

Equalities Participation Network – August 26th 2021

Present: Dave Black (GREC), Myshele Haywood (GREC), Shola Ajide (Fountain of Love Church), Omar Al Hamdan (As-Salaam Project), Skara Bowie (4 Pillars), Darren Buck (ACC), DeeJay Bullock (4 Pillars), Roslynn Fowler (AAD), Libby Hillhouse (NESS), Zuzana Jatelova (Sunnybank Community Centre), Ana Maria (community member), Baldeep McGarry (ACC Equalities Team), Marion McLaughlin (One Stop Shop), Diego Mejias Morffe (community member), Fay Morrison (community member, tenants' participation group, etc), Marta Neuman (GREC social work student), Christa Reid (community member, DEP, Act Up transport group), Fiona Rennie (AWA), Mackenzie Wilder (GREC social work student). **Apologies:** Carol Hannaford, Mateusz Lagoda, Daniel Meinel, Abdalla Mohamed.

Community Spotlight: One Stop Shop

Marion talked about the charity One Stop Shop (OSS), which is run by and for autistic people. Marion can be contacted by email on: marion@oss-aberdeen.co.uk

Some key points about what OSS does:

- A free information hub, with solid information from reliable sources – this has been incredibly popular, with over 10,000 hits in the past 10 months, from all over the world: [webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/autism information hub](https://webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/autism-information-hub)
- Help with queries throughout a person's whole life – parents looking for information for their children, young people struggling at school, into adulthood, work, relationship issues, parenting, preparation for retirement, etc.
- One-to-one support for autistic people, families and carers.
- A group for people diagnosed in adulthood.
- Free training and webinars on understanding autism, plus free training for professionals and organisations – on supporting autistic employees, working with autistic customers and service users, etc. This service is funded by the Scottish Government, and bespoke sessions are available.
- OSS also consults with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils on autism strategy

What is autism?

(text below from [webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/what is autism](https://webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/what-is-autism))

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference. It presents differently in each autistic person. It means that autistic people have brains which are built in a fundamentally different way from non autistic people. [There are] differences in how we process information, how we communicate and how we interact with the world. [...] autistic people literally experience the world in a different way.

Autistic people are often seen as quite different from our peers. [...] We excel in some areas and may struggle in others. For example, an autistic child may [match their peers in] some milestones, but [may reach others early or late]. Or an autistic adult may be a professional, highly skilled in their field, yet struggle to carry out household tasks.

Here's a few things autism is not – it is not a disease. It is not a mental health condition, although many autistic people have co-occurring mental health conditions. It is not something that will ever go away. It does not mean the person is broken, and autism is not something that needs fixed. It does not mean that a person cannot be an active, contributing member of society.

More information available here: [webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/autism information hub](https://webspaces.oss-aberdeen.co.uk/autism-information-hub)

What's New?

In small groups, folk discussed equality issues have been on their mind over the past month:

- **Information access** – not a new issue, but people still don't have access to as much info as they should. Key problems around technology – 'collision of worlds' between tech and accessibility – like different languages. Getting info into accessible formats takes time and capacity, which is often lacking. Folk who aren't good with computers struggle to access services and find information.
- **City centre disabled parking** – another perennial issue for people with mobility issues, made worse by the removal of 6 disabled parking spaces in the City Centre. In particular, it is now very difficult for disabled people to access Marischal College.
- **Anti-trans discrimination & clinic waiting times** – as noted in the last meeting, transgender folk are still facing discrimination and harassment on social media and elsewhere. There are also huge waiting times to access gender clinics – 18 months in Grampian and even longer elsewhere, despite NHS commitment to much shorter waiting times (*note: folk need to attend gender clinics as the first step in getting a Gender Recognition Certificate, and also to access treatments*).
- **Home Office / visa fees** – many communities are dealing with frustration and financial hardship due to the ever-increasing cost of visas, especially re-applications when small mistakes are made.
- **Excessive financial burdens on African communities** – high visa costs and other bills mean individuals need to focus on making money and paying off debts, rather than integrating with their community, which impacts on mental and social wellbeing. Pressure needs to be put on the government to be more humane when reviewing fees due to the repercussions this has.
- **Covid impact on African communities** – barriers accessing work, etc. There's a need for more financial assistance to help individuals pay bills, council tax, buy food, etc. Food banks can help, but there are difficulties relating to cultural differences in diet and food preferences.
- **Isolation and Covid inequalities** – community spirit has been lost, and isolation remains a key issue, feels never-ending as numbers change. Anxiety as things open up, with more people around. Unequal impact on minority communities with families abroad – could not visit, cost of self-isolation high and unaffordable (especially students who were separated from families for longer). All this alongside other issues, e.g. increase in domestic abuse cases, uncertainty for EU nationals – no human contact to process their queries and applications.
- **Mental health issues** – increased as a result of Covid, especially for those with a history of similar problems. Diagnosis over digital platforms may not fully capture the issues, leading to people not getting the help they need. Also ongoing stigma attached to talking about mental health, etc.
- **Unknown unknowns** – perhaps not all social issues are known as yet, as community contacts are lost or diluted. Anticipation of increased social issues when things get back to some normality.
- **Covid and driving licenses** – many folk in the New Scots community have to redo their theory tests as driving lessons, tests, etc were postponed by Covid. Can the validity period be extended? This is likely an issue across many communities. Perhaps worth raising with an MP.
- **Unethical research** – recently in the news – 'Spectrum 10k' study is asking autistic people to sign over their genetic data, for use by third parties. The research seeks to find a genetic basis for autism and treat it like a disease, rather than neurological diversity. Worrying hints of eugenics. Rooted in lack of public access to reliable information – creates space for pseudoscience.

Customer Service/Access issues follow up: Update was circulated with meeting notes in June, also available on the website (grec.co.uk/e pn). No further update since then.

Discussion on HR at the Council

Darren Buck talked about his role at Aberdeen City Council. As head of the 'People and Organisational Development' department (basically Human Resources), he deals with recruitment, selection, equality/diversity/inclusion, etc.

Two key aspects:

- Ensuring equality of opportunity in recruitment, promotion, etc.
- How employees feel at work, ensuring they feel part of the organisation and have a voice in decisions.

They've set up several working groups on different aspects of these issues with volunteers from ACC staff, but some are small (only 2-3 employees) and there's not much representation of different communities – they are 'lacking a wider voice' and Darren wants to form links with communities. Specifically he wants to know why people don't want to work for ACC, and what can be done to encourage them to apply for ACC jobs (presumably there will be different issues in different areas of employment with the council).

Marion and Libby said that OSS and NESS would be keen to be involved in this process.

Christa suggested that EPN members could access/share any questions and discussion points with their communities, to then feedback.

Shola said that ACC needs to take African candidates more seriously, as Africans tend to be under-employed in every field everywhere. Darren noted there's a specific group on race/racism in the workplace, looking at barriers etc. He will get an update from them soon and share with EPN.

Zuzana noted that there's still a lot of stigma for eastern Europeans, the stereotype is that everyone from that region is here for 'unskilled' and low paid jobs, when many have qualifications and skills that are not recognised. Darren replied that this might be something for the recruitment/job profiles group to look at – are people being excluded because their qualifications don't have the right names?

Myshele noted in the chat that folk with foreign qualifications can get a certificate of equivalence from ecctis.com – but this costs money, and even with a certificate it can be challenging to get past stereotypes.

Ana Maria asked if there's any stats on the ethnic minority folk working for ACC. Baldeep shared the report: aberdeencity.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-04/Appendix%202%20-%20Employee%20Information%20.pdf

Both Libby and Zuzana noted that organisational culture needs to change at all levels, around ethnicity, disability, and all characteristics. Darren will feed this back to the learning and culture group, looking at how people perceive disability etc.

Deejay noted that many marginalised folk apply for plenty of jobs but are considered 'overqualified.' Shola and Marion echoed this concern.

Roslynn noted that many folk have invisible conditions which they are reluctant to disclose. She was concerned that ticking a 'disabled' box on an application form means someone won't get an interview. Christa, Marion, and Ana Maria echoed her concerns. Darren said this kind of discrimination should not happen, and clarified that the guaranteed interview scheme guarantees an interview for disabled people.

In this case, Roslynn was concerned that people are asked to disclose special requirements prior to interview, which can lead to discrimination in itself. On the other hand, discrimination can take place if someone indicates they have a disability but don't 'look' disabled. Darren identified a need here for education/training for managers about disability, unconscious bias, etc – to combat 'rogue managers.'

Marion supported this idea, because a hiring manager's lack of education is a barrier to employment, especially given the stigma behind many disabilities. For example, people often think (wrongly) that autism is a psychiatric condition, an illness, or a learning disability.

Not discussed at the meeting but worth adding here – most job applications have (at least) two parts: the job application form, and an equalities monitoring form. The latter asks questions about protected characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc. This is how HR departments (and researchers) can track the kinds of people who are applying for jobs, who actually gets those jobs, etc – so it's important to fill these in! **By law, the equalities monitoring form must be kept separate from a person's application. The person making hiring decisions does not have access to the form at any stage in the process.**

At the end of the discussion, it was agreed that folk would like to go into some of these issues in more detail, at a future meeting with a more specific focus. Darren agreed to propose a few topics by email.

Discussion of future sessions – postponed due to other discussions running over – Dave and Myshela agreed to make the agenda less packed next time.

Next Meeting: 30 September 2021 (virtual group outing)

There's a scheduling conflict with the next meeting – Community Planning Aberdeen (CPA) is holding an information session about different groups that people can get involved with – Community Councils, Civic Forum, etc. Dave suggested a virtual 'group outing' for EPN members to attend the (online) meeting and everyone was enthusiastic about the idea. **Details about the CPA meeting, including link to join, will be circulated nearer the date.**