

**Social Inclusion Working Group
19 November 2008**

Discussion paper

**Engaging the equality communities in the Social
Inclusion Working Group**

As required by its own policies and national legislation, the Council aims to make sure that local people have a say in the planning and delivery of public services and become engaged in local decision making.

The Social Inclusion Working Group (SIWG) provides a mechanism for people from the equality communities (also known as "the equality strands") to do just that, but needs to improve so that it can engage with as many people as possible in a fair inclusive and sustainable way.

This paper aims to help the Group begin its discussions about how to improve engagement. It explains the current national definition of "engagement" and the duties that the Council will have in this area from April 2009.

The paper also describes how people from the equality communities are engaged in SIWG at present, and asks questions about this process to be looked at in small groups. Feedback from the groups will be considered when drafting an Engagement Strategy 2009-12 for SIWG, which is expected to be finalized at the SIWG Development Day on 27 February 2009.

1. What is "engagement"?

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health (LGPIH) Act which comes into force in April 2009, introduces a new duty for local authorities "to inform, consult and involve representatives of local persons' across all authority functions".

The Act offers a definition of engagement and says that it is made up of:

- **Provision of information**, to support communities to have their say and get involved 'where appropriate'. This needs to go beyond standard information on services and must be provided in a way that can be easily accessed and understood.
- **Consultation**, to allow people to have a say about the decisions and services that affect them. Consultation needs to provide genuine opportunities for people to be involved.
- **Involvement**, which is the most interactive form of engagement, giving people greater influence over decisions or delivery, through:
 - influence or direct participation in decision making (for example budget consultations, the EIAs Fair of the Social Inclusion Working Group and ward committee meetings)
 - feedback on decisions, services, policies and outcomes (such as exit surveys, resident's surveys)
 - working with Council services to design policies and services
 - carrying out some aspects of services for themselves (for example owning, running and maintaining a community centre)

- working with Council to assess services (for example through co-opted members of Overview and Scrutiny committees, or as mystery shoppers)

SIWG has for sometime now been doing a lot of what the Act is asking, but needs to consider how to do this better in the future.

2. Community engagement in SIWG currently

It is very important that community representation on SIWG is as strong as possible. This will help the Council meet its legal duties, but more importantly it will make sure that people protected by equality legislation have a strong voice and are able to influence decision making in the Council, as was the intention when SIWG was set up.

Since July 2006 when SIWG was set up, the involvement of people from the equality communities has developed to include:

- **Co-opted representatives,**
- **Expert Witnesses, and**
- **SIWG community participation and engagement events,** like the recent Equality Impact Assessments Fair.

Below we look at each of the ways that people are involved in SIWG now, and ask some questions to help us think how to improve community representation and engagement on SIWG.

Co-opted representatives

Following its first meeting in July 2006, the organisations below were invited to send two co-opted representatives to serve on SIWG:

- the Inter-Faith Forum
- the BME Citizens' Open Forum ,
- the Older People's Assembly,
- the LGBT Forum

To date, there are two representatives from each of these organisations serving on SIWG. Most of these are elected annually by their groups and the same individuals have served since July 2006.

The "Disabled People's Forum once set up", was also invited to send two people. At the time and pending the creation of the Forum, one person involved in setting up the Forum came forward to represent the Disability strand on SIWG. Despite efforts, it has not been possible to set up a York Disabled People's Forum so far. The person resigned from the SIWG in October 2008. However, there are disabled expert witnesses from different groups who are currently engaged in SIWG.

Finally, as in July 2006 there was no single organisation representing gender issues in the city, the groups above were asked to send a male and female representative each to cover

gender issues. To date, SIWG agendas and minutes show that few if any gender issues have been raised for discussion. This needs to be addressed, because since April 2007 the Council and other public bodies have a legal duty to eliminate discrimination and harassment and promote and bring about gender equality, working with representatives from this strand including trans-gendered people.

There is an implicit expectation that people appointed as co-opted representatives attend SIWG meetings regularly. They are also expected to actively contribute to the objectives of the Group, for example by bringing forward project proposals that support and promote equality inclusion and engagement and can be funded by SIWG project budgets.

Last year the number of Councillors who sit on the SIWG was reduced. One of the main reasons was to make room for more community representatives to be engaged in the Group.

Issues to consider

1. What is the role of a co-opted representative? What should they be asked to do?
2. How does one become a co-opted representative? Elected? Appointed? Self-appointed?
3. What skills and personal qualities does a person need to have to be a co-opted representative?
4. How do we know that representatives are "representative"? How do we make sure that they bring all voices to the table - even ones they personally do not agree with?
5. How long should a co-opted representative serve on SIWG?
6. Once on SIWG, what support does a co-opted representative need to be effective?

Expert witnesses

At its first Development Day in February 2008, members of the Group considered how to widen community representation on SIWG. The concept of Expert Witness was brought up and explored during the day.

At the meeting in March 2008, SIWG Members decided that:

"The role of "expert witnesses" is to provide information and knowledge about specific issues. Expert witnesses will be invited at meetings in 2008/9 at the discretion of the Chair, for relevant agenda items."

Witnesses currently invited and reasons for inviting them are as follows:

- √ York Travellers Trust, to inform traveller issues
- √ York Humanists, to inform non religion/belief issues
- √ Young people invited in consultation with and supported by Steve Rouse, the youth worker who is currently commissioned by SIWG to work with young people, to inform specific issues such as intergenerational projects.
- √ User representatives from Valuing People Partnership and York People First to inform learning disabilities and mental health issues
- √ People from York Access Group to inform mobility issues
- √ Representatives from Higher York to progress higher education student inclusion

- √ Following investigation to identify relevant groups in the City, representatives from women's groups, men's groups and transgender groups to assist with gender issues.
- √ Representatives from the Primary Care Trust and Education services to assist with and inform equality in service issues arising in these areas.

The current Chair of SIWG has issued a standing invitation to all the witnesses to attend and feel free to speak at all meetings. Agendas and minutes are distributed to the invited witnesses.

With the exception of people from gender groups, all of the witnesses have attended:

- √ the induction lunch in June 2008,
- √ some of the main meetings, and/or
- √ the SIWG Equality Impact Assessments Fair on 5 November 2008.

There is no requirement for expert witnesses to attend all SIWG meetings.

Issues to consider

1. Is the current definition of expert witness adequate?
2. Can a person representing their own views/experience be an expert witness, or should it only be a person representing the views of a specific group?
3. What skills and personal qualities does a person need to be an expert witness?
4. Should there be a time limit for the same individual to serve as an expert witness on SIWG? What should it be?
5. What support do expert witnesses need to be effective?

Community participation and engagement events

These events provide an opportunity for large numbers of people from the equality communities to come together, share their experiences and voice their opinion about matters that SIWG deals with.

Current SIWG community events are as informal and inclusive as possible. Attendees tell us that they like them because they are relaxed and informal and make no particular demands on their time (for example by requiring attendance at frequent meetings).

To date, there have been a number of events organized in the context of SIWG:

- √ The “**Disabled People Together**” event in March 2008, to launch a project by higher education student-volunteers to support the development of a Disabled People’s Forum in York
- √ The “**Help us to get it Right Day**” (SIWG Equality Impact Assessments Fair) on 5 November 2008, where Council officer from 9 key Council service areas discussed equality issues about these areas with community representatives. Feedback from the sessions will be used to formulate service plans in 2009/10.

Both of these attracted between 40 to 50 people and feedback has been very positive with more events of this nature being asked for.

Some community groups currently involved in SIWG, also hold their own community forums (YREN, OPA, Interfaith forum).

Although these are not organized to contribute to SIWG business only, they too help get representative views to the table.

Issues to consider

1. Are SIWG community events the right way to bring more voices to the table?
2. How often should we have them?
3. What are their costs and benefits?
4. How can we improve them?
5. Who should organise them and run them? Why?

3. Other issues we need to think about to make SIWG work better

Below is a list of other issues that we need to consider in our journey to improve SIWG:

- √ Format of meetings
- √ Frequency and length of meetings
- √ Who makes decisions and how
- √ Communication

The list is not exhaustive and SIWG members are invited to put additional issues forward by contacting Evie Chandler in the Equality and Inclusion Team. These will then be discussed in detail at the Development Day on 27 February 2009