

## **Equalities Participation Network – November 24<sup>th</sup> 2022**

**Present:** Maria Jose Pavez (GREC), Olushola Ajide (Fountain of Love), Christian Allard (Councillor), Karen Finch (ACC), Roslynn Fowler (Aberdeen Action on Disability), Steven Gray (UNISON Scotland), Libby Hillhouse (North East Sensory Services), Baldeep McGarry (ACC Equalities), Fiona Napier (UNISON, ATUC), Mary Rasmussen (Guide Dogs), Deena Tissera (Councillor), Paul Tytler (ACC), Bertha Yakubu (African Women's Group).

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### **Theme: Civic Participation**

**Presenters: Deena Tissera, Karen Finch, Christian Allard, Steven Gray**

#### **Deena Tissera (Councillor) – on ethnic minority women in politics**

I want to cover lack of minorities in politics, beyond political parties. I came to the UK from Sri Lanka as a student, I was vice-president in student union. Ethnic minorities and people with visa status are not well represented in Scotland. In terms of ethnic minorities and people with immigration status fall through cracks of services many times. There is no knowledge of access and eligibility and for student support.

I co-found a political movement that campaigned against anti-immigration status and discrimination from service providers. Some points of the campaign were successful, particularly with the NHS. Joined the Labour Party because it supported our campaign and aligned with personal values. Women of colour particularly face barriers for leadership roles in politics. I've done leadership programmes with the Labour Party.

There is much research that covers women in politics and the highest levels in discrimination in politics and online abuse affects women of colour, with character assassination, trying to attack your credibility. Leadership programmes have been key to face this, you need this support, and this is very important to be able to access. One of the biggest problems with racism and in politics is that raising a complaint might not go in your favour. It is difficult to raise a complaint. Support systems are very important.

Entitlement around visas is a big issue, very few charities in UK focus on ethnic minorities and domestic abuse, this is a massive gap in provision. There's no specialist support for us. It's important for ethnic minority women to come forward. I became the first woman of colour to be elected in Aberdeen, such a multicultural city. We need to do a lot more work, and without representation no one will know these issues. Equity in power distribution when it comes to representation is really key.

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#### **Karen Finch (ACC) – on Community Councils**

Community councils are elected. I would like to see more diversity across all community councils, and we do struggle. We are reflecting on how to improve. We have around 10 people from ethnic minority groups, and 2 people with disabilities. One of them thought he couldn't come forward to be in a community council because of his disability and this is something we need to challenge.

Why do people don't come forward? Do they think they won't be allowed, like this person?

Am I doing enough to communicate with other groups? I do find that community councils struggle trying to tap into knowledge of other groups. We have made some headway, but I want more people with protected characteristics involved in community councils.

How do people find out about community councils? Most things are done digitally.

Which area is not covered? Woodend, which has never been established.

Issue of awareness, quite a lot of people doesn't know about community councils. If they don't know, they don't come forward. Then is time commitment, cost of living crisis, and people in leadership positions tell us to get more jobs, but then we don't get time to volunteer on community councils.

Then we also have cultural baggage, some of us who are not from here, there's that understanding of what politics is. People don't understand how politics works here. Another idea is the perception of age, and the perception of older people participating in community councils and not changing much. Last point is attack on family members, your background, etc.

We need to answer these questions and remove these barriers for people to come forward as community councils. We need to go beyond and engage people in mosque, church. This group is a starting point, but we need to go and share information beyond.

The need to communicate more success of community councils, what community councils are about, and what is expected from potential members, was raised as a relevant point. Also considering that we need to be mindful of communication barriers, language, disabilities, etc. Karen has reached out to faith-based organisations, but didn't get too much response, and it's also only her taking this forward.

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### **Christian Allard (Councillor) – on local democracy**

Democracy needs to be as local as possible. Community councils are the foundation of our democracy.

At ACC, if you look at population, we have a high % of ethnic minorities, and there is a good level of representation at ACC. But where we are low is women, there's only 40% of women being elected. On disability is a bit hard to evaluate. On age we know that councillors are mainly older men. We have younger representatives now, under 40 and across parties, but still low.

Communication and visibility are key, we want to make diverse people visible. We need to engage with media, and be visible. An elected politician represents people, you don't need these special skills, or someone telling you you are not good enough.

The selection process works in political parties. Most political parties are top-down, with not good levels of representation. How can you re-structure this to make it more democratic? We can change our cultures so we don't always go for old white men, we have a lot of them already.

We all have a role to support people to increase diversity, we can do better as individuals as well.

We also need to think that the right to be candidates is different to the right to vote, refugees and people from other countries can be candidates.

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### **Steven Gray (UNISON) – on trade unions**

We have exactly the same problems as community councils.

UNISON's values:

- Provide a safe place, where everyone is shown respect.
- Commit to working together, in partnership, to advance equality in the City.
- Raise issues and challenge constructively with the aim to achieve positive outcomes.
- Maintain confidentiality when information is personal or sensitive.
- Focus on specific equality issues that impact on communities (rather than individuals).
- Learn from each other and understand about how issues impact diverse communities in different ways.

These values reflect trade unions values and guidance for member meetings. Using these values to make more diverse member led organisations is the hard bit.

Fall in living standards and all that comes with it leaves people with less energy for active participation.

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### **Discussion in breakout rooms – opportunities and challenges to participation and representation**

- What are the main barriers EPN members see within their own community?
- How should these be addressed?
- How can participation be encouraged among underrepresented groups?

#### **Breakout Group 1:**

Challenge is if people don't know, they don't know.

Baggage of how politics are done where you come from is a hot debate, people's integrity, stealing money, etc. It takes a lot of educating, debriefing, etc. We need to begin to learn and create more opportunities to disseminate more and more. People want to be sure of good representatives, we need to remove this barrier.

If you're not from Britain is not something we identify, I wouldn't, because we are not in that situation. It's about learning about people that do go through this.

I've tried contacting churches in the back, maybe because how it was done, posters videos have been circulated, and still not pulling people in. They've made videos with community councillors, but then for people with disabilities, how can we reach them?

Community councils are representative male/female – Christian pointed out it's close to 50/50 gender balance - 134 women/131 men. We need more events with women only speakers.

Time is something to consider, family commitment, etc.

Busiest people are the ones to rely on, they will get the job done. We've seen a bit of distrust among some community councillors, but in a way there is less politics in these groups. Education statuses.

Capacity is an issue going out and engaging to inform better.

Model of health champions was suggested as a way of engaging with communities to inform about community councils (suggestion for Karen).

### **Breakout Group 2:**

It seems from what the speakers shared that the barriers to encouraging active participation are similar at all levels of political/civic participation

Those from underrepresented groups may feel intimidated to participate in a system that excludes them; people feel unqualified/as if they lack the social/political power to participate; like politics is not 'for them.'

This extends to civic participation more broadly; when Tillydrone Community Campus was being built, a local community member enquired whether he would be 'allowed' to visit it.

These barriers could be mitigated by better representation of role models, mentorship and investment into minority communities to better equip people to participate.

There are parts of the city which lack any real 'sense of community,' so people in these areas are less inclined to get involved in their community.

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### **AOB**

ACC Equality outcomes will be reporting progress, 8<sup>th</sup> March (April EHRC deadline), so Baldeep will be reaching to everyone to contribute towards this and where we are at.

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### **Date of Next Meeting**

Thursday 26 January, 2023, 5:00-6:30pm, on Zoom.