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Corporate Plan Output: Community Liaison, Assistance and Advocacy	

The purpose of this report is to recommend some possible directions for the Council in response to the deputation in November by Patrick O'Connor, Tim Barnett and Tuck Waaka about race relations issues in Christchurch.

BACKGROUND

In November of last year Patrick O'Connor, Tim Barnett and Tuck Waaka made a presentation to the Community Services Committee. The purpose of this presentation was to propose that the Council consider forming a working party to develop a Christchurch based organisation to co-ordinate race relations issues. It was noted that the recommendations which were presented arose partly because the South Island Race Relations Office (based in Christchurch) had recently closed.

The purpose of the working party would be to consult widely and develop partnerships around the key proposal to develop a new organisation (see original proposal for more detail). The proposed purposes of the new organisation would be:

- Education, positive use of media, co-ordination of stakeholders (identified as the Race Relations Office, Mana Whenua, specialist agencies working with refugees and new migrants, Christchurch City Council, businesses, Refugee and Migrant Centre, Refugee and New Migrant Forum, multi-party politicians, Community Trust, Central Government, Police and ethnic communities) and provision of information to proactively enhance cultural diversity in Christchurch.
- To initiate and co-ordinate responses to regional and central government on matters pertaining to ethnic minority groups.
- To provide regular reports to local government on initiatives undertaken.

The proposal also contained a plan entitled '10 Practical Actions to Tackle the Job Crisis Among New Migrants and Refugees' by Tim Barnett.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Since this delegation to the Committee the Race Relations Conciliator, Rajen Prasad, has indicated through the media and in a meeting with Councillors that the Christchurch Race Relations Office is still open and will remain so (see attachment). Mr Prasad noted that his office is changing focus towards education but that it will still respond to complaints as required by law. Mr Prasad is currently visiting Christchurch every second week to work from his office here.

The Committee originally resolved that staff should liaise with the delegation members regarding the scope, terms of reference and membership of a working party to look at organisational arrangements for improving race relations. Given that a main part of the rationale for the proposal was the closure of the Southern Race Relations Office, this action is no longer appropriate. The proposal does however raise broader issues about race relations issues and this report therefore provides comments on the original proposal and recommends a future role for the Council in this area.

DISCUSSION

Current Council Involvement

The Council has long had an interest and involvement in initiatives to promote positive race relations. For example, the Council is a co-convenor of the Refugee and New Migrant Forum and is represented on the Christchurch Safer Community Council. The Refugee and New Migrant Forum has education, employment and health working groups which are well informed about actions needed for their client groups. At present these working groups are highly dependent on the time and other resources available from member organisations to carry out lobbying and other activities.

The Council has a substantial financial commitment to the Refugee and Migrant Centre (\$45,000 per year under the Social Initiatives Programme). It is the view of one of the groups housed in the centre, and of Crown Public Health, that “in achieving its potential, the centre will become the hub of many of the projects suggested in the plan”. The organisations housed in the Refugee and Migrant Centre have continuing difficulty in obtaining sufficient funding to meet the needs of client groups.

Future Involvement

In responding to the deputation’s proposal the Council must give consideration both to the effectiveness of its current commitments in this area, but also the most appropriate role for it to play in race relations issues in the city. The role of the Race Relations Office is a statutory one. Building a relationship with this office and finding out how mutually beneficial activities could be achieved is a logical first step in any move by the Council to become further involved in race relations issues. For example, Mr Prasad has indicated that he considers education programmes to be a priority for the office. The Council could consider contributing to a locally based education initiative. (The Race Relations Office intends to forward information about such programmes to Council in the near future.)

Alternatively, the Council may decide that the office itself is a key priority. If this is the case, the Council could lobby government to provide additional funding to the office and/or determine to what extent it is willing to support re-establishing the functions of the Christchurch Race Relations Office (and to what extent it could do so given that it does not have statutory power in this area).

Views of Stakeholders

Race relations involve all ethnic groups in Christchurch. However race relations issues relating to refugees and new migrants tend to be the most visible and the most discussed. Employment, discrimination and access to health care are all potentially race relations issues and there are obviously a great many organisations and groups which address these issues on a daily basis.

The deputation's proposal suggests a concrete solution to issues which have not yet been fully discussed or agreed upon by the many stakeholders. It is a positive suggestion to propose that the stakeholders have the opportunity to discuss issues of concern. However it is not helpful for the solution (in this case a new organisation) to already be the purpose of these discussions.

In canvassing the views of some of the stakeholders in this area, it is apparent that there is very little enthusiasm for 'yet another bureaucracy'. At present, there is no mandate for such an organisation. The Pacific Island Executive Council, for example, has indicated an enthusiasm for race relations issues to be addressed, but suggests that ideas on how to do this should come from all those involved. Similarly, Maria Tait (Ngai Tahu) suggests that everyone has a responsibility to be involved identifying the issues of concern before solutions are put forward. These views are echoed by the Co-ordinator of the Safer Community Council and the Chief Executive of the Canterbury Employers Chamber of Commerce.

CONCLUSION

Suggestions made by the delegation may usefully contribute to discussions by the Council on race relations issues. The extent to which stakeholders endorse these suggestions or their proposed manner of delivery is yet to be determined. The Race Relations Office has indicated interest in pursuing discussion with the Council about future initiatives. Ngai Tahu and several community groups have also indicated their interest in participating in discussions on race relations issues. It seems appropriate for the Council to take a lead in initiating discussions which identify the key issues and then seeing which existing initiatives can be further strengthened to address these. If new initiatives are required this would become evident as a result of this process.

Recommendation: That the Council pursue discussions with the Race Relations Conciliator and Ngai Tahu about the possibility of jointly hosting a forum to progress race relations issues in Christchurch.