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SIWG Development Day – 20 May 2009

Notes from the Day

Overall

During the day we:

1. Considered the context in which we operate
2. Looked at our group and asked:
 - What have we collectively achieved and how?
 - What have the community groups that participate in the SIWG contributed?
 - What helped them contribute?
 - What stopped from contributing?
3. Considered our objectives and whether they needed changing
4. Looked at what future meetings (content and style)
5. Discussed the contents of the Council's next equality strategy and scheme for 2009-12 and commented on key issues that officers needed to know before they assess the impact of Council policies and practices on people from the equality strands

We had planned to look at the way we currently work and consider improvements, but decided to spend more time on discussing and identifying key issues to be included in the council's next equality strategy that we called Fairness and Inclusion strategy (2009-12)

The context

We identified that the context in which we operated was complex as it was made up of expectations and demands by:

- The people who live in York
- The Councillors
- The senior managers in the Council
- Equalities legislation
- The various bodies that inspect the Council to confirm that it does a good job

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Looking back

Achievements

- We have increased the Council's and each other's understanding of equality and inclusion issues in the city, focusing in particular on groups of people who face disadvantage and continue to feel excluded, like those with learning disabilities.
- We have promoted collaborative working and helped networking between community groups that had not talked to each other previously.
- We have broken down formality in Council meetings. Working in small groups every time we met helped everyone to get a voice.
- We have had direct access to councillors who promote fairness equality and inclusion in the Council and felt that we were listened to and action was taken as a result.
- Because of groups like ours, the Council can show that it is a listening organisation, acting on feedback it receives from community groups
- Our membership is committed and there is high attendance every time we meet.

SIWG community groups

Community groups involved in the SIWG have contributed the following:

- Offered the Council free/cost effective channels of communication to and from communities of interest (as opposed to communities of place) e.g. YREN Open Forums
- Helped the Council research and identify the needs of people from the equality strands.
- Kept people in the community informed about how the Council approaches equality fairness and inclusion and why.
- Were able to challenge decisions and thinking that affects lives in the city.

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- Offered officers and councillors the chance to have diverse voices in one place, giving a snapshot of diversity in the city and increasing their awareness about it.
- Highlighted issues concerning groups that are not represented in SIWG at present.

The following **helped** community groups contribute to SIWG work:

- Networking with other groups to find common issues and promote them together.
- The Equality Impact Assessments Fair on 5 November 2008, where community groups worked with council officers to “equality-proof” key Council services like access to leisure services. .
- A sense that they “own” the SIWG

The following **stopped** community groups from contributing their best to the SIWG:

- Lack of training/understanding issues both for community representatives as well as officers. Suggestions for training or briefings needed, included:
 - Workshop by York People First about learning disabilities and using easy-read/accessible language;
 - Understanding the rights of people from the six equality strands;
 - How the Council works; how the budget is allocated and managed;
 - The impact of sport and leisure on community cohesion/quality of life in the city
 - Library services
 - Human Rights and Equality legislation (full day training)
- Inaccessible information: Need more accessible presentations and pre-meeting briefings for community groups. Officers and councillors need training on using easy-read.
- Open questions when working in small groups or consulting. Prefer “targeted” questions.
- Lack of clarity about the role/obligations of community representatives.
- Too many community groups around the table, too little time to cover the agenda. Meetings can be too long.

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- Permission to be frank.
- Lack of understanding of how the Council works and how its budgets are allocated.
- Not getting feedback about issues raised in meetings.

SIWG objectives

Overall, it was felt that our current three objectives were ok. Areas that we needed to focus on to help realise our objectives better, included:

- Better links with ward committees that will:
 - Help us to know fairness and inclusion issues arising in localities
 - Give us a "geographical" map of inclusion issues in the city
 - Use YOUR WARD to communicate what SIWG does
 - Get those attending to think about issues that affect everyone not just dog-bins and issues about their immediate neighbourhoods.
- A Community Cohesion strategy for York.
- A review of SIWG membership (community groups).
- Community groups on SIWG need to work together more; need shared and neutral space to work from (within the new Council HQ?); need shared events; need to share information (can council contact centre give out information about local groups?)
- Work harder to include small hard-to-reach groups.
- Council vision should include valuing everyone and Council services need to take on board Human Rights issues.

Looking forward

Future meetings

To improve the way we work we should:

- Follow up actions from previous meetings, every time we meet
- The first meeting with a new Chair should include short presentations from each of the groups involved about their work and issues they have identified to Council to take on board.
- Hold an event to attract/promote SIWG to young people.

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- Hold a day-long meeting with Council Executive and Council Management Team, once a year.
- Have "Ask the Director" slots at our meetings.
- Have informal meetings between formal meetings.
- Have SIWG training and development days.

The following were suggested as items for future meetings:

- Value for money: Does it deliver better outcomes for people from the equality strands?
- Including people with learning disabilities in public and democratic life.
- Briefing sessions (for the topics see page 3 above).
- Progress with the Council Fairness and Inclusion strategy and scheme 2009-12.

Council equality strategy 2009-12: Fairness and inclusion issues for council officers to consider

We looked at issues already identified and added the following:

Issues that affect all strands

- Class issues accentuate problems
- There is still inequality in employment and education
- Provide shared and neutral space for groups from the strand to meet and work together. Free rooms in new Council HQ??

Gender

- Glass ceiling for women still not broken
- Male awareness of female issues is still poor
- Must engage with the Trans community
- Don't forget white working class males (employment, lifelong learning etc)

Disability

- Support independent living; offer the right support for each individual
- Offer training to people receiving direct payments about what they are and how to use them
- Accessibility to life in the city is still an issue. For example, people with hearing problems continue to feel disadvantaged in

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service and employment but service providers/employers do not seem aware of/wiling to deal with this major problem.

Race

- Discrimination is a problem
- Need pre-school/ early-years education provision with language support. Language can be a barrier when in school too. Need to consider the needs of children coming from different education systems.
- Training qualifications from other countries are not recognised.
- Refugees in the city feel isolated and disadvantaged
- Encourage Black Minority and Ethnic peoples engagement in politics.

Age

- Need to raise awareness educate and promote tolerance towards older age.
- Need intergenerational projects
- Rural isolation is a problem for people of all ages
- Student accommodation is limited/poor in some areas of York
- Dignity in Social Care needs improving
- Employment opportunities for older and younger workers

Sexual Orientation

- Community awareness
- Bullying in schools. Specific support needed for LGBT pupils.
- Older LGBT entering care, face inclusion issues.
- Community safety. Hate crime.
- Gay friendly services are needed.
- LGBT people should be encouraged to engage in local politics.

Religion and Belief

- Improve knowledge about new groups in the city.
- Encourage engagement in politics.