

Islington VCFS Strategy: Creating a more equal Islington

Introduction

The Islington VCFS strategy sets out how Islington Council and the local voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) will work together to create better outcomes for residents, strengthen our communities and increase opportunity for all. At a time when the council, the VCFS and many Islington residents are facing significant financial challenges and an uncertain future it is more important than ever that we come together to make a positive difference to people's lives.

Each of us has a distinct role: the Council has a democratic mandate and an over-arching duty to promote the well-being of residents and neighbourhoods, in partnership with others as 'convenor of place'. The VCFS has deep knowledge of and experience of working with Islington's diverse communities, responding to people's needs and supporting social action. Below we set out how we will strengthen our relationship so that together we can respond more effectively to the challenges our residents face.

Inequality in Islington

Inequality in Islington is stark. Median pay is higher than elsewhere in London, and property prices continue to rise, yet poverty persists alongside this affluence. Islington is the 6th most deprived borough in London and is in the top 10% nationally for income deprivation. For example:

- 18% of children under 16 live in poverty before housing costs; once housing costs are taken into consideration this rises to 43% (14,000 children).
- Disabled people, people with long term health conditions, Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities and households with children, particularly larger families and lone parents, are most likely to experience income deprivation.
- People over 65 years make up only 10% of the population, but approximately one third of these are living in poverty, more than twice the proportion across England as a whole.
- In 2024 Islington had the 7th highest rate in London for households assessed as homeless
- Islington has the second highest prevalence of diagnosed serious mental ill health and depression in London, with a higher prevalence of long-term conditions amongst our marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

Inequality has a very real, detrimental impact on people's physical and mental health and well-being, their prosperity and their ability to lead rich and fulfilling lives. And when deprivation is concentrated in communities, of place or interest, it makes it harder for those communities to thrive. The challenges our residents face are multifaceted and deep rooted and require co-ordinated action from all sectors to create a more equal future.

The Partnership Imperative

The current financial climate makes partnership working an imperative, not just a 'nice to have'. Like many councils across the country, Islington is facing a period of unprecedented financial challenge. Over the next five years it is anticipating a significant budget gap and is required to

set a balanced budget. This means that it will have less money than we are used to, and the choices it makes will matter more than ever.

At the same time VCF organisations are struggling to survive as funding opportunities diminish. Increased competition for funding from the state, independent grant makers and other funders over a relatively long period of time has led to a sector in crisis. Smaller local and specialist organisations have been particularly hard hit. This is as true in Islington as elsewhere.

This requires us to think and work in new ways to achieve our goals, making the most of our collective knowledge, expertise, skills, networks and connections to deliver the change we all want and local people need.

Better together

We know that we work well together in a crisis. This was demonstrated during the pandemic and again in response to the civil unrest in 2024. We can also point to many projects where we are working, or have worked together to tackle poverty and inequality, meet people's needs, and build stronger, more cohesive communities.

We are putting together a collection of case studies to showcase the full range of partnership working across the council and sector. Below are just a few examples:

- In 2025 Islington Faiths Forum worked with Islington Council to deliver seven **community cohesion events** across the borough. Funded by the Government's Community Recovery Fund, these aimed to promote cohesion, resilience and rebuild trust between communities. By bringing people together from different cultures to share stories, food, their hopes for the future, challenges and common experiences, these events helped to rebuild trust and combat polarisation.
- **The Bright Lives Alliance (BLA)** is a partnership of local organisations, including the council, voluntary and community sector, and health services, working together to create a joined-up wellbeing offer for Islington residents. The BLA's purpose is to make it easier for people to access early help and support in a way that feels simple, connected, and person-centred, rather than having to navigate multiple disconnected services.
- The **11x11 Programme** works with schools and cultural organisations to ensure children and young people in Islington experience 11 outstanding cultural experiences by year 11, especially those who are most in need and most disadvantaged. The programme was coproduced by the council and charitable providers, involving around 80 cultural organisations who met regularly to develop the offer. Since it began it has offered more than 50,000 cultural experiences and involved 99% of Islington schools.
- **Islington VCS Partnership Grants Programme 2024-28** provides longer-term stability, resilience and capacity so trusted organisations can deliver preventative, community-based support aligned to council priorities. This positions the VCS as a strategic partner, not simply a delivery arm. Alongside this, small grants play an important enabling role, supporting access, innovation and responsiveness, and often acting as an entry point for grassroots, resident-led and place-based activity that may not otherwise engage with larger funding programmes.

A Shared Ambition

This strategy is an opportunity to build on this history, to strengthen the relationship between the council and the VCFS, so that together we can make a bigger impact, delivering the change Islington residents want and need: improving services and increasing opportunity for local people, particularly those from underserved and marginalised communities.

Our vision

Islington Council and its voluntary, community, and faith sector (VCFS) have a shared ambition: to improve the lives and well-being of Islington's residents, create thriving communities and ensure everyone can live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives.

By strengthening our partnership and collaborating more effectively we can harness our respective strengths and assets to create a more equal future for Islington and improve outcomes for local people.

The challenges we face cannot be solved by the council or the VCFS alone. This strategy commits us to working in equal partnership, sharing our vision and aligning our actions to make a real and tangible difference to people's lives.

Our aim is to work together to:

- reduce poverty and inequality and prevent illness in Islington, with a focus on early intervention, prevention and the wider determinants of health;
- build services around people and place to ensure residents receive the right support at the right time, particularly those who are currently marginalised and underserved;
- enable people to participate in their community and have a say in decisions that affect their lives and neighbourhoods.

Key principles

The strategy is based on the principles of trust, transparency, empathy and respect. Changes in behaviours, relationships and decision-making are a legitimate and necessary focus of the partnership, alongside the outcomes we deliver for residents.

- We will work together in a spirit of trust and openness, building a shared purpose and shared accountability for the strategy;
- we will communicate regularly, honestly and transparently, sharing and respecting the knowledge, skills, experience and different perspectives that we each bring;
- we will agree to disagree where necessary and seek to resolve tensions without undermining our relationship;
- the council respects the independence and legitimacy of VCF organisations, their right to make decisions, manage their own affairs and advocate for the people they work with, irrespective of any funding relationship;
- the VCFS respects the legitimacy of the council to make decisions and mediate between competing interests, in the interests of all, and to make every pound count;

- we both recognise that we are dependent on each other to achieve our shared ambition to meet community needs and create a more equal future for residents.
- We recognise that the council and the VCFS operate within different institutional cultures , with different pressures, accountabilities, language and ways of working, and that building an effective partnership requires us to understand, respect and actively bridge these differences.

How we will work together

Our partnership will be underpinned by the above principles and a framework for collaboration that will enable VCF organisations to share their insights, knowledge and expertise at an early stage to meaningfully shape decisions. Conversations between all parts of the council and VCFS will ensure these have impact at strategic, thematic and neighbourhood levels.

Our goal is to create a strong, strategic relationship based on trust and respect, with consistent engagement on the issues that matter most to residents, the VCFS and the council, leading to real change on the ground.

We recognise that the voluntary, community and faith sector is not a single voice but a diverse and evolving ecosystem of organisations, communities and perspectives. A strong partnership requires space for the sector to articulate its own narrative, priorities and concerns, informed by wider engagement beyond formal representative structures. We will support and respect this process, recognising the time, trust and dialogue required to reflect the breadth and complexity of the sector.

To further this goal:

- We have established a VCFS Strategy Oversight Group bringing together senior council officers and leaders of key VCF organisations to provide strategic leadership and accountability, this will include
 - early strategic conversations, sharing information, power and decision-making;
 - agreeing a shared vision and priorities for the partnership, with clear outcomes for joint action;
 - reducing barriers to and creating opportunities for partnership working beyond the group itself; and
 - regular review, learning about what works and how to strengthen and improve the partnership over time.
- The VCFS Strategy Oversight Group is the starting point for engagement, achieving our shared ambition will mean:
 - Reaching out to VCF organisations across the borough, particularly those from and working with the most marginalised communities,
 - giving them a voice and a say in the development of the strategy and its workstreams;
 - building active networks based on shared identity and purpose.
- Thematic working groups will engage the relevant council departments and the wider sector. These will provide an opportunity for smaller specialist organisations to share their expertise and shape proposals around their issue or issues affecting their

community. Having the right people at the table will ensure that voices from different sections of the community are represented and solutions are tailored appropriately.

- The development of neighbourhood and other services will take account of existing VCFS provision to increase integration and avoid duplication of effort and resources (people, skills, physical assets, expertise as well as money).
- Engagement with residents and communities will draw on and maximise the expertise of VCFS organisations, especially those led by / rooted in their communities, to increase the council's reach and strengthen resident voice.

Creating the conditions and building the blocks for a strong strategic partnership

To realise our ambition for the VCFS and the council to be genuine strategic partners , shaping, leading and delivering change across the borough together, we must collectively ensure the sector itself is strong, sustainable and confident.

The following commitments reflect what organisations told us through Compact workshops and engagement about what they need to work with the council on an equal footing.

- Across funding, commissioning, capacity building, volunteering and community assets, we commit to reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and focusing on shared outcomes rather than transactional compliance.
- We will prioritise local knowledge, community-rooted expertise and social value, using flexibility to encourage collaboration rather than competition.
- We recognise that investment in the sector goes beyond money alone and includes buildings, systems, skills, trusted relationships and the time required to participate meaningfully.
- The Council will take a more transparent and collective view of resources and how they can be aligned to future-proof the sector and support diverse organisations to survive and adapt.
- Together we will approach capacity building as a shared responsibility across the whole ecosystem, people, organisations, infrastructure, knowledge and systems. We will work to address uneven access to support, particularly for smaller and unfunded groups, so organisations have the capability to collaborate, influence and deliver.
- The council will improve transparency and access to premises and community assets by clarifying responsibilities, increasing visibility of space and encouraging shared use. The sector will consider how collaboration might better support the use of community assets.
- We will champion inclusive volunteering and social action, recognising contribution and impact through stories and lived experience as well as data.

What we will do together

This strategy is being developed against a background of uncertainty, both in relation to the external environment and locally: the council is embarking on an ambitious programme of change, but it is still very early days. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is deciding where we can work together when policies, plans and ways of working are still being developed and tested. The opportunity is that we might develop and test them together. Early engagement with the VCFS, as plans develop, will help to harness the strengths of both sectors from the outset to explore how best to support residents and deliver impact.

Given the pace of change it is inevitable that our work will evolve and develop over time and in response to changing needs and circumstances. The Oversight Group (OG) will develop an annual **shared delivery plan**, in consultation with the wider sector and across the council. This will be an iterative process. The plan will be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure that

- feedback, learning and accountability are built into the process; and
- work programmes are able to flex and adapt as needs and circumstances change, ensuring they remain relevant.

Our Shared Delivery Plan: Year 1

In Year 1, the partnership will focus on strengthening the collective voice of the VCFS by better articulating its reach, relationships and contribution to communities most affected by inequality. This includes developing a shared understanding of how locally rooted organisations function as essential social infrastructure, and the impact on residents and neighbourhoods if this weakens.

This work will be supported by proportionate approaches to understanding and evidencing reach and impact beyond individual organisations, alongside the development of shared measures that track partnership quality, behaviours and relationships as well as community outcomes.

Learning from system wide audits, inspections, evaluations and partnership activity will be used to create clear feedback loops, with the council sharing learning with the sector to inform delivery, improvement and future planning.

1. Building a consistent culture of collaboration

We will work together to develop a deeper understanding and evidence of the benefits of collaboration, so that partnership working becomes just ‘how things are done’ in Islington. Relationships at every level will be based on mutual respect and all contributions equally valued.

Over the next year (2026/27)

- The Community Partnership Team will work across all council departments to support existing and new work with VCF organisations, strengthen relationships, champion and share good practice and maximise investment.
- Council and VCFS representatives will coproduce a capacity building programme to enable people in both sectors to learn about the role and remit of their statutory or voluntary sector partners. This will include, for example, opportunities for joint training, and shadowing people in their place of work.
- We will coproduce the next round of the Council’s grant programme, 2028-2032, so that limited resources are used effectively and aligned with our shared priorities.

- We will regularly review the opportunities for, and challenges of partnership working, learning from experience, in order to build trust and confidence in the partnership and enable us to work together more effectively.

2. Supporting people and places

We will work together to identify how the VCFS adds value to council priorities and change programmes, and to people's lives, and how this can be built into the development of those programmes. In year one the focus will be on *Thriving Places*.

Thriving Places

The Council's Thriving Places programme reflects its ambition to significantly change the way it works with and supports local residents, building services around people and place with a renewed focus on early intervention and prevention.

VCFS organisations that are embedded in their communities, with a track record of understanding and supporting people over time, adapting their services as needs and circumstances change are well placed to further this agenda.

Over the next year (2026/27) we will work together to:

- Identify existing good practice in both sectors that can be learned from and shared more widely.
- Develop and test joint approaches to delivering services that support people earlier, are better co-ordinated and more impactful.
- Develop and test new ways of assessing the impact of more relational ways of working on individuals and communities.
- Support NHS and other partners to improve health outcomes in neighbourhoods.

3. Commissioning services

We will work together to review how commissioning and procurement processes might be more accessible to local VCF organisations, for example by reducing barriers to entry and incentivising collaboration.

Over the next year (2026/27) we will

- Explore how the flexibilities within the Procurement Act 2023 support commissioning approaches that enable proportionate processes, early engagement and collaboration, and a stronger focus on social value and community-led outcomes.
- Develop VCFS knowledge and skills around how commissioning works, the expectations of commissioners and what a good bid looks like.
- Incentivise VCF organisations to jointly bid for contracts by combining their knowledge, skills and resources to meet contract requirements, for example through capacity building and/or establishing local supplier networks to facilitate this.
- Work with NHS partners to explore opportunities for joint commissioning from the VCFS, to maximise the sector's strengths in relation to early intervention, prevention and a social model of health.

4. Strengthening evidence and impact

We will work together to develop research capacity and skills within the VCFS, so that organisations can confidently use and generate data and evidence to support their work and assess their impact.

Over the next year (2026/27) we will

- Develop a shared understanding of the inherent social value of voluntary, community and faith organisations, eg in terms of social capital and connectedness.
- Develop accessible tools and resources to make it easier for VCF organisations to demonstrate their own impact, for example, templates to make better use of administrative data, case studies, testimonials and stories of peoples journeys.