

Brighton & Hove City Council

Cabinet

Agenda Item 76(c)

Subject: Deputations

Date of meeting: 17 October 2024

A period of not more than fifteen minutes shall be allowed at each ordinary meeting of the Council for the hearing of deputations from members of the public.

Notification of one Deputation has been received. The spokesperson is entitled to speak for 5 minutes.

1) Deputation: Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy

For women like me, the Council's stated commitment to refreshing its strategy on preventing and tackling VAWG is welcome. For those of us who have experienced sexual violence and live with the trauma of it, single-sex counselling services are crucial. In learning the lessons of the recent Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre (ERCC) debacle, I'm sure all of you will agree with me that any publically funded service here in our city must necessarily place the needs of survivors as paramount. In Edinburgh, we now know that female survivors, desperate for single-sex services, were labelled bigots and their pleas were stored in a folder marked 'hate emails'. In our city, female survivors of sexual violence like me have already experienced a devastating breach of trust at the hands of our male attackers. But when we turn to council-funded services only to be told that no single-sex services will be offered our trust is betrayed all over again. This is unforgivable. When rape survivors are being denied services simply because they need to know men will not be present something has gone very wrong in this city. It means women in need of female-only services are now self-excluding from these services. Stranded on the Survivors Network waiting list for over 2 years I became desperate. I approached Brighton's Women's Centre and spoke to a coordinator. I was told that the Women's Centre would not be able to guarantee a woman-only service and a man identifying as a woman could be present or allocated as a counsellor. This came as a shock because I had previously noted that the centre advertises roles referencing Sch 9, pt 1 of the Equality Act. This states that posts are restricted to women only as a 'genuine occupational requirement'.

With the definition of a woman so brazenly eroded by these two council supported services, can we all agree that this is a woeful state of affairs? How many other women are self-excluding from vital services in health and wellbeing settings due to this obvious blatant dilution of women's safe spaces? No woman who has been sexually assaulted by a man should be put into the position of having to accept a man, however he identifies, in a support or therapeutic environment.

The major issue here is that women do not even have the right to know in advance or, in the current climate, be able to make a complaint without being vilified. Given the Council is funding these services, I trust that Cabinet will ensure that its VAWG strategy will take on-board and remedy this anti-woman policy? How many more women are silently struggling due to the denial of our sex based rights and access to single sex spaces. Women like me were pleased to see your VAWG document list one of its four strategic objectives as "Supporting survivors to ensure anyone

affected by VAWGDASV has access to high quality trauma-informed support” (p3). Curiously, the document only uses clear terminology for ‘female’ and ‘male’ (as a biological category) a few times. I’m glad the strategy recognises that sexual violence predominantly and disproportionately impacts women and girls (i.e the biological category of female). But “female” is only mentioned in regards to police data twice (on p9 and p10). And while its true that the document makes a distinction between females and ‘all genders’ in the summary, thereafter it blurs these categories. In describing violence against women and girls, the VAWG strategy document states that this “can happen to anyone regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, ability or disability or sexual orientation”. The council’s omission of the biological category of ‘sex’ and the conflation of ‘female’ with ‘gender’ seems rooted in a desire to avoid offense to men who identify as women over the needs of female survivors. For this reason, women like me the laudable strategic objective of supporting survivors with access to high quality trauma-informed support not only rings hollow but the vital role of single-sex services is completely ignored.

A new resident to our recently wrote of the council: “... if [BHCC] takes its commitment to tackling VAWG seriously, a new approach is desperately needed [which] reflects the differing opinions in the city and actively listens to survivors rather than silencing them, [enabling] solutions that don’t leave survivors of male violence with nowhere to go”.

Supported by:

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