

Equalities Participation Network – February 3rd 2022

Present: Myshele Haywood (GREC), Shola Ajide (Fountain of Love Church), DeeJay Bullock (Four Pillars), Carol Hannaford (sheltered housing), Libby Hillhouse (NESS), Zuzana Jatelova (Sunnybank Community Centre), Marion McLaughlin (Autism Understanding), Abdalla Mohammed (Aberdeen Mosque), Fay Morrison (community member, tenants' participation group), Faiza Nacef (ACC Equalities), Mary Rasmussen (Guide Dogs), Seun Samagbeyi (GREC social work student).

Apologies: Roslynn Fowler, Baldeep McGarry, Mateusz Lagoda.

Community Spotlight: North East Sensory Services (NESS)

Libby spoke about NESS, a charity that was established in 1879 (under a different name), making it Scotland's oldest integrated sensory service.

- NESS covers Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Dundee and Angus, and is based in John Street in Aberdeen. Website: nesensoryservices.org
- NESS provides practical and emotional support for people whose sight or hearing loss (or both) impacts their day-to-day life.
- This includes advice, information, social groups, a library of audio books, a small gym, access to assistive technologies, social work, rehabilitation, and other specialist support.
- During Covid-19, many services moved to being telephone based, but in-person groups and services have been starting back up again.

Q&A

- **Does NESS offer BSL classes?** No, NESS doesn't have capacity for this. NESCol offers BSL classes, but there can be a waiting list because they're very popular.
 - **Can people access the gym who are not NESS service users?** (e.g. people with sensory issues related to other conditions like autism) Unfortunately not – it's only a small space.
 - **What are the criteria to access NESS services?** People can self-refer or be referred by a GP, social worker, etc. The only criteria is that they have sight loss or hearing loss that affects their day-to-day life (so, wearing glasses would not count, as the glasses corrects a person's vision). What this means will be different for different people – for example, someone may get a hearing aid and feel they don't need any further support; others may want help getting used to using the hearing aid, or dealing with other aspects of hearing loss.
 - **Are there any services to help with LFT Covid tests?** These are very difficult (if not impossible) for blind and visually impaired people to use without assistance, which isn't available for people who live on their own. GP surgeries and pharmacies have said they can't help people do LFTs. Libby wasn't sure about this – she will check and update the group when she finds out.
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What's New?

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

- **Anti-trans misinformation in St Nicholas Sq** – every weekend since late summer, a group of transphobes has been in St Nicholas Sq, spreading malicious misinformation, handing

out anti-trans leaflets, talking to people, collecting money and stirring up fear. Police asked them to move on in September/October, but they just came back the following weekend. Police said there's not much they can do; ACC said similar, as they're not associated with a specific organisation.

- **Highway Code changes** – blind and visually impaired people have always been advised it's safest to wave cars on at junctions, in case there are other cars that don't realise the pedestrian is there. Recently, some motorists have been getting angry with this, shouting abuse, etc. Clarity would be useful on both sides here.
 - **LFTs** (see NESS discussion above).
 - **Accessible spaces for 'pop up' consulates** – most foreign embassies and consulates are located in the central belt, but staff travel to other cities a few times a year. But community groups in Aberdeen struggle to find suitable and affordable spaces – most spaces are extremely expensive, or only open 'normal working hours.' In general, there is a lack of flexibility in opening times for community spaces. (*similar to discussion at November meeting*)
 - **Spiking in clubs & 'Ask for Angela'** – as clubs are opening up, there are reports of women's drinks being spiked, assaults with hypodermic needles, etc. Aberdeen Women's Alliance is planning to ask Aberdeen Inspired about use of the 'Ask for Angela' campaign.
 - **Working with unvaccinated service users** – protections/rules/etc?
 - **Opening up** – lack of consistency about what businesses/services are opening up – not everything is publicised. Also lack of clarity around rules, safety measures, etc.
 - **Rising energy bills** – concern for service users and the general public, knock on effects, etc. Discussion of increase in food bank use and anti-social behaviour.
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Discussion with Nigel McDowell (City Centre Master Plan team)

- Nigel updated the group on progress, including ways that the CCMP team are trying to make spaces as accessible as possible (presentation attached separately, plus a document with more details).
- Most of the temporary 'spaces for people' installations (e.g. wooden decking benches and planters) have now been removed.
- On 28 February, the business case for a Belmont Street 'café quarter' will be presented to Council.
- During the discussion, several questions around transport came up. Nigel told the group about ACTUP (Accessible City Transport Users Partnership), a forum that includes the bus companies, the bike forum, Nestrans, etc, and he invited folk to get involved. He also agreed to ask for the minutes from ACTUP meetings to be forwarded to Myshele to distribute to EPN members.

Discussion/Q&A

- **How to ensure the spaces are actually used?** The CCMP team want to be aware of how folk use existing spaces and what they want in the future – they don't want to create something not fit for purpose. They are studying how people have used different spaces in the city centre over the past 3 years, changes from removing temporary seating, etc.
- In the specific example being discussed (area around the Khartoum statue by Robert Gordon's school), Nigel explained they want all different kinds of people to use the space, not just school kids – there will be an outdoor seating and dining area by the Art Gallery, leading into Belmont Street and Schoolhill. By pushing cars out, the space becomes more usable, creating a more equitable balance between cars and people – while still ensuring access for residents and people with mobility impairments.
- **Will the new buildings in Union Terrace Gardens be rented out to private companies, or used as community spaces?** They are currently inviting offers from restaurants and cafés (*note: rents are not listed on public documents about the UTG 'pavilions' but rent for city centre restaurants tends to be £20,000-£60,000+ per year*).
- **What improvements are planned for Carmelite Street?** (Currently people park in the street and make a lot of noise late at night, despite it being a residential area) Some car parking areas will be replaced with greenery, footways will be improved and widened, and a 'light net' added to improve and soften lighting. Ultimately the plan is for it to help connect the area around Union Square, the new Market, and Union Street.
- **How will these plans interact with the new Low Emissions Zone?** (seems to put a lot more pressure on roads outside the city centre area) No definitive answer here, but the hope is that people will be encouraged to leave their cars outside the city centre, possibly making use of Park & Ride facilities – currently no plans for more Park & Ride routes, that will be up to the bus companies. Various traffic studies were shown.
- **Other plans for the buses** – no loss of provision, buses will continue to use Guild Street, with a 'bus priority area' by the station to improve traffic flow.
- **Accessible parking spaces** – The CCMP team are working with DEP (Disability Equity Partnership) to ensure there are enough spaces – currently plans for 4 spaces by Union Terrace Gardens (possibly more), and some at the new Market.
- **Navigation & street furniture – how will these be managed to avoid adding more barriers for people with mobility issues or visual impairments?** Many of the improvements are about simplifying road layouts (near the station and Union Square, for example), widening pavements and improving surfaces to remove trip hazards – there will be an audit of current materials (paving stones, etc) to identify areas where changes need to be made. The CCMP team will be happy to consult with NESS as a stakeholder.
- **Tactile** – about ten years ago, Heritage Lottery funding was used to upgrade some areas in the city centre, but the installation of tactile (different textures of pavements to indicate crossings, etc) was a mess. Not a question, but urging the planners to ensure tactile is used in a consistent, safe way.
- **Access period for vans, HGVs, etc – why is the proposed access period so long? (6pm-10am)** (In pedestrianized areas in other cities, the window for deliveries etc is much shorter, midnight to 6am, for example) This is not set in stone, and still up for consultation.
- **What is the logic behind closing a small part of Schoolhill, and what's being done with the bus routes through that area?** Bus routes are being pushed north, but plans are not

finalised – routes north of Union Street need to be considered alongside those south of Union Street.

- **Bus stops on Union Street** (some bus stops have been ‘physically scrapped’ off Union street, for example Adelphi G7 (bus 1 or 2) – but they still exist on the bus apps, so people need to walk to the next bus stop along Union Street, which is the Music Hall) – the bus companies should be updating their apps – Nigel will take this question to the next ACT-UP meeting. *Update: bus operators said that revised timetables should be updated in the apps over the next few days, and some should have been updated already. If this remains an issue please get back in touch and Nigel will raise with Transportation managers.*

Next Meeting: Thursday, 24 February 2022, 5:00-6:30 on Zoom

- **ACC Equality Outcomes Action Plan** – presentation, how EPN members can get involved, etc. The community spotlight will be either for GREC or Cyrenians.