

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy Discussion Event

Thursday, 7 September 2023

Attendees

19 people attended, including six facilitators, note-takers and ACC staff. Community members were invited to fill in anonymous forms giving their demographic details.* Four participants were under 30, two were over 70, and the rest were in their 30s to 50s. There were four men and nine women, all cisgender. Nine participants were white Scottish, three were African, and one was Asian. Six were disabled, two were LGBT+, and five identified with a religion (four Christians and one Wiccan). Overall, 11 had at least one protected characteristic, and four had three or more.

Event Format

After a short introduction, participants discussed three questions in small groups, allocating 15 minutes per question. There was also an opportunity to leave additional feedback on sticky notes. By design, there was considerable overlap in the three questions. A brief overview of each question will be given below, followed by discussion of the main theme that linked all three.

Question 1

What is the Council's role (or what should it be) in addressing inequalities in Aberdeen?

Key words/phrases: leadership, proactive, transparency, accountability, duty of care, fairness.

Overview:

- The Council's key role is to balance the needs and priorities of many different groups, recognising that some groups face greater disadvantages than others. In its policies and services, the Council can choose to mitigate those disadvantages, or make them worse.
- The Council's role should be to provide leadership in prioritising equality, by shaping policies and services to meet the needs of people in marginalised groups.
- Where this does not happen, the Council should explain which groups it has chosen to prioritise instead, and why. For example, removing crossing lights implies, at best, that the Council has not budgeted to meet the safety needs of blind, visually-impaired, disabled and older people. At worst, it implies they have prioritised the needs of motorists. Either way, reasoning for the decision should be explained.
- The Council should consider more broadly where it has influence. For example, it has no control over immigration policy – but there are many ways it can improve the experience of newcomers. Small initial investments can lead to wide-ranging, long-term rewards.
- To give another example, the Council can 'nudge' private sector partners to enact different policies, provide more funding or in-kind support for community groups, etc. The Council can choose to be 'led' by business interests, or exercise leadership of its own.

* Participants were also invited to indicate on a map where they live. Three lived in Airyhall/Broomhill/Garthdee, two each in Bridge of Don and George Street/Harbour, and one each in Dyce/Bucksburn/Danestone, Northfield/Mastrick, Hilton/Woodside/Stockethill, Torry/Ferryhill, Kincorth/Nigg/Cove, and Hazlehead/Queen's Cross/Countesswells.

Question 2

What should the Council do to understand, consider, and meet diverse needs when it comes to its services?

Key words/phrases: dialogue, listening, walkabouts, connecting on a human level, keeping promises, prioritising community needs, 'reality check,' 'grassroots Google.'

Overview:

- The Council should develop long-term relationships with communities to build understanding, including physically 'showing up' where people live and gather.
 - Front-line staff should be able to work flexibly, around community needs, and have more time to connect with people (not just when there are problems). Relationship building takes time, and does not necessarily fit on a spreadsheet.
 - The presence of Chief Officers and other senior decision-makers should be increased, including regular community-led 'walkabouts.'
- Leaders and decision-makers should meet regularly with front-line staff to better understand the reality of services.
- The views of people in marginalised groups should be sought as early as possible, taken seriously, and built into design/planning processes in transparent and meaningful ways (e.g. not just 'tick box' exercises). Where possible, prioritise their needs.
- Where relevant, and not excluding communities, conversations should include input from experts, front-line staff, and/or organisations that work with marginalised groups.
- To build trust and avoid 'disappointment fatigue,' promises should be followed through on. Where circumstances change, reasons should be explained and mitigations put in place.
- Solutions should be sought to meet the needs of many groups at the same time. For example, accessible green spaces, seating areas, and better public transport benefit everyone, but especially disabled people, older people, young people, people on low incomes, refugees and people seeking asylum.

Question 3

How can the Council ensure that services are delivered in a way which is equal, equitable and inclusive?

Key words/phrases: transparency, clarity, respect, accessibility, communication, lived experience, co-production, intersectionality.

Overview:

- As in Question 2, strong relationships and two-way dialogue will help identify and deal with issues at an early stage. It will also help decision-makers understand the needs of marginalised groups and build these into planning and service design.
- Improve customer service, prioritising respect and kindness. Increase staffing levels to ensure staff have time to speak with people, explain processes, answer questions, accept feedback, etc. While requiring initial investment, it will help reduce problems later on.
- Improve staff wellbeing – staff are 'more supportive if they are supported.'
- More training for staff to understand the experiences of marginalised groups.
- Improve access to Council services and resources. This includes:

- Making it easier to find relevant information on the Council website;
- Improving access for telephone queries;
- Improving access to language interpreters.
- Information from the Council should be as clear and accessible as possible. This includes:
 - Clarifying the wording and tone used in webpages, documents and letters, making it easier to understand (e.g. less ‘council speak’) and less threatening;
 - Creating summary documents, so people do not need to read dozens or hundreds of pages to understand what is happening;
 - Improving transparency around access to services, for example social housing – which groups are prioritised? What are the criteria?
 - Improving transparency around budget/funding decisions – why are certain things prioritised over others? If this kind of information is ‘hidden’ in Council meeting minutes or other long documents, summaries should be made available.

The Core Problem: Social Distance[†]

Decision-makers were described as ‘kingpins,’ ‘high heid yins,’ ‘top of the pile,’ ‘inaccessible.’ Demonstrating a specific kind of inequality, there was a strong sense of distance between decision-makers and everyone else – both ‘ordinary’ people who live in Aberdeen, and the ACC staff who implement policies. The sense of distance was mostly expressed in vertical terms (‘higher-ups’ not understanding what is happening ‘on the ground’) – but also horizontally (being ‘far away’ from the outcomes of their decisions, even being ‘on another planet.’)

As a consequence of this distance, policies and services may fail to improve inequality, and can make it unnecessarily worse. Participants felt that decision-makers have cut themselves off from the wealth of knowledge in local communities – what one participant called ‘Grassroots Google.’ They questioned whether community feedback ultimately ‘filters through’ to senior decision-makers, and how that feedback affects policy. There was a strong sense that some feedback ‘counts’ more – for example, the wishes of business leaders tend to trump those of communities.

Broadly speaking, participants felt that ACC has not been consulting with communities early enough in planning processes, and has not been adequately listening to people in marginalised groups – or if listening is taking place, it is not acted upon. They recognised that people’s needs and expectations must be balanced against what is actually possible, but also felt that ACC could be more open-minded in terms of what is considered ‘realistic’ – especially when small, third-sector organisations with limited funding often ‘pick up the slack.’

In addition to more consultation, participants were enthusiastic about ‘walkabouts,’ where decision-makers visit neighbourhoods to listen to residents and see where the issues are. Seeing situations in context gives a much clearer understanding than hearing about them in the abstract, and demonstrates a greater level of commitment and accountability from decision-makers than expecting community members to travel to the city centre. Participants hoped that connecting on a human level will encourage decision-makers to take their needs into account more often.

[†] For an in-depth discussion, see *The Social Distance Between Us* by Darren McGarvey (Ebury, 2022).