

Thames Valley Leadership

Summit 2026

*Building Tomorrow, Today – Inclusive Leadership for a
Flourishing Thames Valley*

Executive Report

Prepared by:
Imam Monawar Hussain



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I was delighted to welcome everyone to the Thames Valley Leadership summit held at Reading University on 28th April 2026. Promoting interfaith creates trust, friendship, and harmony within our communities, and, as such, it is a fundamental priority for His Majesty The King.

This interfaith event brought together many people of different faiths from across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. We all shared a common interest and a desire to promote mutual connections between our different faiths and our communities, it was a day of enjoyment, hope and belief.

Mr Andrew Try
Lord-Lieutenant for the Royal County of Berkshire

Foreword

The Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026 brought together over 100 leaders from civic, faith, education, community, university, and youth backgrounds, with young people making up a quarter of those present. Hosted by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading and the Students' Union, and delivered in partnership with the Berkshire Lieutenancy, the summit created a strong and timely space for shared learning and collaboration.

Yesterday's Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026 was a powerful reminder that leadership is not built through authority alone. It is built through listening, shared responsibility, and the courage to stay in difficult conversations long enough to create better outcomes.¹

The 2025 summit helped establish important foundations for interfaith understanding, community cohesion, and practical leadership. This year's summit built on that work with a clear focus on inclusive leadership, trust, belonging, resilience, and courageous dialogue across difference.

As Co-Chairs of the Thames Valley Civic, Community and Faith Leaders Group, we thank all our partners, speakers, facilitators, and participants for making the day such a success. We are grateful to the Vice Chancellor, Professor Van de Noort, of the University of Reading, and the Students' Union for their generous hospitality and for providing the venue, the Berkshire Lieutenancy, and The Oxford Foundation for bringing the summit to fruition. We especially note here our thanks to Graham Barker DL, Vice Lord-Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire, for offering to host this summit in Berkshire and to the volunteers on the day: Alison Murray, Richard Bennett, Carol Jackson-Doerge DL, Bushrah Hussain and Usha Kar. Thanks are also due to Leonard Sackey (Riverside Learning Trust and The Oxford Academy), Sarah Emery (Berkshire Youth) and Mr R Tamale (Kennet School, Reading) for their support in facilitating the participation of the young people.

The programme reflected the concerns and priorities raised by delegates last year, beginning with a simple but important question: what do our communities need most in 2026? The day then moved from keynote reflection to a panel on trust, belonging, and resilience, followed by partnership conversations, youth and civic innovation, and courageous conversations across difference. This structure helped ensure that the summit was not only informative but practical and participatory.

One of the strongest reflections of the day was this: Young people need more than representation; they need meaningful participation.

¹ Delegate feedback is taken from written responses and social media comment.

We were especially pleased to welcome young people to this year's summit. Their presence and contributions were central to the day, and the feedback from delegates made clear how important it is to keep young voices at the heart of our shared leadership. Young people brought insight, honesty, and urgency to the conversation, especially on digital literacy, misinformation, and leadership pathways.

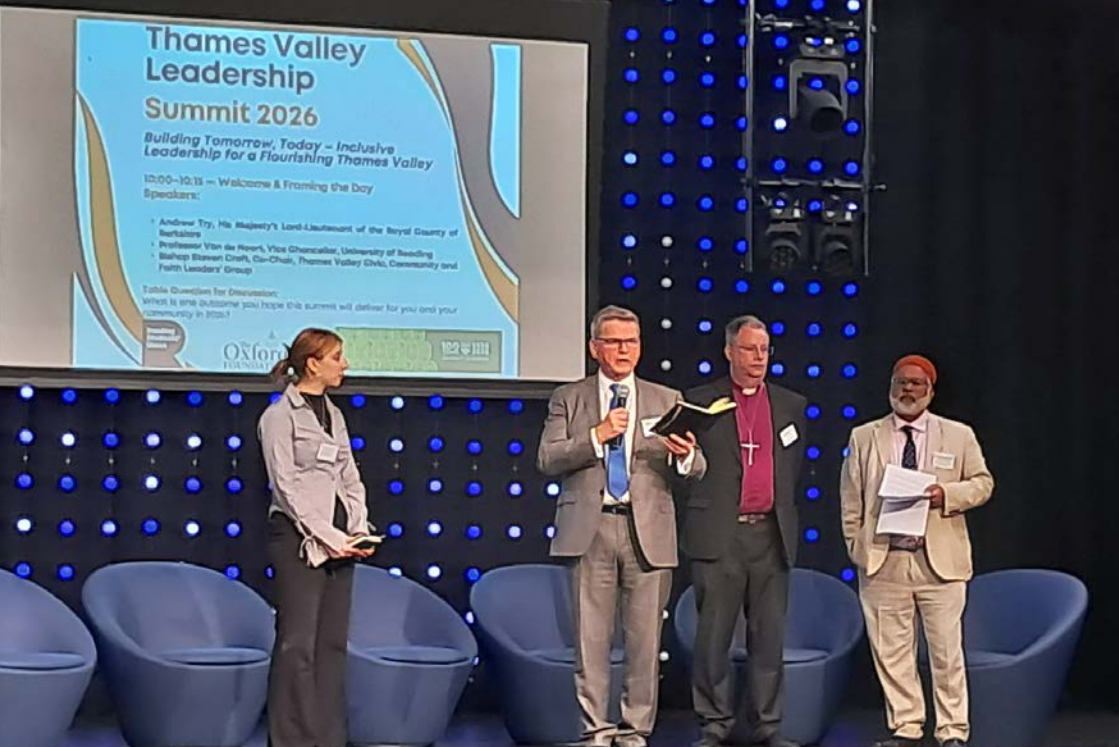
The feedback was strongly positive. Delegates described the summit in terms of belonging, trust, confidence, emotional safety, collaboration, hope, dialogue, and unity, and many said the event helped them make new connections or strengthen existing ones. That response shows that the summit was not only well received but genuinely useful in helping to shape future action.

This report records the day, but it also points ahead. We hope that the relationships, conversations, and commitments formed here will continue to deepen cooperation across the Thames Valley and support leadership that serves the common good.

Finally, we want to express our sincere gratitude to Bishop Steven Croft for his support of this group over the past few years as Co-Chair, and for his thoughtful, wise, and generous leadership. We also thank him for his service as Bishop of Oxford, from which he retired on 31 May 2026.

Imam Monawar Hussain and Bishop Gavin Collins

Co-Chairs, Thames Valley Civic, Community and Faith Leaders Group



Above (from left to right): Opening the Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026 Tiam Koravand, Professor Robert Van Der Noort, Bishop Steven Croft and Imam Monawar Hussain

Below: Bishop Mary Gregory in Conversation with students from the Oxford Academy, River Learning Trust.



Executive summary

The Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026 was a major regional gathering that brought together around 100 participants from civic, faith, education, community, university, and youth backgrounds at the University of Reading on 28 April 2026. Its purpose was not simply to host a conference, but to create a serious leadership space in which youth participation, trust, belonging, resilience, and interfaith understanding could be discussed, modelled, and translated into action across the Thames Valley.

I joined the summit as a learner, and that perspective made the day especially meaningful. The room was full of thoughtful leadership across civic, faith, education and community sectors. What stood out most was the quality of the conversation, thoughtful, grounded, and willing to engage with the realities shaping communities today. The discussions moved with honesty and care across themes of trust, belonging, youth participation, leadership responsibility, and the growing need for stronger community relationships in an increasingly complex world.

The summit succeeded because it was coherent from start to finish. The welcome, keynote, panel discussion, lunch conversations, youth innovation session, courageous conversations workshop, and closing reflections all pointed in the same direction: inclusive leadership is everyone's responsibility, and flourishing communities depend on trust-building, shared learning, and practical collaboration across differences.

84% rated the event Excellent or Very good, 100% said they would recommend it, 100% said it helped them make new connections or strengthen existing ones, and 84% felt at least somewhat confident about taking a next step afterwards.

Across the qualitative evidence, participants repeatedly identified belonging, trust, confidence, emotional safety, collaboration, respect, hope, dialogue, unity, and connection as the summit's strongest outcomes.

What makes this summit especially significant is that it did more than confirm good intentions. It surfaced important challenges facing our leaders and communities, mistrust, misinformation, intergenerational distance, youth exclusion, digital confusion, and the challenge of difficult interfaith or civic conversations, and then offered a practical leadership framework for responding to them. The result was a day that felt both principled and practical, emotionally resonant and operationally useful, with clear value for future community leadership across the Thames Valley.

Summit purpose and setting

The summit was framed under the theme “Building Tomorrow, Today – Inclusive Leadership for a Flourishing Thames Valley,” a title that accurately captured both the ambitions of the day and the style in which it was run. The structure moved from welcome and framing, to keynote reflection, to a trust-and-belonging panel, then to a partnership lunch, youth-led civic discussion, courageous conversations, and closing commitments. That structure is important because it allowed the summit to function as a kind of leadership laboratory: delegates did not just hear ideas; they encountered those ideas in different formats and with different voices throughout the day.

The choice of venue at the University of Reading also mattered. The notes indicate that the university was already thinking about inclusivity, interfaith understanding, and the need for more difficult conversations; the Student Union President underlined that the summit reflected positively on the campus and created a space where differences could be acknowledged honestly rather than flattened into superficial similarity. The university setting enabled young people to participate and, for some schools, made attendance more feasible because the event took place in a higher-education space rather than a church hall or civic office.

The opening atmosphere was one of welcome, seriousness, and hope. Imam Monawar Hussain introduced the summit, framing it as an important part of a longer-term effort to bring people together across the Thames Valley and strengthen trust, belonging, and resilience. Andrew Try, the Lord Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire, linked the event to public values such as democracy, mutual respect, the rule of law, individual liberty, and tolerance of those of different faiths, and he also emphasised the King’s interest in interfaith work as a route to peace. Professor Robert Van de Noort spoke about the university’s diversity and the need to learn from faith perspectives, while Tiam Koravand, President of the Students’ Union, stressed that inclusion is not about pretending we are all the same but about listening to each other’s differences and experiences.

Opening leadership frame

Bishop Steven Croft provided one of the early anchoring contributions of the day. He stressed that leadership in the community is difficult and demanding, that it requires care for oneself as well as care for others, and that faith traditions place character and integrity before skill or proficiency. His three insights were simple but powerful: leadership is a serious responsibility, all leadership should be understood as service to the community, and leadership is fundamentally a test of character.

This mattered because it prepared the audience to hear the keynote not as abstract theory, but as a practical and moral challenge. Bishop Croft’s framing also linked naturally to the summit’s wider emphasis on building capacity across schools, faith communities, civic life, and industry, rather than limiting leadership to formal posts or elite roles. In that sense, the summit began by establishing a broad and inclusive understanding of what leadership actually means.



Above: Professor Andrew Davies delivering his keynote address
Below: Imam Monawar facilitating table discussions



Keynote contribution

Professor Andrew Davies' keynote, "Faith, Civic Life & Flourishing Societies: Lessons for Modern Leadership," gave the summit its conceptual centre. He began with two deceptively simple questions: what worries you most about the world, and who do you trust to fix it? He used them to surface a broader crisis of trust in institutions and leadership. His argument was that leadership is no longer something to be expected from "someone else"; rather, leadership is everyone's responsibility in the places where they already live, work, and serve.

Listening to Professor Andrew Davies discuss the balance between human, personal and professional experience was extremely informative, and I look forward to applying this in my own leadership roles.

Davies' acronym, L.I.F.E. — Leadership Is For Everyone — was one of the most memorable ideas of the summit. He argued that leadership is not a person or a position, but a complex moral relationship between people based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good. He then sharpened the point by saying that leadership is the moral obligation to use whatever influence you have to take responsibility for transformative intervention. This moved the discussion away from title or rank and toward influence, responsibility, and moral seriousness.

The keynote also drew a clear distinction between protest and transformation. Davies did not dismiss protest, but he argued that protest on its own changes very little and that the harder work of leadership lies in using influence to build bridges, sustain relationships, and act concretely. That point was especially relevant at a summit concerned with interfaith and civic leadership, as it challenged the temptation to confuse moral certainty with practical change.

Slow leadership and influence

One of the most useful and widely repeated elements of the keynote was the idea of "slow leadership." Davies described this not as indecision, but as conscious leadership: seeing the world differently, reinterpreting one's place in it, and acting from greater self-understanding. He proposed a sequence — pause, centre, listen, reflect, engage, intervene — that gives leaders a practical method for responding to complexity with discernment rather than reactivity.

This concept resonated because it bridged inner formation and public action. In the notes, Davies said that leaders need to understand what they are good at, what they are not good at, and what they have to offer, while also recognising how they connect to their colleagues, organisations, and wider networks. In a society marked by social complexity, institutional distrust, misinformation, and generational tension, this kind of reflective leadership is highly relevant because it resists both impulsive reaction and passive inertia.

The keynote's use of the Serenity Prayer added another layer. Davies used it to emphasise that there are things we cannot change, things we can change, and the moral wisdom of knowing the difference. That idea resonated with participants on a personal level, giving language to the limits of control while still insisting on responsibility and action.

Experiential leadership model

Davies' distinction between professional, personal, and human experience was one of the most important conceptual contributions of the summit. Professional experience refers to the duties, skills, and responsibilities tied to a role; personal experience refers to background, education, intercultural learning, failure, and interpersonal development; human experience refers to the values, character, belief system, and interpersonal connection that make a person distinctly themselves. His point was that leadership draws power from the whole person, not just from formal competence.

| Leadership is for everyone.

This model matters because it makes leadership more inclusive and more honest. If the human element is what makes leaders unique, then people from different backgrounds, faiths, and life journeys bring real value to public life rather than merely representing "diversity" in a narrow sense. The summit's wider theme of flourishing societies depends on this kind of recognition: flourishing is not just about efficient institutions, but about leaders who bring empathy, self-awareness, values, and moral purpose into public space.

Table Discussion Insights

Reframing Leadership: From Authority to Shared Moral Practice

Across all groups, there was strong convergence around a redefinition of leadership as a **distributed, ethical, and relational practice**, rather than a positional or hierarchical function.

Participants emphasised a **moral obligation underpinning leadership**, with a shared belief that individuals, regardless of role, bear responsibility for contributing to the common good. Leadership was frequently framed as **selfless, values-driven action**, grounded in integrity, empathy, and reflection.

Several key themes emerged:

- **Leadership is universal and accessible:** Groups highlighted that leadership is not confined to formal roles. "Ordinary people" were often perceived as the most trusted and respected actors, reinforcing the concept of **everyday leadership**.
- **Community over individualism:** Leadership was viewed as a **collective endeavour**, where communities, not individuals, drive change. This included enabling others to lead and widening participation in decision-making.
- **Power of small actions:** Many groups stressed that **incremental, localised actions** can generate significant ripple effects, suggesting that leadership impact is often cumulative rather than immediate.

- **Credibility and trust dynamics:** Reflections on the “veracity” model suggested that **trust is often stronger at local, relational levels**, while broader influence can dilute perceived credibility.

Implication for practice:

Leadership development should prioritise **capacity-building across communities**, embedding leadership as a shared civic function and reinforcing behaviours such as reflection, ethical communication, and modelling positive norms.

Panel on trust and belonging

The plenary panel on trust, belonging, and resilience extended the keynote into the civic and relational realm. The panel was chaired by Graham Barker, Vice Lord-Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire, and brought together the Bishop of Reading, the Mayor of Reading, a Rabbi, a community foundation leader, and a faith-and-community organiser. That breadth itself embodied the summit’s aim: resilience is not created by any one sector alone, but by relationships across faith, civic, education, and community life.

Bishop Mary Gregory argued that trust and belonging begin with acquaintance and relationship, and only later become durable social realities. She emphasised the importance of storytelling as opposed to supposition, arguing that reconciliation is born out of “rich storytelling and courageous listening.” She also pointed to the danger of quick judgement and the tendency to rely on narratives that are presented as facts without real listening. Her contribution was especially valuable because it translated trust into practical behaviour: spend time together, listen carefully, and let people’s stories reshape assumptions.

Such an inspiration to hear from so many faith and civic leaders about how to foster harmony within our society. It was a privilege to join a panel on "Trust, Belonging & Resilience in the Thames Valley", which feels a more pressing issue than ever.

Zoe Springs brought a local and environmental perspective, describing how community resilience depends on the ability to improve the place where one lives, while also warning about climate change, biodiversity loss, and long-term security pressures. She located community leadership within wider social responsibility, reminding delegates that the future of local communities is connected to larger environmental and economic realities. That widened the summit’s horizon beyond immediate interpersonal trust to the conditions that shape whether communities feel safe and hopeful at all.

Alice Mpofu-Coles emphasised that trust is broken when institutions fail to protect people or when voices are not centred. She stressed that inclusion is not simply inviting people into existing structures but creating new spaces that are genuinely better for everyone. Her reflections on being accepted as a refugee by strangers, and on resilience as something built one person at a time, gave the panel a deeply human grounding. She also drew attention to the pressure many people feel to stay silent when orthodoxies are enforced or when hate speech and fear make authenticity difficult.

Julie Siddiqi added a powerful interfaith and gender-conscious perspective. She argued that it is not enough for faith groups to talk only among themselves; instead, faith, business, community, and youth all need to be in the room together. She referenced the importance of public solidarity statements, such as joint work between rabbis, imams and bishops after moments of violence, and emphasised empathy, showing up, and the need for more women in leadership roles. Her contribution strengthened the summit's message that leadership must be collaborative, compassionate, and visibly inclusive.

Rabbi Rene Pfertzel offered a strong narrative and philosophical contribution. Drawing on his background as a history teacher and rabbi, he argued that the crisis in public life is partly a crisis of narration: we have moved from telling stories to "story selling." He stressed that stories only work when they are genuine and that interfaith work requires first listening to each other's stories, including difficult ones. His insistence that people should "pick up the side of humanity" rather than take sides in a simplistic way connected strongly with the summit's broader call for dialogue across difference.

Table Discussion Insights

Building Trust and Belonging: Local Pressures and Practical Responses Key Pressures on Trust

Participants identified **trust as being under significant strain**, with several consistent drivers:

- **Misinformation and social media amplification**, contributing to agitation, polarisation, and distorted perceptions of groups.
- **Uncertainty and fear of the future**, often leading to stereotyping, particularly of non-extremist majorities being characterised by minority behaviours.
- **Lack of meaningful dialogue**, resulting in groups being represented by vocal minorities rather than authentic engagement.
- **Institutional gaps**, especially where local authorities or services are perceived as failing to meet community needs.
- **Intergroup mistrust**, including tensions both between and within communities.

Practical Strategies for Fostering Belonging

Participants proposed a range of **pragmatic, locally grounded interventions**:

1. **Creating shared spaces and experiences**
 - Social and cultural events (e.g. community and iftar meals, sports) were seen as effective in building informal relationships and trust.
 - "Third spaces" (neutral environments outside home/work/school) were identified as critical but declining.



Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026
Building Tomorrow, Today – Inclusive Leadership for a Flourishing Thames Valley
 11:30-12:30 – Plenary Panel: Trust, Belonging & Resilience in the Thames Valley

Chair: Graham Barker OLS, Vice Lord-Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire
 Panelists:
 - Rt Hon Alice Gregory, The Bishop of Reading
 - Rt Hon Alice Mpfu-Coles, Mayor of Reading
 - Lord Alton of Liverpool, Member of Parliament
 - Lord Squire, CBE, Trustworthy We Trust
 - Zoe Spriggs, CEO, Berkshire Community Foundation
 - Rabbi Rene Pfertzel, Chief Rabbi of Reading

What do you see most under strain locally, and what effect is this having?
 What practical steps could leaders take together to foster a sense of belonging?

Reading Community Foundation | Oxford University | 128 1111

Above (left to right): Graham Barker, Vice Lord-Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire, Zoe Spriggs, Julie Siddiqi, Rabbi Rene Pfertzel, Dr Alice Mpfu-Coles and Bishop Mary Gregory

Below: Jane Clements delivering 'Courageous Conversation'



2. **Structured dialogue and listening**
 - Emphasis on **deep listening**, acceptance of diverse viewpoints, and creating safe environments to challenge assumptions.
 - Dialogue as a mechanism to counter misinformation and humanise different perspectives.
3. **Interfaith and cross-community engagement**
 - Encouraging **joint activities and collaboration across faiths and communities** to build understanding.
 - Strengthening partnerships between **local authorities, businesses, and community groups**.
4. **Intergenerational approaches**
 - Targeted dialogue between age groups revealed strong demand for **greater exposure and understanding**, particularly on complex or sensitive social issues.
5. **Education and perspective-building**
 - Both formal and informal education were highlighted as tools to expose individuals to **alternative viewpoints and critical thinking skills**.

Implication for practice:

Effective trust-building requires **intentional, sustained interaction**, combining structured dialogue with informal relationship-building. Investment in community infrastructure (spaces, facilitation, partnerships) is essential.

Youth leadership and civic innovation

The youth innovation panel was one of the summit's most consequential sessions. Young contributors addressed congestion charging and low traffic neighbourhoods in Oxford, youth voice and participation, AI, digital literacy, climate justice, economic instability, and the practical barriers that prevent young people from being heard or included. Their contributions were not decorative or tokenistic; they were analytical, evidence-aware, and clearly connected to the everyday realities young people face.

Hearing directly from young voices was one of the most important parts of the summit. Their reflections were clear: they want to be heard, they want meaningful involvement, and they want systems designed with them, not simply delivered to them.

The Oxford Academy students approached the congestion charge and LTNs as a civic trade-off. They acknowledged environmental benefits, such as reducing pollution and congestion, but argued that these policies also create hardship for residents, young workers, school attendance, and businesses. Their discussion showed political reasoning in action: weighing benefits, costs, fairness, and local impact. Just as importantly, they said that young people often do not get heard and that communities need to build spaces where everyone can express how they feel.

The Kennet School students focused on youth participation, AI, and the future of civic life. They made a strong case that young people should not be seen only as “the future”, but as present-day contributors whose ideas matter now, especially in areas such as education, technology, health, and climate. Their message was clear: young people are living with the consequences of today’s decisions, and their voices need to be heard, valued, and acted upon.

Their reflections on digital ethics were especially compelling. They recognised that AI is unavoidable, but argued that it must be used responsibly and kept under control, not allowed to shape society unchecked. They also raised important questions about the environmental cost of data systems, reminding delegates that innovation must be weighed against its wider impact.

The students’ contribution also pointed to a practical example of youth voice in action: Kennet School’s Youth Council, where students have real roles and responsibilities rather than simply being consulted by adults.

I had the incredible opportunity to contribute to the Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026. We thoroughly enjoyed being a part of thoughtful discussions surrounding inclusivity, trust and belonging, alongside giving our own presentation on "Our Region, Our Future".

Maryam Ahmed brought a powerful structural critique. She described the precarity of arts and community work, the burden of student debt, the difficulty of setting up civic initiatives, and the unfairness of unpaid internships and inaccessible opportunities. Her call for travel expenses, paid routes into leadership, and practical support for young people was one of the clearest calls for structural reform in the day. She showed that if summits want youth participation to be real, they must address barriers in the design of opportunity itself.

Tayyibah Hussain highlighted digital trust and misinformation. She described how false stories and AI-generated content can spread quickly and why young people need better support to assess what is real and what is not. She also discussed how social media shapes gender presentation, influence, and self-understanding, showing that digital life is not a side topic but a central leadership issue for the present generation.

Job McGuire, the Reading University Catholic Society President and a philosopher, stressed the need for dialogue across boundaries. He argued that people often isolate themselves within their own religious or cultural groups, which weakens depth, confidence, and the ability to debate well. He insisted that communities need to speak with one another if they are to avoid cycles of hatred and misunderstanding. His contribution reinforced the summit’s broader point that confidence and dialogue are mutually reinforcing.



Bishop Mary Gregory in conversation with Tayyibah Hussain, University of reading student

Structural barriers to participation

Taken together, the youth contributions exposed several structural barriers that limit participation. These included financial exclusion, unpaid work, lack of transport support, low confidence encouraged by institutions, weak public platforms for youth voices, and the persistence of adult assumptions that young people do not know enough or are not ready to contribute. The repeated call for better pathways shows that youth inclusion is not simply a matter of invitation but of access, resources, and shared authority.

This is one of the summit's most important findings because it moves the conversation from representation to infrastructure. If young people are to shape the future, the region must create systems that are affordable, responsive, and genuinely open to their ideas and leadership. That has implications for schools, universities, councils, faith communities, employers, and third-sector organisations alike.

Digital culture and truth

The summit also addressed the digital environment as a leadership challenge. Young speakers repeatedly raised misinformation, AI, social media, and the difficulty of telling what is true in an information-rich but trust-poor environment. This matters because the summit's theme of trust cannot be separated from the systems that shape how people see the world and each other.

The discussion recognised that digital platforms are both useful and risky. They help leaders reach younger audiences and make institutions visible, but they can also reward speed, simplification, and manipulation. The most valuable response from the summit was not fear but discernment: the need for digital literacy, critical thinking, and ethical responsibility in what we consume and share.

Table Discussion Insights

Youth Engagement: Barriers and Opportunities

Key Barriers Identified

Feedback revealed significant structural and cultural barriers limiting young people's participation in civic life:

- **Lack of platforms and voice:** Young people reported limited opportunities to express their views or influence decisions.
- **Perceived lack of respect:** Experiences of being dismissed or ignored by institutions and adults were common.
- **Economic and structural constraints:** Cost-of-living pressures and limited access to opportunities restrict engagement.
- **Education system limitations:**
 - Insufficient focus on real-world issues and civic awareness.
 - Learning environments that may inhibit confidence (e.g. restrictive participation norms).
- **Digital and cultural disconnects:**
 - Generational misunderstandings around technology and social media.
 - Unrealistic expectations shaped by online success narratives.

- **Representation gaps:** Young people often feel spoken for rather than included directly.

Priority Enablers and Partnerships

Participants identified key actions to address these barriers:

- **Embedding youth voice in decision-making**, including access to political and civic forums.
- **Strengthening intergenerational collaboration**, fostering mutual accountability and shared learning.
- **Improving accessibility**, including financial inclusion and equitable opportunities.
- **Reforming education frameworks** to reflect contemporary realities and future careers.
- **Building confidence and leadership skills**, particularly through participatory and experiential learning.

Implication for practice:

Youth inclusion requires **systemic change**, combining institutional reform with cultural shifts in how young people are perceived and engaged.

Courageous conversations

The final workshop on courageous conversations brought many of the summit's themes together. Facilitated by Jane Clements, it focused on the hardest issues communities face, including Israel and Palestine, immigration, religious division, identity, finance, and the fear of saying the wrong thing. Participants identified the role of media, misunderstanding, orthodoxy, and the pressure to pick sides as factors that make honest conversation difficult.

The value of this session lay in its insistence that difficult topics can be handled well if the structure is right. Delegates stressed the need for calm, independently facilitated conversations, ground rules, third spaces, deeper listening, and the patience to let people come back to conversations rather than force quick agreement. This is a significant leadership insight: dialogue is not merely a courtesy; it is a discipline that requires design, care, and trust.

Table Discussion Insights

Navigating Difficult Conversations: Barriers and Enablers

Core Challenges

Participants identified a range of **sensitive and polarising issues** that are difficult to address, including:

- International conflicts (notably Israel–Palestine)
- Immigration and integration
- Religious identity and intra-faith divisions
- Class and economic inequality
- Gender and social norms



Building Trust and Belonging panel in action

Barriers to constructive dialogue included:

- **Fear of offence or reputational risk** discourages open discussion.
- **Binary framing of issues**, with pressure to align with particular “sides”.
- **Fragmented information ecosystems**, with divergent news sources reducing shared understanding.
- **Internal community pressures** limit openness to dialogue.
- **Simplification of complex issues**, preventing deeper analysis.

Enablers of Productive Dialogue

Participants highlighted several effective approaches:

1. **Structured, facilitated conversations**
 - Use of skilled moderation, clear ground rules, and intentional formats (e.g. circles, silence, no interruption).
 - Success is defined not by agreement, but by **continued willingness to engage**.
2. **Relational and human-centred approaches**
 - Emphasis on kindness, empathy, and recognising shared humanity.
 - Understanding that disagreement can coexist with respect.
3. **Institutional and community support**
 - Schools, universities, and faith groups are acting as convenors of dialogue.
 - Investment in time and funding for sustained engagement.
4. **Normalising difference**
 - Integrating diversity into everyday interactions rather than isolating it as an “issue”.
5. **Local grounding**
 - Addressing national or global issues through **locally relevant, community-based conversations**.

Implication for practice:

Leaders must prioritise **process over outcome** in difficult conversations, investing in facilitation, trust-building, and long-term engagement structures.

What participants wanted from the summit

The feedback data consistently points to the same desired outcomes: stronger relationships, clearer trust, deeper understanding, and more room for youth voice. Survey respondents valued youth contribution, keynote input, panel discussion, table conversations, and informal networking, indicating that the summit’s interactive elements were as important as its presentations.

In the Slido responses, delegates wanted belonging, confidence, collaboration, respect, hope, dialogue, unity, and emotional safety, while in the commitments poll they asked for deeper listening, safer dialogue, more youth involvement, and more interfaith and intergenerational connection.

This means the summit was received not just as a useful event but as a meaningful leadership process. Participants did not simply want information; they wanted a

stronger civic culture and clearer pathways for action. That distinction is important because it shows the summit has moved beyond being a one-off convening event to now functioning as a platform for ongoing leadership development.

Quantitative outcomes

The survey results give the summit a clear numerical profile. 84% rated the event Excellent or Very good, 74% said the theme was delivered extremely well, 74% said it was very relevant to their role or community, and 100% said they would recommend it at least somewhat. Just as importantly, 100% said the summit helped them make new connections or strengthen existing ones to some degree, which is one of the strongest indicators of social value and civic impact.

The confidence question also points to meaningful follow-through. 84% said they were at least somewhat confident about taking the next step after the summit, with a number saying they were extremely confident. That suggests the summit did not end in inspiration; it created at least some momentum toward practical action.

One of the most helpful suggestions from attendees was that future summits should allow more time for table discussions and shared reflection. This underlines the value of attendee participation and suggests that, if the Summit is to deepen engagement, it will need to make more space for dialogue.

Slido outcomes and commitments

The Slido feedback adds an important layer of insight because it shows the summit's emotional and cultural impact more directly. In the outcomes poll, delegates most often used words like belonging, trust, confidence, emotional safety, collaboration, respect, service, hope, dialogue, unity, understanding, integrity, cohesion, and connection. These are not vague sentiments; they are the building blocks of a healthier civic culture.

The commitments poll went further by revealing what participants intended to do next. Delegates said they wanted to listen more deeply, put young people front and centre, create safer spaces, involve youth in decision-making, challenge binary thinking, translate discussion into action, and make more space for interfaith and intergenerational work. The repetition of listening, youth inclusion, and dialogue shows that the summit created a practical vocabulary for follow-up.

Social coverage and public resonance

The social-media coverage confirms that the summit's impact extended beyond the room. Contributors described the day as thoughtful, powerful, well-held, and deeply relevant to contemporary civic challenges, and they praised the quality of the conversations, the breadth of sectors involved, and the seriousness of the leadership reflected on stage.

A particularly important theme in the social coverage was that leadership is built through listening, shared responsibility, and the courage to stay in difficult conversations long enough to create better outcomes. That language mirrors the

summit's own framing almost exactly, which indicates that the event succeeded in communicating its core purpose clearly and persuasively. The online response also strongly reinforced the importance of youth voice, with multiple contributors noting that young people need meaningful participation rather than token representation.

Overall impact

The summit's broader impact can be understood in four ways. First, it provided a shared leadership language that linked faith, civic life, and community responsibility in a way that felt practical rather than abstract. Second, it made youth contribution visible and substantive, showing that young people are already analysing the challenges shaping the region and can speak with clarity about policy, fairness, digital culture, and future leadership. Third, it deepened the regional conversation about trust, belonging, and resilience by connecting personal stories to structural issues such as misinformation, climate change, exclusion, and public disconnection. Fourth, it created momentum for follow-up. The feedback suggests participants left with a stronger sense of purpose, a greater appreciation of the value of dialogue, and clearer commitments to listen, collaborate, and act in their own settings. That is a strong indicator that the summit had not just a positive atmosphere, but a meaningful developmental effect on the people in the room.

Sustainable leadership grows through trust, courageous dialogue, and shared responsibility across communities.

The Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2026 stands as a clear step forward in strengthening the region's civic, community, and faith leadership ecosystem.

The summit successfully convened a diverse and representative cross-section of leaders, including a significant and substantive youth presence, and translated complex challenges into a shared, practical leadership agenda.

This summit's achievements can be understood across four key dimensions. First, it **consolidated a shared understanding of inclusive leadership** as a distributed, morally grounded practice rooted in trust, empathy, and responsibility rather than position or authority. Second, it **deepened relationships across sectors**, with evidence of strengthened networks and a universal uplift in connection and collaboration. Third, it **placed youth participation at the centre of the leadership conversation**, not as a symbolic gesture but as a critical and credible voice in shaping civic life. Fourth, it **created a structured environment for honest and courageous dialogue**, demonstrating that even the most complex and sensitive issues can be explored productively when supported by trust, facilitation, and a clear purpose.

Just as importantly, the summit moved beyond affirmation to **practical momentum**. Participants left not only with new insights, but with clearer commitments: to listen more deeply, to create safer and more inclusive spaces, to involve young people

meaningfully, and to strengthen local partnerships. This marks an evolution of the summit from a convening event to an **active platform for regional leadership development and civic renewal**.

Looking Ahead: An Emerging Vision for 2027

Building on this strong foundation, there is an opportunity for the Thames Valley Leadership Summit 2027 to take a further step, from convening and connecting, towards **co-creating and sustaining action**.

Three emerging priorities shape this future vision:

- **From Dialogue to Delivery**
The 2027 summit could place greater emphasis on translating conversation into **collaborative action**, including shared projects, local pilots, and cross-sector initiatives that address trust, belonging, and youth participation in tangible ways.
- **Deepening Youth Partnership**
The next phase should move beyond inclusion towards **co-leadership with young people**, embedding youth voice in planning, facilitation, and decision-making before, during, and after the summit.
- **Strengthening Civic Infrastructure for Dialogue**
There is a clear need to invest in the **structures that sustain trust** — including facilitated spaces, interfaith engagement platforms, intergenerational programmes, and local “third spaces” where relationships can develop over time.

In addition, the summit could explore a more **year-round model of engagement**, linking the annual gathering to ongoing conversations, networks, and leadership development pathways across the Thames Valley. This would reinforce continuity, accountability, and long-term impact.

A Continuing Commitment

As the summit moves towards Oxfordshire in 2027, its role is becoming clearer: not simply to host important conversations, but to **strengthen the conditions in which trust can grow, leadership can be shared, and communities can flourish together**. The 2026 summit has demonstrated both the appetite and the capacity for this work. The opportunity now is to build on that momentum, with clarity, courage, and collaboration, to ensure that the Thames Valley continues to develop as a region defined not only by diversity but by **connection, participation, and shared purpose**.



Above: a group photo of attendees
Below: Attendees in table discussions





The Oxford Foundation's Vision

To create a society where religious and racial harmony flourishes, fostering mutual respect and understanding among all individuals, regardless of their faith or cultural background.

Our Mission

Our mission is to promote religious and racial harmony by educating young people and the wider public about the unique features and shared values of different religious beliefs and cultures.

We aim to challenge extremism in all its forms and empower individuals through educational and arts-based programs, enabling them to become mature, responsible members of society.

By bringing together leaders from diverse communities, faiths, and disciplines, we strive to foster social and religious cohesion throughout the United Kingdom.