

Research impact with a difference: Bristol Women's Commission



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On International Women's Day 2013 at a colourful and noisy event George Ferguson, Mayor of Bristol, signed the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life on behalf of the city of Bristol, the first city in the UK to do so. To implement the Charter the mayor proposed the establishment of a Women's Commission to draw up an action plan - the Women's Strategy for Bristol- to address areas of discrimination and disadvantage which women face.

This ground breaking initiative arose from a meeting between Bristol Women's Voice (BWV), an independent forum representing women in Bristol, and the newly elected Mayor. BWV took with them a short piece of research demonstrating the success rate of partner organisations in helping women out of poverty through training, placements and employment - a success rate much higher than the government's own programmes.

"Our aim was to influence the Mayor in protecting grants to women's organisations where possible (not all the organisations were grant aided by the council) and to demonstrate the outstanding work going on in the city. We stressed however that this is only the tip of the iceberg and that women are still facing barriers to equality of opportunity in work, society and public life. We also took with us a copy of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, a charter co-authored in 2007 by Diane Bunyan, a member of BWV management group. We asked George if he would consider signing this for the city as an indication of his intention to help bring about real change in gender equality in the city. It was at this point that George proposed the setting up of a Women's Commission to look at key areas where women face disadvantage and draw up an action plan to implement the Charter (which he agreed to sign some weeks later after reading it)."

Penny Gane, Chair, Women's Commission

The Commission

The first meeting of the Bristol Women's Commission was held on May 22nd 2013. One hundred per cent of the organisations asked to send a woman representative responded positively and almost all of them attended the first meeting. Organisations included: Bristol Women's Voice, Bristol Fawcett, Voluntary Organisations Standing Conference on Urban Regeneration (VOSCUR), Bristol City Council, the Lib Dem, Conservative, Labour and Green parties, University of Bristol, University of the West of England, Learning and Enterprise Partnership, First, Clinical Commissioning Group, Avon and Somerset Constabulary, City of Bristol College, Spirit PR and

the BBC. The aim of bringing women from these organisations together was to encourage change in every sector of the city at a crucial time, when austerity cuts will significantly increase divisions between women and disadvantaged communities. The Commission members agreed that part of their role would be to ensure gender mainstreaming takes place in their own organisations and to work together to achieve this. They will be accountable to the mayor, Europe and the women of Bristol.

Research collaboration

The Commission offers academic researchers from UWE and Bristol opportunities to develop research that will demonstrate real impact within the city. UWE and Bristol Pro Vice Chancellors, Jane Harrington and Judith Squires, are members of the Commission and are committed to resourcing the research needed to underpin the task groups. This is an opportunity for UWE and Bristol University researchers to develop collaborations, and will be of special interest to CESR members. Jane has called for UWE women academics interested in developing research with local impact to get in touch.

Six task groups are at varying stages of development: Women's Health, Women and the Economy, Safety/Violence, Transport, Caring Responsibilities and Women's Representation in public life. Both universities offered research capacity and individual women are getting started on pieces of work. The task groups aim to comprise a mix of women with expertise and women who are not closely involved - bringing a fresh pair of eyes. They are also tasked with engaging women across the city on these issues. Leaders of task groups are senior women managers in service organisations.

On November 28, UWE Business School and Bristol University co-sponsored 'Mingle' on the Harbourside, a networking event that brought together women academic researchers, and women leading public, voluntary and community based services. Attended by George Ferguson, and women from both universities, voluntary and community sector organisations and public authorities, valuable connections were made between researchers from the two universities and women leading service organisations as a basis for research collaborations to support the work of the task groups. The event built on a previous event to encourage more women to take up leadership roles in Bristol, addressed by Sue Mountstevens, the new Police Commissioner.

Networking Event

2013 ended with a women's networking event bringing together women from both universities with an interest in the work of the commission, with women from voluntary and community organisations and public authorities. George Ferguson also attended to hear their ideas and concerns and to share his vision for the city. The aim of the event was to make connections so that the commission and its task groups can work with a wide group of women with varied interests and expertise.

Penny Ganes outlined the commission's progress to date and plans for the six priority areas, in particular drawing attention to the impact of public sector cuts on women, both as users of services and as public sector employees. George Ferguson acknowledged the scale of the impact on women and the fact that the council had not shown this clearly in its assessments. His vision, he said, was for Bristol to be 'the best place for women' and he was keen to be advised by the commission on ways to tackle some of the most intractable problems faced by women in the city.

Judith Squires and Jane Harrington, pro vice chancellors of Bristol University and UWE and sponsors of the event, spoke of the importance of this work and reiterated their continued support with active participation on the commission and in task groups and a commitment to underpin the commission's work with research. Excellent working links were established, the suggestion sheets were full by the end of the evening; an excellent event all round, perhaps the first of many.

Other news from the Women's Commission

- New Year brings two new task groups. The Women's Health group meets in January, its work underpinned by the Women's Health Compendium drawn up by Public Health.
- The Women and Economy group will meet for the first time at the end of the month.
- The Women's Representation Group will be establishing new and broader goals following events designed to encourage more women into public life.
- The Women and Transport Group will be running a focus group in February on all issues relating to women's experience of transport in the city. The event will have a crèche and free bus tickets from First. The group will have a researcher analysing gender issues in current transport policies. BWV has conducted a transport survey which will inform this work.
- The Women's Safety group will focus initially on an enquiry day into Sexual Entertainment Venues in the city.
- The commission will be consulted on the Strategic Economic Plan

Bristol Women's Commission can be found on the council website at www.bristol.gov.uk/page/mayor/womens-mayoral-commission

How CESR can make a difference

For CESR members, alongside members of other research centres, BWV offers an opportunity to make a difference and to demonstrate research impact by working alongside service organisations and local communities to promote gender equality at a difficult time. Please contact Margaret Page (margaret.page@uwe.ac.uk) if you would like to explore this further.