:45 and I think it sets an example for how important sport and physical activity are for the whole community.

It has huge benefits for our students and our staff. All the evidence says that it contributes to their well-being, is positively correlated with better, stronger academic outcomes amongst our students. And yet our facilities aren't what they should be. We don't match the facilities that exist across many other UK universities, let alone when we look across the Atlantic to US institutions, even the smallest liberal arts colleges have facilities that would put us to shame. So I think what we're trying to do is build a clear vision for what sport means to our community and develop a strategy for gradually fundraising to ensure we can transform Iffley Road and make sure that all of our student athletes, at whatever level, even those that want to just use the facilities for exercise, can have that as part of their Oxford experience.

What I've been really excited about is bringing sport together with our community engagement, having, for instance, our Sport Leaders Programme, where we've got secondary school kids from the state secondaries across Oxford, coming in one day a week to the University, having sports coaching from our Blues athletes in the morning, having lunch in a college, learning from some of our academics in the afternoon, but always with a link to sport: so the anthropology of football crowd behaviour, mathematical modelling for football…

We can bring to life for the wider community what we do through sport. Sport builds bridges. So for all those reasons, this has to be a priority for the University. And I'm really excited to be part of working with you and others in our sports department and beyond, to think about what we can do to make sport and physical activity a core part of who we are, what we do, and what we offer students, the community and our colleagues.

**Professor Irene Tracey:**

Well, Alex, we've come to the end of our time and thank you so much. I'm so grateful to you for everything that you do, not just as an academic, but particularly in the leadership team in terms of, again, championing our local and national and global engagements and partnerships, and putting sport centre. So good luck with everything that you're doing and thank you again for joining us on Fire and Wire. And thank you to the listeners and I look forward to joining you at the next episode. Bye now.