

## **Equalities Participation Network – May 27<sup>th</sup> 2021**

### Present:

Deejay Bullock (Four Pillars), Baldeep McGarry (ACC Equalities Team), Roslynn Fowler (Aberdeen Action on Disability), Fiona Rennie (Aberdeen Women's Alliance), Olushola Ajide (Fountain of Love), Bertha Yakubu (African Women's Group), Carol Hannaford (Sheltered Housing), Myshele Haywood (GREC), Dave Black (GREC), Abdalla Mohamed (Aberdeen Mosque and Islamic Centre), Daniel Meinel (Aberdeen Cyrenians), Fiona Whitehouse (Aberdeen Cyrenians), Timi Adegunwa (Black and Scot), Libby Hillhouse (NESS), Ahashan Habib (Aberdeen Multicultural Centre)

### **Guest Speaker – Lucy McKenzie**

Lucy thanked the EPN for having her and welcomed the opportunity to get feedback from participants.

Lucy ran through a presentation (see attached separately) which included some of the changes that COVID-19 has forced the Council to make, including a move to more digital access where this might not have been considered previously. There is a recognition that digital access isn't for everyone. The Council is working towards an Assisted Digital Model, which includes staff that can help people at customer service points, e.g. at libraries. These customer service points are now opening up as part of lockdown easing, so this support is now available.

Lucy described the "AB1" function which is helping people navigate the Council website – the team is hoping to introduce a voice recognition element to this facility, including in multiple languages, therefore increasing accessibility.

Face to face appointments are still being made at different customer access points, with flexibility around location and the contact method (e.g. telephone appointments, online etc.). When appointments are made individuals are asked about access requirements so things can be adjusted for each individual.

The Council recognise that there is a need to improve their website. The focus has been on ensuring that it meets the requirements around fonts and screen reader compatibility.

Customer engagement includes gaining feedback on particular access issues such as the website. There is recognition that options for feedback need to be diversified, and an accessibility audit is a piece of work for the future.

Myshele thanked Lucy for the presentation and opened it up for questions and comments from the floor.

Roslyn said that Aberdeen Action on Disability have had a great deal of difficulty in accessing the ACC website for certain things. There's too often a need to put in an email address: can it be clearer what happens to people's personal data? Roslyn

highlighted that people come to Aberdeen Action on Disability for support because they don't have computers and email accounts. She further noted difficulties in navigating the blue badge application portal.

Lucy said she agreed – it shouldn't always be necessary to create an account on the website, though previously this was the approach. All online processes asking for an email address are being reviewed, so you are only needing to input your email address when required. Lucy will feed back to Emma the point about the blue badge applications and come back to the group with a response.

Shola thanked Lucy for the presentation. He was very happy with the experience for the online council tax procedure. Lucy noted there's a new and improved online form for change of address for council tax purposes.

Libby queried if there were plans to increase more information in British Sign Language on the website. Lucy said she would take this one back to the team.

Abdalla raised a query about the AB1 "chatbot" and asked Lucy to explain further. Lucy explained that the team monitor the things that many people ask but that AB1 doesn't have an answer to, and will then try and create an automated response for future users.

Bertha queried the extent to which access to digital services and data collected has focused on ethnicity. Lucy said that the access to laptops and other equipment has been more focused around people who are shielding. Bertha said there are African people and volunteers working flat out to support their community, and hope that the Council has or will focus some outreach to African communities, so that the needs of the community are understood and responded to. Lucy raised awareness of the ACC helpline set up around COVID, and said that the digital inclusion work could be linked with the African Women's Group.

Timi echoed Bertha – we had to do a lot of things ourselves within African communities. Perhaps that's because the community is used to having to do this. Timi said that she hadn't received the information about access which could have been circulated around the community. Information really makes a difference to communities. Myshele added that getting information out is one of the reasons we set up the Equalities Participation Network. Lucy welcomed the feedback.

Bertha said it feels that when the council speak at these events, everything sounds so easy, but the reality is that when there are difficulties they don't hear from the council. Lucy welcomed the feedback and said she was open to on-going dialogue on these issues.

Abdalla suggested that we get some more detail on the concerns that Bertha has raised. Bertha gave the example of the big protests around Black Lives Matter and then there was no change. Abdalla queried: what did we expect or ask to change following the protest? Bertha expanded on some of the points around the local and national government response to COVID-19 and the African community not being included.

Habib raised concerns about the call centre facilitates and the long waiting times on the phone. Lucy gave an overview of some of the moving around of staff that had to happen during the worst of COVID-19. Staff members are now moving back to their previous jobs and so some of these issues around long waiting times should be resolved, but recognised that it wasn't as good as it should be. Roslynn added that there have been a lot of challenges with the inconsistency of phone numbers to reach specific members of staff for follow up.

Fiona W said that accessing housing teams seems to be via a central phone number now, but there's a problem with following up and advocacy work when it's not possible to access the particular case officer. Lucy will follow up on the issue and clarify the situation.

Carol offered to share a link to her community magazine which might support the sharing of information in future.

### **Presentation from Shola, Fountain of Love**

Shola provided an overview of Fountain of Love. The over-arching aim of the organisation is around promoting Jesus and Christianity. They offer a range of services, with a focus on employability support, such as Palmerston and Tillydone Job Clubs. The job clubs are open to all and there's a huge diversity of people who attend, of different faiths and cultures.

Work was done in relation to COVID-19 and lockdown to ensure people in the community were OK. Aberdeen Linking Lives and Aberdeen Two's Company were set up to reduce isolation, linking community volunteers with those who are lonely and isolated (in both Aberdeen City and Shire).

Additionally, there is a project that supports re-integration for those who have been in prison, e.g. around employability, emotional/moral support etc. Shola added that they have had funding from the Fairer Aberdeen Fund to support people with No Recourse to Public Funds.

### **Discussion on raising issues and how to take them forward**

Shola queried how we include experiences of the members and take them to the council or other organisations. Timi queried what GREC wanted from group members. Dave suggested that it is early days – and that we are still developing how things will work, and everyone's input to the development of the Network is appreciated and valued.

### **Date of next meeting**

5pm, June 24<sup>th</sup> 2021