

Equalities Participation Network – November 25th 2021

Present: Myshele Haywood (GREC), Shola Ajide (Fountain of Love Church), Skara Bowie (Four Pillars), Roslynn Fowler (AAD), Carol Hannaford (sheltered housing), Zuzana Jatelova (Sunnybank Community Centre), Baldeep McGarry (ACC equalities), Fay Morrison (community member, tenants' participation group, etc), Marta Neuman (GREC social work student), Mackenzie Wilder (GREC social work student).
Apologies: DeeJay Bullock, Libby Hillhouse, Marion McLaughlin, Mateusz Lagoda.

Community Spotlight: Aberdeen Action on Disability (AAD)

Roslynn spoke about AAD, a user-led membership organisation that was established in 1992, to be a voice for people with physical and sensory disabilities.

Who runs AAD?

- AAD is run by disabled people, for disabled people. People with any disability are welcome to join.
- The volunteer board is elected by members for six-year terms.
- There are four paid staff, all part time: admin assistant, social coordinator, and two benefits advisors. All other work is done by volunteers, including further admin and IT support.
- AAD were honoured with a civic reception in 2018 for their commitment to disabilities in Aberdeen.

What does AAD do?

- **Benefits advice and help** – many folk struggle to complete forms (up to 40 pages long) and are often rejected for the financial support they need. AAD advisors help with completing forms, making appeals, etc. And the process repeats every few years.
- **Help with other issues** – e.g. housing, issues with children, ESA, attendance allowance, etc.
- **Signposting** – to other services where necessary, and also to groups related to specific disabilities.
- **Advocacy** – where issues go to tribunals, AAD advisors help people understand the process and make their case. AAD also represents the views of their members on local and national issues.
- **Information** – website, facebook page and blog with articles about disability related issues.
- **Social events** – groups for disabled people to get together and socialise, reduce social isolation, build skills, etc. Recently in-person events have started again.
- **Other events** – e.g. hustings at election times, hosting events with other organisations, etc.
- Sadly, AAD's benefits advisor Isobel Hunter passed away suddenly in July, and it's been a struggle to cover her work. Folk who need help with applications can't wait – though some new clients have been referred to Citizens' Advice and other organisations for support.

Location

- Since 2017, AAD are based at Kettock Lodge in Bridge of Don.
- Most advice work takes place in the office or remotely by phone/Zoom. For exceptional cases where a person is housebound, home visits can be arranged.
- Website: aad-online.com

Discussion

- **Funding** – AAD gets small pieces of funding for specific projects from the Robertson Trust, the Health Lottery, etc, but it's difficult to maintain funding for basic expenses (office rent and utilities, web hosting, general staff costs, etc). Other EPN groups are facing similar issues.
- Several potential funding sources were suggested: Regeneration Network Community Fund, Fairer Aberdeen Fund, Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund (acvo.org.uk/mhgrants), etc.
- Fay pointed out that it's worth applying for everything, even if some applications were unsuccessful in the past. Baldeep offered to help with applications, etc; Fay noted ACVO will help too.
- **Advertising** – Carol suggested writing a half-page article for the 'News Bite' tenants' magazine, to let people know about AAD. The next edition will be in the spring.

What's New?

Folk discussed equality issues have been on their mind over the past month:

- **Union Street changes** – City Centre Masterplan was recently approved, with concerns from disability groups not taken seriously. For example, once Market Street is closed (for new Market development), no bus stops between the Music Hall and the Castlegate. However, Baldeep noted that it's not the end of the process – Andy McDonald gave assurances that conversations will be ongoing, so community groups can contribute to how the plans are carried out.
- **Access to services** – e.g. Citizens' Advice turned away a client because they didn't have budget for Language Line. Friends and family are sometimes used as ad-hoc interpreters but that brings problems of its own. Shola noted that GREC's Language Café is a good resource for people to develop their English skills. Zuzana noted 25 separate requests for ESOL classes at one community centre; Fay noted that ESOL classes are no longer running at most community centres due to Covid.
- **Appeal for volunteers** – telephone befriending service at Fountain of Love Church has a long waiting list, people feeling socially isolated as the winter closes in. Lots of requests for male befrienders. Please spread the word – for more info, email: olushola.ajide@fountainoflove.org.uk
- **'Merry-Go-Round' between health and social care services** – example of a service user who sees a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN), needing a regular sick line for the Job Centre so they aren't hassled to look for a job. DWP will only accept a line from the person's GP, who is reluctant to write them because they don't see the client regularly. So after the GP refuses the client's request, the CPN has to contact the GP to advocate – this happens every month. Hugely stressful for the client and a huge waste of time for everyone else. Several EPN members had seen similar situations in their organisations and communities. Seems like a systemic issue, might not be possible to address locally – but Baldeep suggested bringing up with the Health and Social Care Partnership.
- **Community spaces** – e.g. many community centres are only open 9-5 due to limited funding, volunteer capacity, bureaucracy, etc – this excludes people from accessing classes and services, constrains activities of community groups, etc. Can ACC support community centres to extend their hours? Baldeep noted Alan Malby is in charge of buildings – possibly bring the issue to him? Also suggested getting in touch with Aberdeen Inspired – lots of empty space in the city centre. Roslynn noted that AAD space is available to other groups; Inspire on Beach Blvd has meeting rooms available; Multicultural Centre might have space available.
- **Lack of BSL services in Aberdeen City**
- **Long wait to get a National Insurance number.**

Update from Lucy McKenzie, ACC Customer Services Manager

To be attached as a separate note.

Planning for 2022

Everyone agreed that the first meeting of 2022 will be on the City Centre Masterplan, to discuss issues with Union Street access outlined above (for disabled people, families with young children, older people, etc – also important to ensure a range of different communities contribute to the discussion so folk are aware of upcoming changes and get to have a say).

Other key issues/topics for 2022:

- **Funding** – possible speakers from ACVO (Susan Morrison?) and ACC to discuss funding opportunities, tips for good applications, other support, etc.
 - **ACC Equality Outcomes Action Plan** – presentation, how EPN members can get involved, etc.
 - **Locality Planning** – what/where the Locality Planning groups cover, upcoming changes, etc.
 - **Housing** – including upcoming changes (later in the year) – inviting Derek McGowan
 - **Brexit/Benefits/etc** – overview of recent changes, Q&A, how to get help, etc.
 - **Access to ACC services** – inviting Lucy McKenzie to another discussion
 - **Diversifying the ACC workforce** – inviting Darren Buck to another discussion
 - **Open Spaces** – making these more accessible/available?
 - **Health & Social Care** – addressing issues above – possibly outside the remit of EPN?
 - **Trainings/workshops** – from EPN members
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Next Meeting: Thursday, 3 February 2021

(the last Thursday in January is Holocaust Memorial Day, so everyone agreed to move the meeting to the following week)