

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPEECH BATH CITY FORUM

WEDS 17 JAN 2018

Good evening and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak tonight.

I am here to talk about community engagement.

- What does that actually mean?
- How can the ways in which we engage with community be improved?

I look around this room tonight and I see that the majority of people here are male, white and middle class.

- Bath clearly has a diversity problem when we look at its representative groups.
 - While Bathnes is 90% White British – against 80% UK average, are 10% of our public representatives from BAME backgrounds?
 - Almost 9% of residents were born outside the UK
 - There are more women than men resident here, as across the world now.
 - Over 10% (21,000) residents don't earn a living wage for a single person, Over 20% (36,000) residents don't earn a living wage for a couple of family.
- It is not just the Council but it's inherent within other organisations as well.
- I come from a theatre background. Even this traditionally "liberal" world has a massive diversity problem.
- It is slowly improving but there is a long way to go.
 - A regional theatre asked local BAME residents why they did not come to see shows at the theatre.
 - Amongst obvious things such as the price of tickets, another common theme emerged.
 - The answer? The shows were white middle-class actors telling white stories.
 - They did not see **anything – or anyone – on stage that reflected them, their communities or their stories.**
- Could Bathnes's failure to engage with different communities be down to the largely white male and middle class profile? **Are local people not seeing themselves represented and therefore feel excluded?**
- As human beings, we all tend to gravitate towards those who share similar values, speak the same way we speak, think in a similar way.
- But we know this is dangerous.
- If the US election and the unexpected nature of the Brexit result showed anything, it is the danger of echo chambers – **the danger of assumptions that come with privilege.**
- Another barrier to engagement is a physical one.
 - The buildings where we meet are designed to impress, not welcome.
 - That can be very intimidating.

- Theatres are not that different.
- One local mum's kids went to a youth group at a regional theatre.
- At the end of each session she would always wait outside
- When asked why, she said: "I've never been to a theatre. I've no idea how to behave in one. Do I have to talk with a posh voice?"
- The building was a barrier.
- Members of the community can understandably feel the same way about the Council chamber.
 - They've no idea what to expect in meetings, how they're supposed to act, what will happen.
 - **The meetings themselves prevent community engagement.**
- I have highlighted a few issues I believe cause some of the problems that community members have fed back to me over the last year.
- These are not anybody's fault and they can all be fixed.
- **But if nothing changes, then the problem does become deliberate.**

To recap, some of the barriers I have identified are:

- Lack of diversity and voices from different backgrounds
- Buildings as barriers
- Processes that are opaque, rules that need learning, language that's unnecessarily high-falutin'
- In the Council's Corporate Strategy for 2016-2020, section 3 clearly states that one of the Council's ambitions is A new relationship with customers and communities: **Putting residents first in everything that we do**

With that in mind here are some positive ways to make change.

- Kenneth Hogg was a civil servant based in Scotland
- His TED-X talk – available on YouTube – is called "Change Starts Here"
 - He tells the story of how the Scottish Government rolled out a program from MIT called ULab, across Scotland.
 - ULab has helped communities across the country engage with their councils and the public sector in a new way – going into discussions with questions, rather than answers.
 - Mr Hogg openly admits it had been uncomfortable. It was a completely new way of working.
 - Dealing with people as people and actually learning to listen and leave preconceived views at the door.
 - The results have improved how the Scottish Government works
 - There is now a spirit of openness and true engagement with the community.
- I believe it is time that this Council learnt to become uncomfortable.
 - But more than that – become comfortable with a new state of uncomfortableness, of uncertainty, of questioning without knowing the answers.

- I would like to work with officers to hold a series of mock Council meetings which shows residents exactly what to expect.
 - Break down the policies and procedures
 - Let them try out public speaking for 3 minutes with the traffic light system – without the stakes being any higher than learning something new.

I believe that if we work together we really can improve local engagement with the Council, and perhaps raise awareness of issues within the city which are currently not finding a voice.

Thank you for your time.