

Advisory Committee Focus Groups - Responses

This document includes the responses of the Advisory Committee members that attended the focus groups held on 30 January and 31 January 2006.

Membership

WAC has a good mix of members including disabled women, women of different ages and of different ethnic backgrounds. Seen as a good.

WAC has got smaller, lost a lot of members such as representatives from the Derby Women's centre, Karma Nirvana, Hadhari Nari. There used to be some really good discussions, but less so now.

There was further discussion around previous membership, for example Derby Women's centre – that they hadn't attended for the past 2-3 years.

One member of WAC said that at one time there was a lot of debating which she wasn't always comfortable with.

There was also discussion on the European Network – that there was a lot of activity but that when the project finished and they went away.

WAC members felt that membership of WAC should remain both for individuals and organisations.

Group organisation ...

- Do not think a mixed group would work as the vocal minority could control things.
- Better to focus on different group issues – to get real engagement need to move away from the committee structure, possibly to individual ward structures (not Area Panels)
- Could look at making sure that the groups are more representative – young people, BME, women etc
- Bring in different dimensions for MECAC – 50/50 split women/men – older people, young people, other groups

What works well with the advisory committees

- General view was the processes did not work well and don't facilitate consultation
- MECAC – when the group was set up in 1995 worked initially but it needs to move on, be more representative of other groups
- Advisory committees are not the best way to consult people, as you tend to raise expectations, which the Council can't meet – so why consult?
- Need to be clear about the remit for the groups – what the expectations are/what the Council can do
- WAC – have gelled well as a group

- If the process doesn't work with these groups, it won't work with engaging with the wider groups.
- Not sure if what is discussed go up to the decision-makers – what is the point of us advising them?

Time to absorb info

Time given to provide feedback when being consulted. If information was received for example 3 weeks before the consultation it might be better. But only get information a week or so in advance so for giving feedback, time is short. (WAC member)

We brought this up too (DPAC member). Slightly different to the discussion we had before and especially for those with sight problems or for those who have to have it signed to them.

Need time to comment – 2 weeks is sometimes not enough time. Although other members of the group said that this was the same with most meetings that they attend.

Being send information on consultation a week in advance doesn't give time to understand the issues. The presentations in the meetings vary, some are long and some brief. Where the presentation is brief – sometimes feel a bit stupid asking questions.

Information being understandable

Need time to understand the information being sent. If possible simplify information.

May be better if there are only a few things on the agenda. Enjoyed Greater Derby PCT presentation – one comment inc – didn't understand it all.

No need for the Councillors to read out reports word for word that committee members have already received. One view expressed. Another member of the group added that sometimes this is helpful.

Feedback on the outcome of their comments / consultation

Some members of the group commented that they had given views on 'leisure' – the physical activity strategy, but hadn't heard what the outcome of the consultation is.

What happens to the information gathered through the committees?

Would be good to follow something through, what happens, what's the outcome, follow through.

Impact – any impact on things?

Acknowledged that they sometimes make an impact, although A-Boards and Cycling in pedestrianised zones are still allowed.

‘Things come to DPAC, are flashed by us’.

Would like some feedback when we’ve given an opinion.

It is good to have Council officers in attendance if they are listening, because this helps participants to feel they are having an influence. A positive example mentioned was DPAC’s influence over “A” Boards policy. However there was some cynicism about whether some of the items were being presented by the Council just so a box could be ticked to say it had been done. Often more evidence was needed that people’s input had been taken on board.

On the question of 'representativeness' and participants feeding back into their groups and communities, some people said they might quite a thorough effort to do this. One thing that would help was for Agendas to appear earlier to give participants more of a chance to discuss them in their groups and communities.

Focus of the Committees

Area where the committees need to improve include the agenda’s, that items are inconsistent. One item will be on the council budget and then the next item will be a query relating to a personal issue more like casework. Why can’t these queries be picked up separately? If the advisory committee is intended to be strategic with senior officers attending then make it strategic. Need to decide whether the committee has a strategic or an operational remit. For some groups it is an opportunity to raise operational issues. Committee could do with a support officer to pick up on these queries and channel them to the right people.

- To consider paying attendance allowance to Advisory Committee members.
- Make the agendas much sharper
- Others to set up meetings outside of the Council and not on the back of MECAC – for example the PCT.
- Have more community advocates / champions to better gather neighbourhood / resident views.

A further suggestion to invite officers to attend the meetings with only subjects / issues members of that committee wish to discuss / hear / be consulted on.

Issue raised about the level of interest of the Councillor chairing the meeting. MECAC rep commented that if the chair of MECAC wasn’t interested in race issues then they would want to replace them with someone who is.

'Committees are seen as lip service'. Enable the Council to tick the box on having consulted with groups. Advisory Committees were mentioned a great deal in the Council's CPA report.

How valuable are the committees? Objected to the closure of the Equalities Unit, but it happened anyway.

There was a general view that the Agenda setting for Advisory Committee was too dominated by the Council side cascading items down. There should be a more 2-way process to set the Agenda, without the process becoming too bureaucratic. One suggestion was that the Committee participants come up with their own list of priority topics for the year to put alongside the Council Plan. Another suggestion was one or two participants meeting with the Chair in a pre-Agenda meeting to discuss the Agenda

Moving even further towards a participant-led Agenda, the example of the Derbyshire County Council Women's Forum of the 1980s / 90s was raised as a suggestion of good practice, where the Agenda was pretty much entirely set by the Forum participants. There was a pre-Agenda committee to do this. Also only one or two councillors attended the Forum, and who they were was chosen by the Forum itself. The Forum selected its own Chair. There was a suggestion that we should find out what the County Council does nowadays.

The Advisory Committee Agendas can be too long and participants may not get the chance to get properly to the bottom of some of the items raised. Participants can sometimes feel rushed, and intimidated because councillors and officers know so much more about the workings of the Council. Also there was concern about Matters Arising from the previous meetings not always being allowed to be properly followed up unless the item appeared again on the Agenda. Sometimes items disappear and participants don't know what has happened in relation to their contributions.

To remedy this, there was a suggestion that there should be at least one Councillor for each Advisory Committee with a responsibility to take up issues arising from the Committee and make sure they are followed through – a championing role.

The Focus Group suggested that if a councillor chaired an AC, the vice-chair should be elected from the participants. Current meeting frequency and duration were OK.

Attendance Allowance

As Advisory Committee members give their time on a voluntary basis, the council could give all of those who attend an attendance allowance. As committee members are there to support / influence council policy it would be a recognition of the support that they give. People may also then give adequate time, more commitment and also turn up to meetings.

Sometimes Councillors thank committee members for their hard work. Peter Berry made a special effort to do this and it was appreciated, also Janet Till was highlighted as being good. (WAC member)

Meeting Process

Themed Meetings? Most in the group were supportive of this idea. However it was acknowledged that these could be different depending on the committee.

- Frequency of meetings? Okay.
 - Duration of meetings? Okay
 - When the meetings are held? Okay
 - Timing of meetings – on the whole okay.
- WAC – good to have a regular pattern of meetings, it helps to establish links within the group – Bi-monthly meetings are fine
 - WAC tends to meet too frequently – sometimes attend and think meetings are a waste of time
 - MECAC – quarterly meetings may be the best approach
 - Bigger forum type meetings should be called as and when required – don't send out paperwork, just have informal discussions around specific topics that affect the wider community/groups. Outcomes could then be discussed at the Advisory Committees
 - Need to receive information and understand the issues and given time to feedback properly.

Cut down on the paperwork have more open sessions where all the groups meet – similar to the Seniors Forum – then the results can be discussed at the separate advisory committee meetings.

Positives

The committees give a better understanding of the council and how it works – all though not necessarily how the councillors work.

One WAC member said she understood more now about recycling.

Other ways of publicising the work of the committees

WAC member – you could send information about the committees to community centres to keep them informed.

WAC members thought that the MECAC newsletter sounded like a good idea.

Suggestion to reserve space in existing council newsletters to give information about the work of the committees.

Issues

WAC member – 'I'm not sure I live in a community, I don't know anyone in my area'. Following this was a discussion that members of DPAC and MECAC tend to be representative of community or voluntary organisations.

Information Sharing

WAC member – we could learn from each others (the different advisory committees) discussions – have this as an agenda item.

WAC member – if all three committees want a presentation on the same thing – could have one meeting with all three. General agreement.

Combining Resources

Suggestion from one WAC member on combining resources for organising International Day of Disabled people and International Women's Day. The same few people every year work to organise IWD every year. On the day, where's all of the committee members?

Other members of the group commented that we need to be careful not to lose the identity of each committee.

Wider equality dimension groups ...

Faith / Religion – group not sure how comfortable a fit this would be. Wish to avoid politics and religion. One member of the group a member of the University Faith Group. Potential to link into existing faith fora.

LGBT – that a group focusing on sexuality would need to be set up sensitively and carefully. Feeling was that it's best to ask members of this community if this sort of consultation is something that they want.

Involving other wider groups ...

- Council needs to go out to these groups – not just rely on the committees
- Need to consult people in the areas affected about the issues that affect them – this would be for specific issues. For wider issues that affect everyone you need to involve a broader cross-section of people.
- Council needs to listen and target specific groups
- Town hall style meetings could be used to engage with wider groups – councillors should not be allowed to attend as they dominate meetings with their political agendas and put people off giving their views
- Need to go outside current selection process to recruit non-represented groups

Part of the Review Process

Request to see the suggestions for the future of the advisory committees before they are agreed and moved forward. If there's to be a new structure proposed would like to see the proposals first – rather than find out once everything has already happened.

What could be improved?

- Meetings are too formal, controlled by the Council – not consultation just information
- Advisory Committees are dominated by councillors – should be for the community representatives/members
- No formal process for nominating people on to WAC
- Consultation should start from the beginning, not after they've already made the decisions
- Think consultation carried out with the Seniors Forum, better organised than advisory committees
- Demoralising to get no feedback about outcomes from the Council
- Councillors are not properly briefed about the issues affecting the committees – this could be because of their busy workloads
- Council needs to support members more about issues that affect them – Council doesn't listen effectively to people's concerns – examples given disabled housing needs and support needed by the Kurdish community.

Women cross over into the other 2 categories as well, so it would be good for WAC to link better to DPAC and MECAC. Options considered for improving this lateral communication / bridging between the 3 Advisory Committees were:

- at least one representative from each Advisory Committee going to the other ones as a full voting member with a brief to feedback both ways. There would be an Agenda item on each Committee's Agenda about what to take to the other ones
- having a regular meeting of about 12 people bringing together 3 or 4 reps from each Advisory Committee to consider common issues. However, there was some doubt expressed about what this would achieve.