

2022

‘Tackling Inequalities’ Forum: Summary of Discussions



Forum hosted on
14th October 2022,
at Mount Shiloh
Church
10:00 - 13:00

‘Creating a vibrant community by tackling inequalities’

This document is a summary of discussions by those in attendance at the ‘Tackling Inequalities Forum’ 14th October 2022 10:00 – 13:00 at Mount Shiloh, concerning Equality and the City of Wolverhampton Council’s ‘Our City: Our Plan.’

This document has been reviewed and approved by the Working Group, as a true record of discussions that had taken place on 14/10/2022 10:00 – 13:00 at Mount Shiloh.

The approval of this document was unanimous by all in attendance at the first Working Group meeting on Tuesday 29th November 2022.

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Background, context and introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline the key points of discussion and feedback from residents, community groups and stakeholders who attended the 'Tackling Inequalities' forum on the 14th October 2022 hosted at Mount Shiloh, setting it in context with the 'Our City: Our Plan' and community participation.

Back in 2021, the City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) established the City Allied Network (CAN), inviting community groups to be part of this 'great' venture for the City. However, since January/February 2022 the CAN had not received any further updates or information about the future plans of this network since the CWC postponed the election of the vice chair.

The reason for this forum was to proactively bring together communities, residents, groups and key stakeholders, including the CWC EDI and representation from Wolverhampton Equality Diversity Partnership (WEDP) to provide an opportunity for them to discuss their concerns about equality issues and inform the 'Our City: Our Plan' document in line with the three key principles being:

1. Climate Conscious
2. Digitally Driven
- 3. Fair and Equal**

This document will highlight the voices, ideas, concerns, contributions and proposed solutions made by those in attendance to key issues that exist in the City and consider how services need to be improved in alignment with the 'Our City: Our Plan,' as far as the key principle of being 'Fair and Equal' is concerned.

The key area of focus was the principle 'fair and equal' of the 'Our City: Our Plan' and the CWC's strategy regarding how inequalities are currently tackled in the City. One of the key points agreed by all the attendees was to set up a working group forum to continue the dialogue, with the aim of working together to develop an Action Plan going forward.

The Director of Governance was personally invited with EDI, but declined the invitation clarifying CWC are ensured of community participation through WEDP. The Head of EDI, together with a colleague, was booked to attend this forum and unfortunately cancelled an hour before the meeting was due to start. The opportunity to be better informed about the

plan was denied to those in attendance, as CWC EDI might have been able to address concerns raised. The format of the meeting had to be changed as CWC's contribution to the discussion had been factored into the agenda. The Ethnic Minority Council (EMC) / WEDP were also personally invited as stakeholders in the City for equality, but they also declined to attend. Although, some members of WEDP were in attendance as individuals, not representing WEDP, and provided some valuable input to the discussions.

Key items of discussion

Our City: Our Plan

The first item of discussion centred on the 'Our City: Our Plan,' with key focus being on the 'tackling inequalities' aspect of the plan. Attendees expressed disappointment that CWC EDI and EMC/WEDP did not attend without any credible explanation and also CWC EDI reps had left it so late to inform the organisers of their absence.

- It was felt that CWC and EMC/WEDP choosing not to attend the forum to listen to the views and concerns of others speaks volumes about their commitment to equality, inclusion and accountability.

Attendees were asked:

- i. Is everyone present aware of/ seen this plan?
- ii. Did anyone participate in the development of the plan?

Responses were:

- No one – other than a Councillor who was in attendance - was aware of the plan or had seen it.
- No one had been involved in the development of or had made a contribution to the plan.
- What does the CWC mean by the term 'Our?' The lack of involvement suggests that the CWC mean 'themselves' as a corporation and not the 'residents.'
- No decision should be made about me without me.
- How can CWC identify the 'problems' prior to writing the plan and how will it achieve the 6 objectives of the plan, if there has been no direct engagement with residents prior to writing the plan?
- How can the deaf community access this City plan and be involved with discussions?
- There have been many conversations at forums about their lived experience around equality yet interpreters have not been booked or factored into budgets to cover the costings for interpreters.

- How are priorities determined and decided without proper consultation and inclusion of the residents, of all groups, to participate in the development of the plans for the City? What are councillors doing to effectively communicate the 'Our City: Our Plan' to its residents and constituents?

Equality Groups in Wolverhampton

Discussions at this point centred on how inequalities are currently being tackled. There was a slight deviation from the agenda (given CWC not attending), as particular focus centred on WEDP, of which its members were in attendance, however, not representing it at this forum.

- Questions were asked by attendees why EMC/WEDP were not present at this forum and if WEDP is a separate organisation from EMC. Attendees who are part of WEDP, but not representing it at this forum, explained that EMC became the Accountable (but not Lead) organisation when WEDP was set up. However, it evolved into being the Lead body when EMC emailed its new members asking if any of them wanted to be the Lead body otherwise EMC would do it. As this was suggested in the early formative months of WEDP's development no one felt ready to Lead and therefore it fell to EMC by default.
- Are EMC/WEDP not separate organisations? The reply from its members was as follows: questions have been asked to EMC/WEDP regarding governance, decision-making, membership, accountability, finances etc and satisfactory answers have not been forthcoming. WEDP does not have AGMs, nor give financial reports, roles and the responsibilities of the Executive group are unclear.
- Despite CWC governance officers being informed of these issues around governance of the WEDP there has been no response. It seems the CWC is reluctant to acknowledge any challenges to WEDP because it helps them to tick boxes around equality. But why does it seem they don't want to engage with any other organisations unless it is through WEDP?
- The EMC lead officer has been in contact with people not to attend this equality forum. Question was asked if this approach has had any influence on CWC not attending.
- If the Council's Head of Governance is only prepared to work with/through WEDP, where does this leave everyone else who is not part of this group or partnership or who want WEDP to be more accountable, transparent and inclusive?

Accessing services

There was a discussion around some challenges that exist, in the City of Wolverhampton, accessing services both pre and post-Covid.

- An example was given of a resident aged 70 wanting to book an appointment with his GP and then being directed to Babylon Health, only to be charged £65 for a consultation, which he did not request.
- Through complaints raised at Penn Residents Association about the relevance of the Council and the Clinical Commissioning group (CCG) a new Patient Participation Group (PPG) was formed. Almost 500 local people/participants were involved. This was a result of local action.
- Support from the council and councillors is difficult to access for migrants and asylum seekers requiring help, which pre dates Covid and is still an issue post-covid. Some residents feel that covid is still being used as an excuse by some councillors. There is a perception that councillor's professional survival and representation is more important than that of the constituents they represent.
- Residents can help to provide solutions to local problems, but that there seems to be a lack of willingness from local authorities to act upon them.
- How is it still acceptable in 2022 that post-Covid, in Wolverhampton, there are still barriers to accessing essential services? An example was given of a major concern from the deaf community regarding access to GP services. Only 2 people can be seen on a conference call. Online/ telephone consultations present communication barriers to accessing services to health for the deaf community and those who are hard of hearing. Most services are telephone based and, despite the deaf community requesting alternative forms of communication, there has been no responses and no changes have been made.
- Health-inequalities still exist in the City for instance data shows that the life expectancy of a resident living in Tettenhall is several years more than that of a resident living in Bilston.
- A Health Inequalities event organised by EMC/WEDP took place in November 2021 at the Nova Hotel. The event was well attended and raised several important issues yet there has been no feedback, Report or Action plan or other outcome for those who attended after almost one year. Did the meeting take place because it was a funded event to help tick boxes? After an Older Person's event – which was also organised by EMC/WEDP and took place a few years ago also had no follow-up or action plan.
- It was also highlighted that there does not seem to be any representation in the Council for the deaf community. A comment was made for them to contact councillors but

others said that their experience of contacting a Councillor for advice on how to resolve an issue was largely ignored.

- The Council have previously asked for proof of barriers/concerns that the deaf community face and yet despite them providing the proof and evidence over the years, they too have just been ignored.
- The Council decide what is best for the City on their terms not what is in the best interests for the public tax payer.
- What provisions are in place for those who cannot speak or read the English language, in particular asylum seekers and migrants? What representation exists for migrants and asylum seekers? What provisions are in place for the deaf community? How is the information currently being presented and circulated so that these communities have better access?
- The CWC has £70million of reserves, why is this not being accessed to improve CWC's services?

Perceptions and solutions

- Scrutiny panels seem to be a pointless exercise as key stakeholders need to be held to account by the public. It was confirmed that councillors can only scrutinise what is presented by the Officers, which raised the question as to who has more power – the officers or councillors? Another proposal was to re-establish public scrutiny reviews and to ask why they had been stopped?
- There needs to be improved access and publication of Council public chamber meetings. One solution proposed was to publicise all live feeds of council meetings via social media outlets including: Wolverhampton Today, Councillor's Facebook Pages so that residents can attend virtually/ in person and be properly informed of these meetings. This also includes openness and transparency of the dates of meetings through all avenues to better connect residents and communities with the CWC discussions and plans.
- There is an impression that the CWC officers spend too much time patting themselves on the back whilst ignoring community intelligence about real issues felt at the grassroots level. Those who raise awareness of these issues feel that they are simply perceived as trouble makers or a nuisance by the council. Residents want to work with the council, not against them, however, it feels that the Council do not want to hear (and have to deal with) the concerns of the residents.
- Resident's perception of the City of Wolverhampton, both internally and externally, is not great. One way to impact real change may be to get media involvement in scrutiny.

- Residents voices can come across as fragmented, however, we need to create a culture where residents can come together in safety as a single voice.
- Perhaps residents could generate its own residents plan involving/inviting individuals, groups and stakeholders to develop with a 'bottom-up' approach, since the 'top-down' approach does not seem to be working. There seems to be a disconnect between the decisions that are being made from the 'top' and the lived experiences of people at the grass roots level. There is enough expertise and community intelligence on the ground for research to be conducted locally that can then inform the 'residents plan' for the City.
- All 60 Councillors are up for election in 2023 and this presents an opportunity to publically state on the record, which councillors have not proactively engaged with residents' issues and concerns especially related to inequalities. It is also a way to highlight/publicise and put on record the names of those Councillors who have been proactively engaged and responsive.
- If WEDP is the only Equalities group that CWC is prepared to engage with, why isn't it led and run by the residents of Wolverhampton and not sit with one organisation with its main focus on ethnic minority groups, which could have potential conflict of interests? An independent organisation, which is community and resident led, could ensure that there is a mechanism in the City for true and authentic participation inclusive of all diverse groups of the City.

Concluding points of ACTION

The following actions were agreed:

- Key points of discussions that took place at the event to be documented and made available to the attendees and the general public once approved by the organising group.
- Working Group Forum to be established made up of individual residents, community groups, businesses and stakeholders proactively working together to identify equality issues across the City and then to find ways to address them by acting collectively.
- Working Group to meet before the end of 2022;
- Working Group to be an open forum to all interested in being part of influencing change needed for the City of Wolverhampton.

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